

Enter the Cube

***by Nicholas and Daniel Dobkin
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Chapter 1: Playtime, Paytime

“Bam! Bam! Slam! You’re dead, sucker! Now -- for the big one,” said Erin in a deadly whisper.

“I want you to write a realistic essay. It must be at least 3 pages long on our regular lined paper. The topic is what you don’t like in your life.” Mr. Classen finished writing “WHAT I DON’T LIKE” on the blackboard and, putting his chalk back in the chalk tray, turned to face his fifth-grade classroom.

“No, no, for Gannondorf you use a charged-up shot,” whispered Nicholas to Tennyson. He scribbled quickly on the margin of page 210 of **The Story of Independence** and then tore it off, taking part of Article V of the Constitution (“when ratified by the Legislatures of three-fourths of the States...”) with it. The sound drew Mr. Classen’s attention, but fortunately for Nicholas the teacher’s view was blocked by Andrew on one side and Cassandra on the other. Both boys, noting Mr. Classen’s gaze, stared ostentatiously at the board as if absorbing the deeper meaning of dislike. Meanwhile, Nicholas tried to surreptitiously pass the note to Tennyson below the level of their desks, but with the participants being unable to watch the process, the handoff failed and the note fluttered to the floor next to Clara’s desk, just behind Tennyson.

While Mr. Classen turned back to the board to write the due date for the assignment, Clara scooped up the note. After a brief delay to decipher Nicholas' scrawl, she snorted and said aloud, "That is so stupid! It takes way too long to charge up."

This was too much for Mr. Classen. "Why Clara, you've already written your essay, I see. Let's read it to the class, shall we?"

Cane, Nicholas, and Brian snickered. Clara was always trying to get them to let her join their video-game discussions and they relished seeing her in trouble.

Clara cleared her throat nervously and read: "You just hold down the B button and when an enemy is in range, release."

"Really, Clara -- that is much less than 3 pages of lined paper." The class broke into laughter. "Though, as I see you've removed it from your text book, perhaps that's just as well."

"I did not!" shouted Clara, while Nicholas quietly shoved his history text to the bottom of the pile, just under **The Excitement of English Grammar**.

"That's a great idea for the essay," whispered Alice to Cane. "I always hated that stuff."

"What's wrong with Article V?" asked Brian.

The bell rang.

Mr. Classen quickly concluded that this was a battle not worth fighting, and smiled as the kids plunged into their usual end-of-class competition to be the first to snag their own backpack while pushing everyone else's aside, chattering happily all the while. Clara thrust through the pack of kids like a tank, grabbed her backpack, and marched out of the room.

As soon as they got out of the class, Nicholas, Cane, Tennyson, Brian and Erin headed towards the first-grade playground next to the handball walls. This was their habitual meeting place for the inevitable after-class game strategy forum. Nicholas took his usual spot at the end of the curly slide, while Erin hung upside down from the ladder and Cane and Tennyson spun in circles around the fireman's pole. Brian sat under the straight slide reading a Nintendo Power magazine he had snuck into school in his pack.

"I don't know, I never got Mewtwo," said Nicholas. "You need something like a thousand matches! Roy is much easier. You just get Marth and complete adventure mode with him, and then you get Roy."

"I never even got Marth, how do you do that?" asked Tennyson.

"You have to complete classic mode with all the standard characters," replied Nicholas.

"That's too hard," said Tennyson. "I keep getting beat, how am I going to complete classic?"

"You're still working on that stupid old Melee game?" said Cane. "That's so old that I don't even remember how I won everything."

"An education in the classics, that's what kids are missing today!" said Erin. "Astro Boy, Mighty Mouse, Mister Magoo. The cartoons that built America!"

"Well, you need to know how use your items better!" said Nicholas, ignoring Erin as usual. "Like, you've got a Mister Saturn and you don't do anything with him."

"Was I supposed to?" asked Tennyson.

"Yeah, you throw him at your opponent when they get close and you get a bonus. Geeze, Tennyson, you have to know things like this if you're going to get anywhere."

"Rearn the fine art of self-defense using Mister Saturn prushy doll," added Erin in an awful faux-Japanese accent. "Get comprete course book and video tape, onry twenty-nine ninety-five, operator standing by, call now!"

"Marth is dumb. Why bother with that stupid sword stuff anyway?" interrupted Cane, continuing to circle around the pole. "Just use Starfox, blam! blam! Zap 'em with the ray gun. Me 'n Fox, we win every time."

"I thought you forgot how to play Melee?" asked Tennyson.

“Wasn’t Sonic in Melee?” asked Brian, looking up from his magazine.

“That was just a rumor!” said Cane. “He was way too famous to be just another fighting character.”

“What about Mario?” said Tennyson. “He’s famous, too.”

“What about PacMan?” replied Cane. “I can’t believe they took the PacMan game away at Medieval Diner! It always takes forever to get seated and now there’s nothing to do.”

“You mean the one next to Bridegroom Depot?” asked Brian. “They have about two hundred books on the bookshelves in the waiting room. Medieval history, warfare, what people used to eat, religious life--”

“That’s what I said, there’s nothing to do!” interrupted Cane. “I mean, last month, when the game machine was there, I got Inky, Blinky, and Pinky with one quarter!”

“You mean they got you,” said Tennyson. “I was there, remember? You have to turn the ghosts blue first or they eat you.”

“Yeah, eat or be eaten, that’s my motto, what’s the difference as long as it’s food!” By this point he had fallen flat on his face and was still too dizzy to sit up straight.

“Foods that strike back, next on the Famous Zombie Chefs channel,” said Erin.

“Doesn’t Samus have a ray gun, too?” asked Tennyson, as he lost his tenuous balance and fell flat on top of Cane. “Maybe I should try her.”

“Samus? Only a woos would be stupid enough to play Melee with a girl,” said Nicholas.

“What about a girl?” said Brian.

“Yeah, Brian, you’re right, girls are so stupid they would use a girl to battle,” said Cane from beneath Tennyson. “Hey, can you get off me, you’re making me dizzy.”

“I’m not making you dizzy, you’re dizzy already,” said Tennyson.

“Or Clara, she’s even stupider!” said Nicholas.

“I heard that!” came a voice from the other side of the handball wall.

Nicholas and Brian looked at each other. “Oh, no,” said Nicholas.

Clara’s head popped out around the steel support post. “I got Mewtwo and finished classic mode and adventure mode and completed all fifty-one events and unlocked the sound test and got all the trophies and beat All-stars in hard mode all with Samus, and that was in fourth grade! And I could use Samus to beat any one of you.”

“Just like a stupid girl,” said Nicholas. “I could whip you with Marth or Roy or even Jigglypuff! You wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“Just like a stupid boy,” said Clara, stomping into the sandbox to face Nicholas. “You just never let me come to play ‘cause you’re afraid you’d lose.”

Tennyson had recovered enough to stand up, though he was drifting down a non-existent wind.

“Good idea, you can come but only if you’ll stop the playground from spinning.”

“Spin the other way, you dufus,” said Clara, but she took his arm and led him to a seat on the climbing structure. “The playground isn’t spinning, your head is.”

“Fine, and if you lose you buy us all chocolate ice cream!” Nicholas added.

“Could I get vanilla instead?” asked Brian.

“You’re on,” said Clara. Clara reached down to help Tennyson, now apparently recovered, to get his butt out of the hole in the climbing structure, wrapping her arm around his shoulders as she did so. Cane, noting their compromising position, started to chant “Clara and Tennyson sittin’ in a tree -- k-i-s-!” His recitation was abruptly interrupted as Tennyson decided he was dizzy again and landed on top of Cane’s face.

“Off to the Cube!” sang Erin. “Off to the Cube! Off to the cube, and whip on the girls and get some ice cream!”

Tennyson's GameCube was almost buried in the clutter of old toys, wooden and plastic blocks, Nintendo 64 game cartridges, pieces of various video game magazines and guides, partially-assembled Lego spaceships, VCR tape cartridges and homeworks marked "INCOMPLETE" in big red letters. Clara insisted on carefully untangling the controller cables from each other (the boys were accustomed to simply pulling harder until they got enough room, the plugs came out, or the television fell over).

"Sorry for the mess," said Tennyson. "Boys," Clara muttered under her breath.

Cane turned on the GameCube and grabbed a controller. "Wait a minute," said Tennyson. "That's Metroid Prime, we need Melée."

Cane said "Oh, forget that, let's just play Metroid, that's a cool game."

"I thought you didn't like games with girls?" said Brian.

"Cane, we were going to show Clara the RIGHT way to play Super Smash Brothers, so that she can buy us ice cream and stop bothering us," said Nicholas, ignoring another glare from Clara.

"Oh, all right," said Cane. He popped out the disk and threw it on the floor in the pile of wooden blocks.

"Cane!" said Tennyson. "That's not where the game disks go." Tennyson fished out the Metroid disk and carefully placed it on the top of a rather unstable pile of unpackaged disks and empty cases.

"What's the difference?" said Cane.

"Because that's the way I keep things organized."

"Organized?" said Brian.

"Besides it's MY games and MY GameCube and MY house so shut up." Tennyson then proceeded to scatter the pile of disks and cases searching for Super Smash Brothers.

He had reached the bottom of the pile and was gaining energy for a second pass when Brian quietly spoke from the corner, carefully holding a small plastic disk by the edges: "Is this it?"

"Yeah, that's the one," said Tennyson, grabbing the disk out of Brian's hands. Soon the familiar silver-blue Cube logo walked up on the screen.

"Who's going to play? We've got six people and only four controllers," said Nicholas.

"Three controllers. Remember the one I tried to make into a Cubesicle in the freezer," said Cane.

"OK, three. That makes it worse. We can't do two on two, we can only do one on one battles. Who is going to play?"

"Well I'm not buying you any ice cream if I don't get to play!" said Clara.

"Yeah, Clara has to play," said Tennyson. "What about Clara against Brian?"

"I'm not sure about that -- why not let her battle Nicholas?" said Brian.

"I want to go first! I'll crenelate her! I'll menebrate her! I'll discombobulate her!" said Erin.

"No, me!" said Cane. "I'll just beat her!" he said, grabbing the second controller so hard the plug pulled out.

"Give that back!" said Tennyson. They started wrestling for the controller, while Erin egged them on: "Let's get ready to RUMBLE!". The two boys started rolling on the floor struggling for the controller. While the other boys gathered around, Clara took hold of the main controller and started selecting her character.

Within a moment Cane and Tennyson had rolled under the bookshelf, upending it and sending a rain of paperbacks and old board books down on top of them. Nicholas and Erin were laughing wildly while the two combatants exchanged accusations, when Brian quietly said from the corner, "Wow. She's defeated Giant Donkey Kong in seven seconds. She's good."

Nicholas said "Oh, that's nothing, I've defeated Giant DK in five seconds!", and Erin chimed in, "and I defeated him before I started fighting!" Cane said "You did not neither!" and Tennyson pushed Cane even though he wasn't being insulted -- he was just accustomed to himself being the object of Cane's detractions. He tried to apologize but Cane grabbed him and pushed him into the magazine pile.

Suddenly an adult - sounding voice from the other room said "You'd better stop messing that room up or you're going to get it!"

Tennyson said "Sorry, Da --- Dad?" The voice sounded like his father but not exactly. His puzzlement, however, was overshadowed by irritation when he realized that Cane had messed up his

game disk pile again. In a moment everyone except Brian and Clara was rolling around on the ground knocking things over. Nicholas pushed Erin, who fell backwards and hit the CD player with his butt. It flipped right up in the air and landed with a loud crash on top of Brian, who screamed “owww!!”

The adult voice sounded again: “Kids. I hate kids.” They all looked over to the doorway expecting to see Tennyson’s dad -- a pudgy balding man with a grey mustache. In the doorway stood a curious very dark man wearing spiked leather boots and dark gloves, a cape bound at the throat with a jeweled clasp, and a red bandanna around his head sporting a big purple star. All the kids were suddenly silent -- even Clara looked up from the game -- but it was too late. The strange man waved his hand and pointed a wand at the kids. The wand glowed bright purple, and then the whole room seemed to turn purple.

“You look gross!” said Cane, referring to Tennyson’s now - purplish complexion.

“Takes one to know one,” said Tennyson, because he couldn’t think of a more clever response, but by this time Cane looked strangely distorted and Tennyson hoped that he wasn’t right because that would mean that Tennyson was blurring around the edges too.

Brian quietly said, “Tennyson, I don’t think that was your dad.” Tennyson looked at his own hands and started to make a sound between a moan and a scream. Then there was a final burst of blinding purple light and the sound of a big explosion.

Chapter 2: Not in Kansas Any More

When they opened their eyes, the play room was gone. What had been toy-cluttered carpeting was now thick green grass. A gentle breeze brought them the scent of flowers. A cobbled trail led away through the field. In the distance were huge structures that looked like mushrooms, protruding from the blue, gently rippled surface of a lake or river that surrounded the grassy outcropping upon which they found themselves. A wooden box in the middle of the trail blocked their view to what seemed north. Past the box was a brick wall which seemed to be floating unsupported in the air about as high as you could jump.

The kids were speechless for a minute or two.

“Where did your house go?” said Cane to Tennyson, vaguely implying that it was Tennyson’s fault.

“Was that your dad?” asked Clara.

Tennyson thought about this for a moment. “No. That was definitely NOT my dad.” And after further reflection: “He was way too cool to be my dad.”

“Do you think they drugged us and kidnapped us?” said Erin. “That would be cool.”

“If they kidnapped us, where are they? Why aren’t we tied up or something?” said Nicholas. “Where are we anyway? Were we zapped by aliens?”

“There’s no such thing. I saw a TV show about that on PBS last week,” said Clara. “Besides this doesn’t look like a space ship to me.”

“How do you know what a spaceship looks like?” said Cane.

“Psow! Psow! Die Earthlings! Crenelac the Magnificent will conquer your world!” said Erin.

“Come on, guys, let’s work this out,” said Nicholas. Clara crossed her arms and rolled her eyes up to the sky. Nicholas stopped and after an obvious effort said, “Oh all right, Clara, that includes you.” Clara was still upset but decided to give Nicholas another chance. “Come on, pay attention!”

“We have to attack them now before more ships land, sir! Call the President! Call the Navy! Call the Air Force!” said Erin. He was not paying attention.

Without thinking about it Clara, Tennyson, Cane and Brian had arranged themselves in a semicircle around Nicholas. Erin was still wandering back and forth across the grass talking to himself: “Launch missiles! Oh, no, they used their shield! RUUUUUNNNN!!!!”

“Does anyone remember anything after that explosion thing?” asked Nicholas. “Did you ever see that guy before?”

“I’ve seen some guy like that before somewhere,” said Cane. “But I can’t remember where. Maybe it was at the comic store. Lot of weird people hang out there. Like, I saw Tennyson’s dad there looking at the Adult Animé section.”

“You did not, you’re making that up!” said Tennyson.

“Oh, you’re right, maybe it was your mom,” said Cane.

“You guys are just not serious about this,” said Nicholas. “Get to the point. Let’s think about this. We’re still wearing the same clothes we were. Oh, does anybody have a watch on?”

“Power up now! Or the aliens will destroy Washington DC and kill the President! Or maybe that’s ok after all. Power down,” said Erin in the background.

Clara held up her wrist. “We’ve only been here a couple of minutes. We got off school at 2:20, and we got to Tennyson’s house by about 2:35, and it’s 2:44 now. That’s not much time to go very far.”

“Maybe the aliens reset your watch with their advanced technology,” said Tennyson.

“What aliens?” said Clara.

“This is the end, commander! The Earthlings have defeated us, we must retreat!” continued Erin. The other kids ignored him.

Crunch crinch crunch crinch: the sound of someone (or something) walking on the gravel trail beyond the wooden box. Brian realized that he had been hearing this sound for a couple of minutes already. He tried to attract the attention of the group by waving but without success, as Nicholas had finished examining Clara’s watch and was looking for another idea: “All right, so it didn’t take much time, or maybe Clara’s watch really is broken. Does anybody recognize this place? Has anyone been here before? Do you see a phone so we could call our parents?”

Brian started to say, “I heard a funny sound--” but Nicholas interrupted him: “Not now, Brian, we’re trying to figure out where we are!” and Tennyson said “Oh that was just Erin anyway,” and Cane said “It was probably Clara burping,” which caused Clara to throw some gravel from the trail at Cane, who ducked so that the pebbles hit Tennyson. This precipitated another round of angry name calling.

Meanwhile, Brian walked around the box to find out what the sound was.

“I’ll never retreat! Crenelac the Magnificent is always victorious, you pusillanimous worm! But sir -- what does pusillanimous mean?” continued Erin, gesturing wildly as he lay in the grass.

“All right, calm down, calm down!” said Nicholas. “Clara, apologize to Tennyson! Cane, apologize to Clara! Tennyson -- well, just say you’re sorry. We have got to be more serious if we’re ever going to--” SPROING pook! pook! tingle tingle tingle. “What was that?” said Nicholas and Clara together.

Again: SPROING! pook! pook! tingle tingle tingle. And then crunch crinch crunch crinch. SPROING! pook! pook! tingle tingle tingle. It was coming from beyond the wooden box. Nicholas looked at Clara who returned his puzzled glance. Cane and Tennyson looked at Nicholas. Without a word, Nicholas in the lead, they walked cautiously around the wooden box.

Brian was standing in front of an absolutely bizarre little creature. The thing was about stomach-high to Brian (who wasn’t very big even for a fifth-grader). Two huge eyes above a frowning mouth with two nasty-looking fangs protruding, all in an orange brown head shaped like a squashed carrot pointing up. The body was a sort of yellow column with no arms, and the creature was walking determinedly forward on very short legs (if there were any at all) terminating in rounded dark brown shoes or feet that looked like shoes. The creature moved straight at Brian, and Clara gasped: “Look out, he’s going to bite!”

Brian ignored her and jumped up in the air, amazingly high, landing right on the head of the creature with a SPROING! The creature turned into a puff of white smoke with a pook! pook!, followed by a tingle tingle as silvery flakes of something dissipated into the surrounding air. All the kids were speechless in amazement. Clara missed the background drama, and looked back: Erin was also staring wide-eyed at the line of goombas.

Brian suddenly noticed the other kids and calmly said, “You jump on their heads. Remember, Nicholas, you told us last week, when you were just starting Melee again.”

“They’re goombas!” said Nicholas. “Holy cow. WE’RE IN THE GAME!!” He sat down on his butt in the grass.

Tennyson said, “What?”, and pretended to faint (naturally landing on top of Cane). Cane’s somewhat muffled voice could be heard from beneath him: “Get off me!”

Clara looked at Nicholas and then at Brian. There were about 20 goombas still in sight. “You are completely out of your mind,” she said to Nicholas. “There is no way we could possibly be INSIDE Smash Brothers. That is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard, even from a boy.” A pause, then: “But, Brian is right, you jump on their heads.” And with that she turned down the path, and, leaping in the air, landed right on top of the next goomba: SPROING pook! pook! tingle tingle tingle.

By this time Tennyson was sitting up in the grass only partly on top of Cane (one leg and a bit of hip). They got up and tried SPROINGing goombas. It was ridiculously easy, as the poor creatures made no attempt to defend themselves or avoid the kids. Brian, having proved his point, felt no further need to remove them, and Clara soon lost interest as well, leaving the remainder to wander off behind the brick wall past them on the trail.

Within a couple of minutes no more goombas were left in sight. “So what was that for?” said Cane. “You don’t really think we’re inside a video game? I mean, I can’t believe I agree with Clara but that is the stupidest idea I’ve heard since Tennyson thought of drying the cat in the microwave.”

“I did not!” said Tennyson.

“Oh, sorry, since you did it without thinking of it.”

“I did not! I put the cat in the microwave as an experiment; she wasn’t even wet. Besides that wasn’t as dumb as the time you tried to plug a scissors into the wall to make it motorized.” Tennyson stuck his hand out and starting shaking wildly to give the impression of receiving an electric shock.

“I did that on a dare!” said Cane.

“I don’t know,” said Clara. “This is crazy but those things were just like goombas in Super Smash Brothers Melée. And isn’t this place just like the Mushroom Kingdom? How many places have you been where a brick wall can just hang in the air like that?”

“Well, there are blocks like these in nearly every Mario game there ever was,” said Brian. He thought for a moment. “That doesn’t really help, does it? I don’t know any real place that has blocks hanging in the air.”

“There’s just no other way,” said Nicholas, still sitting in the grass. “This is the right grass, those are the right giant mushrooms, the lake, the mountains, the wooden box -- it’s all just the way it should be. Goombas too. Either somebody is playing one heck of a joke on us or -- well, there’s nothing else it could be. You guys’ll see: I bet you the next thing is a Koopa coming down the path.”

“Are you sure? I mean, what do we do now? If we’re really inside a video game?” Tennyson looked like he really had gotten a shock. “Are there phones in Smash Brothers?”

“Melée,” said Brian.

“Melée, whatever. How do we get home? How do we get help?”

“There might be a phone at Fourside,” said Brian.

“Where’s that?” said Tennyson.

“Oh, that’s the place which is the giant city with the UFO’s,” said Nicholas.

“Where is it? How do we get there?” said Tennyson.

“Maybe we have to be abducted,” said Erin. “By the aliens. Cool! Take me to your leader! We will conquer you and steal all your game magazines!”

“You know, I remember there are helicopters there too,” said Nicholas. “Maybe we can catch a ride on a copter.”

“How do we do that?” said Clara. “After we defeat the Yoshies, we go to Peach’s castle, and from there Congo Jungle. That’s if we get that far.”

“You think we’re in adventure mode?” said Brian.

“Makes sense,” said Nicholas. “Look over there!” He indicated a worn, arrow-shaped wooden sign on a post, with flaking white paint: PEACH’S CASTLE.

“Owww!” said Cane. “Get off me!” But instead of Tennyson, on top of Cane was a two-legged yellow creature with a green turtle shell and big round eyes: obviously a koopa.

“What did I tell you?” said Nicholas. “There is no question about it. We are in the game.”

“Ummmph!” said Cane. The koopa wasn’t really bothering him, in fact it seemed not to notice him at all. It stepped off his head and onto the grass, and continued walking with a curious awkward gait down the path.

The kids looked down the path. A bunch of koopas were meandering in a somewhat disorganized fashion towards them. Clara said, “If you jump on their heads they just go into their shells. I think you have to throw them into the water or something like that.”

Tennyson said, “They don’t seem to be bothering anyone.” Cane glared at him. “Maybe we should just ignore them.”

“He’s right,” said Clara. “Let’s just try to figure out how to get to Fourside.” The koopas were now walking past the kids, taking no particular notice of them. Pacifism seemed like a profitable course to everyone.

"If we go down the path, we'll come to a big tower where the Yoshies hang out, and past that there's a huge green pipe that leads to the end of this stage," said Nicholas. "Why don't we go that way? Maybe we can find a Toad to ask about Fourside."

"Well, OK, go ahead," said Tennyson. "Ow!" A koopa had bumped into him and was blindly walking over his foot. The koopas didn't seem too bright.

So Nicholas started down the gravel path and the kids fell into a ragged sort of line behind him. Erin meandered back and forth, vaguely keeping up. "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore! Woof! Woof! Excuse me," leaning over a koopa, "are you a Munchkin?"

The path led past a tall brick tower, dodging Koopas, under another one of those disconcerting platforms hanging unsupported in the air, and up to another stone abutment about 6 feet high. Brian went first, and as he got to the top, they heard a funny *crunching* noise.

"What's that?" said Cane.

"I was hungry," came Brian's somewhat muffled voice from atop the abutment. Brian came back and helped Cane up with one hand. In the other he had a rather remarkably appetizing red apple.

"Where'd you get that?" said Cane.

"It fell down from the sky," said Brian. "It's an item. An edible one. Crrrunch." He took another bite.

"Wait a minute," said Nicholas. "Where are those coming from?" They looked up. Almost directly above them they could see the bottom of another mysteriously airborne platform. The top of the platform wasn't visible, but they could hear the distant sounds of what seemed to be an argument:

"Yeeek meeeiie shrruuuummiiiiiee!" went one screaming voice.

"Ooookiiee mooorreeeeiii!" replied another. Some sort of box went flying over the side of the platform, spewing smaller objects as it fell.

"Get down, everybody!" said Nicholas.

"No way!" said Cane. He ran to where the box had fallen and reached in. "Look! Burgers! Mmm, I love cold hamburger."

Another burst of high-pitched screaming reached their ears. This time some sort of wooden pallet flew off the side of the platform. "Look out, you dufus!" said Clara, grabbing Cane and throwing him to the side just as a large metal object struck the ground where he had been.

"Hey, keep your hands to yourself, I saw that -- thing coming!" complained Cane. He reached down to pick up the object. "It's a ray gun," he observed. "Cool! I wonder if it works." He immediately pointed it at Tennyson and pressed the trigger button. There was a ZIPPITY sound and a cracking lightning-like flash struck Tennyson's left arm.

"Owww!!! You're crazy, you could've blown my arm off!" said Tennyson.

"Oh, don't be silly, they just give you a sort of electric shock," said Clara.

"Uhh -- I knew that. I knew that." said Cane.

"Yeah, when we get home I'll get my softball bat and you can be the ball. It just hits you in the head," said Tennyson. "Owww!" A Homerun Bat had delivered a glancing blow to his head as it fell down. The pallet made a *thunk* as it struck behind the kids a moment later. Tennyson picked up the bat and looked suggestively at Cane.

"Fly, my pretties, fly!" said Erin.

"Calm down, calm down," said Nicholas, grabbing the end of the bat. "Let's all agree, no more using items on each other, right?" he said, looking at Cane, who started to say 'he started it' out of habit, but then reluctantly nodded. "Good, let's keep our eyes open and get out from under that platform before they throw something heavier."

They proceeded more carefully over the top of a small rise to a plateau with a cylindrical pipe-like object sticking out about 8 feet from the ground. Below them, past a steep terraced slope, they could see a white wooden pier protruding partway into the water towards a round tower that seemed to be made of a green stone. Above the pier were a series of large platforms at varying heights.

"Well, this was your idea," said Tennyson. "You wanted to get to the tower. What are we going to do?"

"I guess we could -- swim to the tower," said Nicholas, continuing to walk down the slope.
"Uhh -- I don't know," said Brian. "In the game, when you go into the water -- you don't come back." This stopped the kids.

"He's right," said Clara. "You never see what happens to them but -- I don't know if I want to find out whether I get extra lives."

"OK -- we'll -- have to jump up on the platforms," said Nicholas. He started walking towards the nearest one, which was suspended a bit before the pier about 12 feet in the air.

"No way!" said Cane.

"With the thoughts I'd be thinkin', I could be another Lincoln, if I only had a brain," said Erin.

Nicholas stopped about 5 paces before the first platform, leaned back and got a running start down the grassy slope. With a grunt he leapt into the air. "Wow!" said Brian, who had forgotten how easy it was to jump up on to the heads of the goombas. Nicholas virtually flew through the air, much farther than he could manage in the long jump in PE, and managed to grab the platform at the end of the arc and pull himself up.

"Oh, anybody can do that!" said Cane, and took off down the slope. With a cry of "Kowabunga!" he jumped wildly up, overshooting the edge of the first platform and catching his foot, resulting in an inelegant face plant.

"Nice job," said Tennyson.

"Jump jump here, fall fall there, we hardly ever pause -- That's how we while the day away! in the merry old land of Oz!" said Erin as he leapt.

"Come on," said Nicholas. "We'll have to jump from platform to platform. Be careful! we don't know what happens if you fall in the water. Watch for koopas!"

But it was difficult to remember caution in the exhilaration of flying from one platform to another. Cane had succeeded in executing a reasonable facsimile of an airborne somersault between the second (low) and third (high) platforms, and turned around to return: "watch this, guys!" (Clara had given up glaring at them by now.) Tennyson and Nicholas turned to see him flip over twice and land on his back on platform 2 ("ooohmpph").

While the three boys competed in recklessness, Clara was helping Brian to carefully negotiate the series of platforms. They had reached the third (high) platform and were contemplating the nearly horizontal leap to the last one. Cane executed a difficult leap from the low fourth platform, just managing to catch the edge of the last platform and prevent a fall into the open water below. Clara said "Be careful! What if you fall in the water?"

"Only a girl would think of that. I'm not gonna fall," Cane replied. He pulled himself up on the platform surface, grabbing something yellow as he did so.

Clara, forgetting Brian, ran to the edge and jumped for the last platform. She landed safely enough on the final platform -- only to slip on the banana peel that Cane had just dropped.

"Aaaah!" screamed Brian. Nicholas, watching from the fourth platform, gasped as Clara dropped out of sight towards the water. Tennyson was frozen, while Cane looked back, a bite of banana in his mouth, to see what the fuss was about.

"I'm melting! melting! Oh, wotta world, wotta world..." said Erin.

"I am not neither melting!" said Clara. She was rising haltingly, held in the arms of a winged turtle -- obviously a koopa paratroopa. "Wow!" was all Tennyson could say.

The winged koopa gently deposited Clara onto one of the flat stone steps protruding from the tower. Clara said "Thank you very much!" The koopa gave the slightest nod of acknowledgement and turned to fly away, mumbling to itself -- "mapple mapple".

After this unexpected brush with danger, the boys proceeded more cautiously to join Clara. Tennyson helped Brian on the last hazardous leap over the open water. When they were all gathered on the stone slab, Nicholas tried to look up to see the path to the top of the tower. However, there was a second stone slab blocking his view.

"How are we going to get up to the top?" said Nicholas.

“We can climb,” said Clara. “Look, the stones aren’t at all close together. You can get your feet and hands in between them.” She demonstrated, jamming her left foot into a crack and reaching up for the handhold at the next row of stones.

“Well, I guess that’ll work,” said Nicholas. “Clara, you go first.” She looked back and mouthed “Duh!”. “Then Brian, Tennyson, Cane--”

“No way! He’s gonna fall on me again!” said Cane.

“Not unless he wants to end up in the water too. Erin is next, I’ll go last. And don’t any of you guys fall cause you’ll end up on me!”

“Don’t look down, Brian!” said Tennyson. Brian didn’t look too happy about it, but he took to the wall, carefully observing where Clara put her hands and feet (which also kept his eyes directed upwards).

“Don’t get too close to each other or you’ll get your hands stepped on!” said Nicholas. In a moment, there was a line of kids distributed along the wall.

“Should we rest here?” said Brian to Clara as she climbed right past the next stone terrace.

“Naw, let’s go right on up,” said Clara. “This is ea-- OWW! What was that?”

The other kids looked up to see an object about the size of Clara’s head zip by. It had obviously bounced off her on its way down.

“Koopas shell?” said Nicholas.

“Nope, Green Shell,” said Brian.

“Right,” said Nicholas. “Where’d it come from?”

Just then they heard a bizarre high-pitched laugh. A greenish round face with huge yellow eyes was poking over the edge of the tower top. It laughed again and dropped a smaller object. This time Clara was alert and dodged: the object just missed Brian and landed SPLAT! on Tennyson’s upturned face.

It was a hamburger. The top bun fell off and went spinning down to the water. Ketchup dripped down Tennyson’s cheek and a pickle was perched on his nose. “I wanted that!” said Cane.

“Get your own!” said Tennyson, and jammed the hamburger against the stone wall so he could take a bite. It was after snack time, after all.

“Let’s get under that platform!” said Nicholas.

“Which one?” said Clara.

“The one you’re next to! Look out!” said Nicholas. While Clara was distracted the creature had come up with another projectile: a goomba. If the goomba could talk it would probably have been saying, “Let me go!”. Then it would probably change its mind, as the Yoshie holding did so.

With the warning, Clara was able to dodge the falling goomba, and Brian somehow managed to bounce it off his back so that it went spinning into the water. They couldn’t see quite what happened when it hit, though there was a sudden flash of light and a POP that convinced them they didn’t want to find out what happens if you fall in.

Clara and Brian had climbed under the shelter of the next rock overhang, and reached back to pull Tennyson (still chewing on the hamburger) in. Cane scrambled up behind, with Erin and Nicholas bringing up the rear. With all of them on the narrow slab of stone there wasn’t much room.

“Okay, what do we do now?” said Nicholas.

“Well, we can’t go back,” said Clara. “We’ve got to get to the top of the tower.”

“What do we do (chomp) (swallow) when we get there?” said Tennyson, finishing the last of the hamburger. “That was a good hamburger but that Yoshie’s pretty mean.”

“Oh, of course, that’s what that thing is!” said Nicholas.

“Obviously,” said Brian.

“If we try to climb up again he’s going to drop something else on us,” said Clara. “I bet it’s not another hamburger.”

“Why do we need to climb?” said Brian.

“What else are we going to do?” asked Nicholas, skeptically.

“Oh, this,” said Brian, and gathering himself, he jumped straight up into the overhanging stone. It was hard to say exactly what happened but he somehow went right through the solid stone.

“Wow,” said Tennyson. “That’s pretty good. I forgot you could do that.”

“How could you forget?” said Nicholas. “I only told you about that last week.”

“Fine, then, you go ahead,” said Tennyson, rubbing the top of his head dubiously.

They heard a high-pitched chuckle from above them and Brian called out from around the stone, “Hey, somebody get up here, the Yoshie is after me!”

Nicholas and Clara looked at each other, nodded, and jumped as high as they could. Zip! through the stone they went. Cane started to say “I can do that” but Tennyson cut him short: “just jump!” and they did. Erin stayed where he was: he seemed content to let the other kids try this first.

The idea of jumping into solid rock was still sufficiently disconcerting that the kids all closed their eyes as they went. The scene that presented itself to them as they opened their eyes would have been funny if it wasn’t so desperate: Brian was running around in a circle with the Yoshie chasing after him. The tower top was about 20 feet in diameter with patches of white hard stuff that appeared to be slippery, the remainder being stone that was so mossy it looked like it was covered with fresh-cut grass. Above them were two more thin wooden platforms tilted at a slight angle. A couple of Yoshies seemed to be asleep on one of the platforms; the other held a cluttered pile of miscellaneous junk. A short human or humanoid in a huge, outrageously colored turban was pacing back and forth out of range of the circling combatants.

Nicholas didn’t stop to think, but jumped to grab the leg of the Yoshie as it ran by. The Yoshie was covered with a sort of smooth scaly hide like a lizard, but it was amazingly strong. It didn’t even seem to notice Nicholas, but just kept on running. He was thrown off after a few steps, and nearly rolled off the tower edge before Clara could scamper over to snag him by his pant leg, which pulled his pants partly down but stopped him. “Do you mind?” said Nicholas, trying to pull his pants up.

“Well, fine, next time you call roll off into the water,” she replied. Their incipient tiff was interrupted as Brian tripped and the Yoshie kicked him rather viciously, laughing all the while.

The little man said, “What a bunch of dorks, you could hardly be stupider, how’d you even get this far? Grab a Yoshie? -- you might as well grab Bowser. Fine, don’t use any items, no skin off my nose.”

“The items!” said Clara.

“Tennyson, Cane, you’re the ones with weapons! get him!” said Nicholas.

Cane pulled out his ray gun and took aim at the Yoshie, which was about to deliver another blow to Brian: ZIP! The Yoshie looked stunned and turned to see what had happened. Clara and Nicholas ran to help Brian while Tennyson ran at the Yoshie with his Home Run Bat and took a huge swing just as Cane let loose with another shot. The ray gun hit Tennyson on the leg as Cane ducked to avoid the bat.

“Watch where you’re shooting!”

“Watch where you’re swinging!”

“What was I saying? Morons with items -- still morons!” said the little man.

“Yoieeeeeooooouueeeiii!” The Yoshie was doubled up with laughter for a moment and forgot he was supposed to be attacking the kids.

“Who is that guy anyway?” said Cane, disentangling himself.

“Oh, it’s a Toad,” said Brian.

Clara had helped Brian away towards the edge of the tower, and Nicholas turned back to the conflict. “Stop that, you have to work together! Cane and Tennyson, you have to be at -- at right angles to the Yoshie so you don’t hit each other!” Cane and Tennyson looked puzzled as they tried to remember what a right angle is. “Cane on Tennyson’s left so he can cover you if the Yoshie attacks.”

The two were sorting the instructions out just as the Yoshie recovered itself and went after Cane. Tennyson waded in with his bat swinging wildly; he landed a lucky stroke on top of the Yoshie’s head (eeeeaaaowowowo! it wailed) but then hit himself in the calf (yeooooow!) and fell on top of Cane again. “What a joke! I couldn’t make up something worse than that!” said the little man.

The boys struggled to their feet and got back in position. Cane snapped off two raygun shots and it was the Yoshie's turn to double over in pain rather than laughter. ("Oy, even a megavitamin ain't gonna help that ache!")

"Good, good," said Nicholas. "Cane, drive him towards the edge -- good! Now, Tennyson, knock him off AND HIT THE YOSHIE THIS TIME!" Tennyson pictured himself at the plate in Little League: *feet planted, swing level, hit through the ball -- I mean, Yoshie -- WHACK!* The green creature flew in a parabola away from the tower, wailing in his cute high voice, until he hit the water with a POOF!

High fives were in order -- even Clara joined in the celebration as Cane and Tennyson, after a couple of misses, slapped hands high and low, while Nicholas went to help Brian up. Erin had finally made it to the top and appeared to be talking to the turbaned little man.

Unfortunately, the ruckus had awakened the two sleeping Yoshies. One of the Yoshies jumped up and slid down the platform, leaping off straight at Tennyson before he had a chance to raise his bat. Cane, however, alertly snapped off a ray gun shot -- ZIIIP! -- causing the Yoshie to lose its balance as it hit the slippery center of the tower. This gave Tennyson time to whack the poor fellow on his head with the Home Run bat. The Yoshie staggered off balance toward the edge of the tower. Clara and Nicholas ran up behind the creature and delivered enough of a push to send him sliding off the mossy rim and into the drink.

That gave the third (and the kids hoped final) Yoshie time to get to the tower top. As the Yoshie faced his four adversaries (Brian was keeping out of the way), Erin launched into an unusually relevant monolog: "It's a beautiful day here at Top-o-the-Tower Field. We join the game with two down in the first inning, and Tennyson up at the bat."

Not to be outdone, the Toad did color commentary: "Yes, Erin, Tennyson is hitting .453 so far this season with two Yoshies batted in, topping the stupid kids league in the early season stats."

"The Yoshie is wrapped up tight in his shell, looking in for a sign -- here comes the pitch, looks like a spinning-shell slider -- a big swing from Tennyson --" CRACK! eeeoowwww! -- "going! going! -- it's gone! A home run into McMushroom Cove," shouted Erin. "We'll be back right after this message from People Who Throw Toads off Towers And Like It." The Toad glared at him from under his huge hat. "So, Humptee, so you were gonna tell us how to get to Fourside, right?"

"When did I say that? In your dreams, you banana-brain. You guys couldn't get to Peach's castle in the first place and you'd probably never figure out how to get to the heliport on the roof. You'll all fall off the green pipe before you get ten steps." "Erin -- who's your friend?" said Nicholas.

"Oh, this is Humtee Dump T.," replied Erin. "He spends a lot of time on the tower, so he knows a lot about what goes on here. He was just telling me we can catch the helicopter to Fourside from the roof of Peach's castle."

"I was doing no such thing. I wouldn't tell you how to get to the castle if you gave me a Golden Diamond! My dork brother at the Checkerboard Field -- his name is Hedley Medley T. but I call him Hed M. T. for short -- he would go around telling stupid kids how to get to Fourside. I don't do that kind of thing. You can all fall in the lake and get replaced for all I care." The Toad was pacing back and forth across the tower while he talked, ignoring the kids except when they were in his way.

Meanwhile Clara and Brian had climbed onto the wooden platform and started to look through the junk pile. "Look at this, Clara! There's all sorts of useful stuff here. Some more apples, a couple of hamburgers --"

"Boys, all they think about is food!" said Clara. "We've got just a treasure trove of weapons here! Freezies, detonators, flippers, bunny hoods..." as she picked up several and tried to figure out what would fit into her pockets.

Humptee turned to watch them: "Yeah, go ahead, muck around like Pikmin in a mulch pile! Waste all the time until the next guard shift comes -- all those Yoshies coming to trounce you while you just fiddle with items and waste precious time. Typical clueless kids."

"Oh, when does the guard change?" asked Brian.

“What good would it do to tell you? ‘four thirty, what’s that? is that the big hand on the 8 and the little hand on the 3?’ I wonder if you can even tie your own shoes, punk.”

“He is such a helpful guy,” said Erin to Nicholas. “I really like Humptee; I myself would not join the People Who Throw Toads off Towers unless they had really good food at their meetings.”

Nicholas, finally catching on, grabbed Clara’s wrist: “we have about five or six minutes, guys! Clara, Brian: pick out two or three of the best items each, and throw some food down to us! Cane, Tennyson, collect the food items. Then we’d better get going!”

“Boy, Nicholas, when you’re crrrunnnchh! right, you’re right munch munch munch” said Cane, working on an apple intercepted on the fly on its way to Tennyson’s hand while they shoved each other competing for the other food.

“Stop that,” said Nicholas.

“Here,” said Clara, tossing a huge brown donut with yellow icing to Cane and another to Tennyson.

“Than-mmphph--ks!” said Cane, alternately shoving donut and apple into his mouth.

Clara pulled a silvery object out of the pile: “Look, a heart container!” said Brian. “I’ll take that one.”

“OK,” said Clara, handing it to him. She grabbed a long thin object that looked like a mix between a telescope and a bazooka:

“A superscope!” said Tennyson. “Good Idea!”

As she pulled the superscope out, something that looked like a ball with feet and a big nose rolled out of the pile down the sloping platform and fell onto the tower top. “Ow!” it said in a high-pitched voice.

“What’s that?” said Erin.

“Oh, just a Mr. Saturn. They’re useless,” said Clara.

“He’s a cute little fella’,” said Erin, walking over to pick the tiny shape up.

“Who you callin’ cute?” said Mr. Saturn..

“You can talk!” said Erin.

“More than that, I have something to say, which is more than seems to be the case with you kids,” said Mr. Saturn. “But I guess you did figure out Humtee, that’s something.”

“You wanna’ come along with us?” said Erin.

“A Mr. Saturn, that’s a wonderful idea,” said Humptee. “Carry that smarty pants thing around everywhere you go and look like a dork. He thinks he knows every place in Smash Brothers!” (“Melée” said Brian). “What a jerk!”

“Guys! guys! we’re almost out of time, let’s get rolling!” said Nicholas. “Thanks for everything, Humptee!”

“Thanks?” said Cane, puzzled. “All he did was insult us.”

“You *are* a dufus,” said Clara.

“What? what did I say?” said Cane to Tennyson.

Tennyson rolled his eyes: “When she’s right, she’s right. Come on.”

Nicholas led the kids over to the far edge of the tower top and leaned over. Below them was a huge green pipe that ran across the water to the neighboring shore. Even from a distance they could see that the pipe was filthy and covered with what looked like a mixture of dirt and oil. At the end of the pipe was a big cylindrical tee forming an outlet; a sort of viscous oily substance bubbled up above the rim of the outlet every few seconds.

“Whoaah, we’d better be careful. I’ll go first,” said Nicholas, lowering himself by his hands and then dropping the last two or three feet. His feet started to slide out from under him, and his arms spun briefly as he regained his balance. “Come on, Brian, I’ll help!” he said, turning around carefully on the pipe. One by one the kids dropped down.

Just as Erin hit the pipe they heard a high pitched squealing from above them. “The Yoshies! Come on!” said Nicholas. A green big eyed head protruded over the tower edge and chuckled as it

dropped what looked like a big piece of ice -- a Freezy -- narrowly missing Clara. Another Yoshie head appeared, laughing uproariously.

Clara's eyes narrowed. "Go ahead, greenie, make my day," she said through clenched teeth as she brought the superscope up to her shoulder. PSSSEEUUUUOPP! The second Yoshie bounced up into the air as if he'd been kicked by a giant boot; the first one discretely backed off out of range.

"Don't mess with Clara when she's mad," said Tennyson. Clara smiled at him.

The kids made their way carefully along the slippery pipe and up a ladder of steel rungs. Several goombas were milling around on top of the platform at the other end when the kids got there, uncertain of what to do. Cane jumped in the air and landed on one of them -- SPROING pook! pook! tingle tingle tingle, but the other kids had no enthusiasm for eliminating the pathetic creatures. "Come on," said Nicholas, "let's get going!"

They headed up the hill, dodging goombas making their waddling way towards the pipe. When they reached the top of the hill, before them was a curious scene: a huge expanse of land covered with some sort of big square tiles, alternating black and white.

"It's a giant checkerboard!" said Tennyson.

"It's a giant chessboard!" said Brian.

"Checkers!" said Tennyson.

"Chess!" said Brian.

"What's the difference?" said Clara.

"What's chess?" said Cane.

"Who's that?" said Brian. He pointed at another curious little man with a huge colorful mushroom-headed turban -- another Toad. The Toad was seated on the grass next to the huge board. As they approached it became apparent that before him was a chessboard. A winged koopa wearing an old-style leather flying helmet was hovering on the other side. The Toad reached down and slid a piece forward. "Check," he said in a surprisingly low voice.

"Hedley Medley!" said Erin.

"Indeed, well met, young Erin," replied the Toad. "My brother informed me that you and your colleagues might soon drop by for tea. If you can attend me for but a moment whilst I dispatch my friend Parakarry's knight, forcing an exchange of rooks and exposing the back file to an attack by the remaining rook -- well, to be concise, I anticipate a victory within four moves at the most."

The koopa rolled his eyes: "Which game are you lookin' at, mate? 'ad too many brews, I'd say," he said. He reached down with a foot and slid a piece -- a bishop -- diagonally across the board.

"Oh, bloody good show, Para, old chap. Worthy of Russ T. himself. Indeed, I shall have to rethink my position. Well, I'd best attend to our guests." He turned away from the board and bobbed over to the kids. "Let's see now -- you're Erin, the smallest is Brian, you must be Stick--"

"My name is Cane!"

"Quite synonymous, of course. Then Kipling -- I mean, Byron -- Keats? -- Browning -- Dickinson -- no, oh Tennyson! Quite. And Nicholas. Oh, and the lovely young lady must be Clara. How charming, my dear, of you to come visit us. I'm sure Parra is charmed, too."

"Fat chance, mate. 'edley is just avoidin' the game as he knows I'm goin' to eat his lunch!" said Parrakarry.

"Quite so, my dear chap, quite so. Now, children, how can I be of service?"

"Well, we wanted to get to Fourside and Humtee said you could help," said Nicholas.

"By Jove! Fourside! Bloody good show! Exciting spot, eh wot? Lovely view. Couldn't have made a better choice myself."

"Yes, well -- how do we get there?"

"Blast it all, by the copter, of course. Stops in at Peach's heliport every day directly, a bit after tea. Or is that after supper? Of course, the chaps usually stay for a nip with Tacey T., leave for Fourside 'round sixish. Or is that the maintenance crew?"

"Where's Peach's castle? Can we walk there?" asked Clara.

“Oh, no, my dear, you should have to swim the river -- tut tut, just isn’t done! Wouldn’t think of it. No, no, no; you must take the warp pipe. Yes, of course. The warp pipe. Down the hill next to the brick wall by the banana nut tree. Oh and do be careful of the goombas, I just can’t abide them, so impolite. Do be sure to give Tacey T. my regards. She is very fond of children, I’m sure she would be pleased to be of assistance.”

“Thanks, Mr. T.,” said Erin. “We really appreciate your help. Anything we can do in return?”

“Oh yes, thanks very much!” said Clara. Nicholas nodded.

“Oh, please, call me Hedley. At your service, Master Erin. Of course, if you must know, I should appreciate a word on my behalf with the Princess. I should dearly like a relief, as I’ve been on guard duty here for three days and two nights now. Not that I’m complaining, of course -- stiff upper lip and all that! Still, a proper meal and bed would be very much appreciated, if she could find it in her heart to provide me with a leave.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Hedley, we’ll mention it to her as soon as we get there.”

“Just Hedley. At your service and your family’s, I’m sure. Good day.”

“G’day, mates. Come on, ‘edley, move before the river freezes!”

Nicholas had taken several steps down the hill and directed the other’s attention to a tree now visible near the river bank, behind a group of goombas that seemed to be milling around with something in their mouths: “There it is. The pipe must be behind it. Let’s go. Thanks again, Hedley!”

“Quite, quite. Hmmm... pawn to queen’s rook 3.”

“Blimey! Checkmate.”

“Check? Check? By Jove, what shall I do now?”

“No, checkmate.”

“Yes, I heard: check, mate.”

“No, checkmate. You lost, the game’s over, you bloomin’ empty-headed Toad!”

“Oh. Oh, my. Good show, Parra old chap. Bloody good show.”

Meanwhile, the kids were making their way down the hill, dodging goombas as they went. The goombas were awkwardly holding beat-up golf clubs in their mouths and pushing golf balls through the grass, rather like a toddler with a tennis racket. What they planned to do when they got to the river wasn’t apparent: perhaps they didn’t need to breathe and would walk on the bottom (if they didn’t go poof on touching the water).

“There it is!” said Brian, the first to reach the tree. Just behind a green pipe about a meter in diameter stuck waist-high out of the ground. The inside of the pipe displayed a peculiar sort of shimmering, as if it wasn’t quite there.

“OK, let’s go,” said Nicholas. “I’ll go first, then Erin, Cane, Tennyson, Brian. Clara, you go last to keep an eye out for the Yoshies. Hold on to your stuff. Right?”

“Right,” Clara said. “Come on, get in!”

Nicholas hesitated for a moment and then took a deep breath and jumped head first into the pipe. There was a curious slurping sound and he disappeared faster than could be strictly accounted for by gravity. Erin grabbed Mr. Saturn: “Plop! plop! fizz! fizz!”, with Mr. Saturn replying, “Oh what a relief it is!” and in they went.

Cane was more reluctant, but Clara dealt with him summarily: “Boys! all talk and no guts. You are a dufus AND a wimp.” That did it: sluuuurp, quickly followed by Tennyson; Clara helped Brian in, tucked her Superscope into her belt, and reached up. Just as she leaned over the opening, she heard Hedley in the distance: “Children! oh, dear, children! I forgot to tell you where --” but then she felt a pull, starting from the hair and sweeping down over her from nose to toes: into the pipe she went. “Well, whatever he forgot, too late now,” she thought.

The ride through the pipe was moderately bumpy and extremely fast. Clara was reminded of the Space Mountain ride at Disneyland, where she had gone with her father the previous year -- but this time there were no seat belts and no assurance that they would come out safely. The tube dropped straight down initially and then abruptly pulled level and turned sharply to the right. Clara kept her arms stretched in front of her; on the sharper turns she bumped into the walls of the tube, which seemed dry

and hard but very slippery. Ahead of her she could hear the other kids: “Whooooaahh!!” “Oooommpphh!” “Coooo!!” and the high voice of Mr. Saturn: “Of course I know -- ooof! -- where this goes --- owww!”

There was a sudden right turn, a drop, a bump back up, and a disorienting corkscrew through some sort of huge helical shape, and then FUMP! She landed on top of Brian. Clara was blinded for a moment by the bright lights and deafened by what sounded for all the world like applause.

Chapter 3: A Quiz in Time Saves Six

“Koopa Corp. presents the sixty-fourth semi-quadri-annual Trivia Quiz-off, sponsored by Club 64, the peerless place at the pier, right in downtown ToadTown next to all your favorite shops. Also brought to you by Frankie’s Shops, “from Boo to You with a Smile”! I’m your host, Mr. Hammer! And let’s have a big round of applause for our four-time champion, Spiky T.!”

By this time the kids were able to see again. They were in a sizable room arranged as an auditorium, with a brightly lit stage on which stood a helmeted koopa, dressed in an absurdly bright red tuxedo, and carrying a small hammer in one hand and a microphone in the other. Next to him, behind a grey wooden podium decorated with multicolored lights, stood a koopa looking somewhat uncomfortable in the spots, wearing a leather helmet and goggles, and a shell decorated with blue and orange polka-dots. The floor stepped up away from the stage, and rows of chairs held a remarkable mixture of viewers: there were koopas, Toads, ghost-like creatures, goombas, koopa paratroopas, and penguins with blue feathers and orange beaks. A couple of Yoshies seemed to be acting as ushers, shoving the wildly applauding fans back away from the stage. Two koopas sat behind huge dolly-mounted cameras with “KPVT KoopaVision TV” on the side. A third camera was suspended by huge crane arm above the stage.

“It’s the quiz room,” said Brian.

“I knew that,” said Nicholas.

“I can see this is going to be a great crowd!” said the emcee, looking out into the audience. “We’ve got a great show for you -- and as you know, we’re opening with a challenge match tonight! This is your chance to go head to head against Spiky T himself. Remember the winner could take home up to 500 coins, that’s right, 500 coins could be yours if -- my, oh, my, koopas and friends, look at this! We’ve got kids! Real human kids!” Mr. Hammer leapt off the stage, followed by a bright yellow spotlight, and strode down to where the kids were unpinning themselves in the front row, where the warp pipe had dumped them.

“Welcome to Trivia Quiz-Off!” said Mr. Hammer, shoving his microphone into Brian’s face. “And you are?”

“Urrff. I’m -- uh -- Brian.”

“Brian, pleased to meet you, have a whack!”, said Mr. Hammer as he struck Brian on the behind with the hammer, in what he apparently thought was a friendly gesture of greeting. “Why don’t you introduce us to your friends?”

“Owww. Well -- uh -- that’s Nicholas and -- um -- Cane and Tennyson, and, uh, Erin and, well, she’s Clara.”

“Let’s have a big round of applause for these young fellows and this absolutely charming young lady!” said Mr. Hammer. He started to whack Clara on her butt with the hammer, but she grabbed it right out of his hand with a look that would have turned a goomba into smoke right then and there. Fortunately this little scene was drowned by the raucous applause from the audience. “What do you think, folks! Should we give one of these youngsters a chance at those 500 coins?” Screams of approval from the wild audience -- the Yoshies started throwing goombas into the air to keep them off the stage.

“Come on, kids, who’s ready to take on Spiky T?” The koopa nodded politely behind his podium. “Don’t be shy, step on up!”

The kids looked at each other and in unison Clara, Nicholas, Erin, Cane and Tennyson said: “Brian!”

“What?” said Brian.

“What. It’s you! Get up there!” said Cane.

Mr. Hammer didn't wait for Brian to make up his mind, but grabbed him by the arm and practically dragged him onto the stage: "Well, folks, let's have a big hand for our volunteer contestant Brian -- Brian -- Brian T!" he said as he practically threw Brian behind the second podium. Brian tried to explain that his last name wasn't T. but his modest protest was drowned out by the wild screams of the crowd, which seemed even more unruly. The Yoshies were so busy tossing audience members back away from the stage that they lost their sense of direction and sent a couple of goombas flying over Brian's head before they noticed.

Mr. Hammer: "Alright, folks, you all know the rules, each contestant alternates first chance at answering for 50 life points, their opponent gets a shot if they blow it" [boo! boo!] "for a hundred life points, ten questions total, and a one question sudden death playoff" [sud-den death! sud-den death!] "if we're tied at the end of regulation, may the best koopa -- I mean the best contestant win and the loser disappear!" [dis-a-pear! dis-a-pear! whoooo! as the Yoshies flung the chanters towards the back row, where they landed on a group of Penguins who were sitting quietly eating ice cream].

By now Brian looked as white as the Boos in the audience. Cane and Tennyson had taken up the spirit of the event and were chanting in unison: "Brian T! Brian T! Brian T!"

Clara looked concerned; Erin and Mr. Saturn were adding their own private commentary: "Brian is dressed today in a lovely chartreuse and lemon combo with stylish soiled tee-shirt and matching swirly underwear."

"Yes, Erin, Brian's world-weary wrinkled look is the perfect complement for Spiky T's tight leather helmet and shiny black shell elegantly decorated with Pikachu sequins! What a couple they make."

"What sequins? I thought those were polka dots."

"Welcome to the fashion world, Erin."

"OK folks, first question goes to --" (a huge arrow suspended above the contestants' heads spun dizzily for a few seconds before settling down to point at the helmeted Koopa) "Spiky T.!" (wild applause) "For 50 life points, Spiky T., how many windows are there on the biggest house in Goomba Village!" (wild boos from the koopas -- "down with Goombas! Goombas stink!" and high-pitched screeches as the goombas waddled into the crowd of koopas) "Your choices are: one -- three -- or FIVE!!!!!"

Spiky T. looked pensive; the Toads seemed to think the answer was "one" to judge by their screams, the koopas favored five, and the goombas (who presumably knew) were still busy trying to knock koopas over on their behinds. The penguins seemed more interested in their ice creams than the action on stage. "Three!" said Spiky T. finally as the timer on the wall behind the contestants clicked down to 1.

"Oh, my, that is NOT right, Brian, for one HUNDRED LIFE POINTS, how many windows are there on the biggest house in Goomba Village, you've got five -- four -- three -- two -- one"

"ONE!" said Brian, though it wasn't clear if this was his answer or a complaint about the speed with which the timer counted down.

"THAT IS CORRECT! One hundred life points!" At this a bright "100" appeared on the podium in front of Brian. The kids all cheered wildly, but were completely inaudible over the cacophony of the remainder of the audience.

"OK, folks, let's roll! The next question goes to Brian: for fifty life points -- where are the star kids born? Your choices: Starborn Valley, Star Heaven, or -- Shooting Star Summit!"

The big counter behind Brian started ticking down but before it could click twice he spoke, more confidently this time: "Starborn Valley". Spiky T. looked crestfallen as Mr. Hammer awarded Brian another 50 points.

Nicholas leaned over to Clara and yelled into her ear (the only way to be heard above the noise): "Where do you think we can find Tacey T.?"

Clara shrugged her shoulders. "I don't remember where the Quiz Room is, and besides I'm not sure this castle is the same layout as the one from Paper Mario," she shouted back. "I'll ask the ushers."

She made her way over to the nearest Yoshi, a rather imposing fellow holding a billy club in his right hand and flinging a Toad by the foot with his left. "Excuse me, sir, I wonder if you could help me."

"Neeker supperscououpe, moi deeeere," said the Yoshi in a squeaky voice. Clara finally decided he was complimenting her Superscope.

"Oh, yes, it's very nice. Listen, could you tell me where to find Tacey T.?"

"Noo eeeet, weee r plaaaaoing quioiz gameeee," said the Yoshi.

"No, I don't want something to eat, I just want to talk to her," said Clara.

"Woot youou seeeeu?" asked the Yoshi, bonking a koopa on the shell with his club (the koopa hardly noticed, as it was busy cheering wildly for a correct answer by Spiky T.).

"We're just going to ask for some help in finding our way to Fourside."

"Ahhhhiiiee, Fouiersaideeee! Taecie Tuiee helooooop. Thruuuuuu tieaaee rououmm duooone hauoul leyifttte fuuuur douers," the Yoshi replied as it pushed a goomba over onto a Toad's toes.

"Through the tea room, down the hall, turn left, go four doors?"

"Yeeeiiss uvv korrrrseeee," it said, joining with the other Yoshi to shove a koopa under one of the seats.

"Oh, thank you very much, you've been a great help!" said Clara. The Yoshi bowed very low, and was so pleased that it grabbed two nearby koopas by the noses and spun them in a circle. The koopas didn't seem to mind that much except that they weren't able to follow the contest while spinning wildly around the usher.

Clara returned her attention to the game. The glowing yellow numbers showed that Brian's lead had narrowed to 50 life points, and the big counter showed "10": the last question.

"Spiky T's big chance to tie the game: where does the Dry Dry Railroad lead? The choices: Mt. Rugged Station, Boo's Mansion Station, or the Northern Area Ski Resort. Five seconds -- four -- three -- two--"

"My. Rugged Station, of course," said Spiky, managing to project confidence and modesty simultaneously.

"That is right! It's all tied up! Folks, we're headed into a SUDDEN DEATH ROUND after this word from our sponsor."

Mr. Hammer seemed to relax and leaned over to chat quietly with Spiky T. and then with Brian. Nicholas was unable to locate a monitor anywhere but from somewhere he could hear a pre-recorded sound track and voiceover: "after a night at Club 64 -- anywhere else is such a bore -- who could ask for more -- every moment has excitement in store -- at the one, the only Club 64! The Peerless Place at the Pier -- open weeknights until 10, Saturdays to midnight, the best food at prices you won't believe!"

Clara had managed to return to where the other kids were seated. In the temporary quiet they could actually converse. "What's been happening?" she asked.

"Oh, Brian's been doing great!" said Tennyson. "But that koopa is really good -- he got three hard ones in a row at the end to come back."

"Yes, it's been a contest for the ages -- human vs. koopa, rookie vs. veteran, leather vs. cotton -- a confrontation that reaches beyond mere trivia to the very essence of what makes quiz shows compelling," said Mr. Saturn.

"Yeah, money," said Erin.

"What did you find out?" said Nicholas.

"I think the usher Yoshi said that Tacey T. is just across the tea room, down the hall and to the left," replied Clara. "Should we leave now or wait--" But just then the lights came back up on the stage and the crowd screamed again.

"Welcome back to SUDDEN DEATH!" said Mr. Hammer, waving his namesake wildly above his head as he paced in front of the contestants. "As you know, the rules are simple: I'll ask one question and the first contestant to press his buzzer and give the correct answer within three seconds wins. If that contestant gives the incorrect answer he loses. The pressure is ON! Only one question! Only one correct answer! Who will be the Only One Left STANDING? ARE YOU READY TO FIND OUT?"

“YES!!!!” screamed the toads. “GO GO GO GO!!!!” screamed the koopas. “eek eek dibble dibble” said the goombas. Nicholas tried to remind the kids to make sure to hold onto their items but it was too noisy to be heard.

“For the GAME, contestants, here is your last question; remember you can’t press your button until I raise my hand.” (sudden silence as everyone waited to hear the final question) “What is the code name of the first boss in hero mode of Sonic Adventure 2?” Mr. Hammer waited for a moment to allow the tension to build and then dramatically raised his hand.

Spikey T. started to press his button and then hesitated just long enough for Brian to beat him to the punch. “Brian!” said Mr. Hammer. “Three -- two -- “

Brian gulped and said: “Big Foot!”

“Big Foot is your answer?” Brian nodded, pale but determined. “We’re waiting for a signal from the judges...” A light went on over the stage: “That is correct! Brian wins!”

The crowd burst out into an intolerable screaming cheer. Spikey T. leaned over and politely shook Brian’s hand, and seemed to say something in his ear, though of course it was impossible for anyone else to hear. Then he started to glow bright purple and seemed to suddenly twist and shrink simultaneously like a wet rag being dried; a brief anguished cry and he was gone. Brian stood frozen with dismay, though in the noise and chaos no one else seemed to notice. Mr. Hammer screamed into his microphone: “What a match! We’ll be back with our SuperKoopTroopa Challenge after a word from our sponsor, Frankie’s Shop!”

With that remark, the lights on the stage dimmed, and Mr. Hammer said “OK, folks, refreshments out the door and to your right, be back in 20!” The kids rushed onto the stage to congratulate Brian, who seemed shaken as he accepted a bag of coins from Mr. Hammer. Big double doors were thrown open in the side of the room and the crowd stampeded out into the hallway, dragging the kids into the crowd with them. The rowdy audience burst into a lovely hexagonal room with a high ceiling and a stairway in the center leading to a raised platform, on which were set tables covered with exotic foods; Nicholas recognized goom nuts, lemons and limes, and dry pasta. Clara shouted over the din, “We need to go through the room! follow me!” They forced their way through the milling crowd, stepping on several Toads (“sorry!”) and passing right through a couple of Boos, and escaped into an open hallway at the opposite end.

Chapter 4: Peach Pitstop

They found themselves in a corridor brilliantly lit by ornate crystal chandeliers hanging from the high ceiling, and sunshine glistening through tall Bay windows. The walls were painted sky blue with occasional clouds. Recessed, arched alcoves terminating in solid plank wooden doors were placed about every 10 paces on alternate sides of the corridor. No one else seemed to be around. The first door was marked with a placard depicting the silhouette of a girl in a long dress. Clara noticed that the next door had a similar placard of a short man with a cap and a big nose (Mario?), and put two and two together: “Just a minute!” She ran back to the previous door and pushed it open a crack: “Yep! It’s about time, too. I’ll be right back.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Nicholas, slapping his forehead with the palm of his hand. “Good idea!” He pushed open the second door and stepped inside, quickly followed by Tennyson and Erin (“What about you, Mr. Saturn?” “Nope, I’m fine, haven’t had anything to drink this week”).

“What’s going on? Where did they go?” said Cane.

“What?” replied Brian. He still looked distracted. “Oh, they went to the bathroom, of course. I guess we can go next.” Cane appeared to have suddenly noticed just how long it had been since they got out of school: he crossed his legs and waited impatiently for the other boys to come out. After a moment the door swung outwards and Nicholas appeared, wiping his hands on his pants.

“Wow! That is sooo cool. The sinks and the toilets are plated with gold! Although it would be nice if there were some paper towels.” He stepped out of the way as Cane zipped towards the door.

Tennyson nearly ran into Cane as he came out: “Nicholas, there were perfectly nice cloth towels on the racks!”

“Oh, I thought those were curtains,” replied Nicholas. “Brian, did you want to use the bathroom?”

“No, thanks, I’m ok.”

“Are you sure? You look -- kinda’ bothered.”

Brian hesitated, as if he was going to say something else, but then nodded and said, “Sure I’m sure. I’ll go wash my hands.”

In a few moments, looking relieved, the boys (except for Brian) were all collected in the corridor, still waiting for Clara. “Geez, girls sure take forever in the bathroom. What do they do in there?” complained Cane.

“What do girls do in the bathroom?” said Erin. “The hidden mysteries are revealed in the new PBS series, ‘Girls and Bathrooms: Their Secret Lives’.”

Mr. Saturn looked up at Erin. “Well, I’m waiting.”

“Gee, I don’t know what girls do in the bathroom. Not sure I want to find out, either.”

“Why don’t you go in and look?” said Mr. Saturn. “It’s not that big a deal, trust me. Of course, from where I stand I’m always looking up their dresses anyway. I got in big trouble last time I told Princess Peach about that.”

Just then the door to the girl’s bathroom swung open and out came Clara. “Clara -- you look -- different,” said Tennyson.

Clara smiled. “I guess so! Wow, I’ve never been in a bathroom like that. There’s a manicure station, a facial station, a hair washer and dryer -- all automatic -- and a big jacuzzi tub! If I wasn’t so hungry I have taken a bath; there’s what looks like a clothes cleaner too.” Now that she had told them what to look for the boys realized that her hair was cleaned and curled, her face washed up, and her fingernails trimmed and slightly pink. She looked a lot more girlish than they were used to with Clara. They weren’t quite sure how to react to this new development, but fortunately Clara said, “Come on, let’s go find Tacey T. Oh, where’s Brian?”

"He's still in the bathroom; I'll go get him," said Nicholas. He popped in and returned a moment later with Brian in tow. Brian's hands were still dripping wet, and he looked distraught, but Clara didn't notice as she led them down the corridor.

"Here it is, fourth door!" This door had a placard marked "Kitchen", but they hardly needed a sign with the appetizing aromas wafting through the partly-open door. Clara knocked.

"Who is it?" said a high voice with a distinct Southern accent.

"We're looking for Tacey T.," said Clara.

The door swung open on the curious sight of a rather attractive female Toad whose turban had golden spots replacing the more common red polka dots. "I do declare! Children! Why, come in, come in, don't sit theah at the door. I am delighted! It's so kind of you to come visit me heah in the kitchen. What is your name, honey?", the last directed at Clara.

"I'm Clara, and this is Nicholas, Erin, Cane, Tennyson, and Brian. Oh and Mr. Saturn."

"How charmin' to make your acquaintance. Exceptin' Mr. Saturn, of course. What brings you heah to Princess Peach's castle? We don't get children very often, you know. Oh, I am quite forgettin' my manners. Would you like somethin' to drink?"

"Yes, please, that would be great!" said Tennyson.

"Come in, come in," Tacey said again, and led them into the kitchen. The kitchen was a long room with an oven in the corner, shelves covered with food and supplies against the back wall, and a counter at the right with a sink. Against the left wall was a range with numerous pots and pans hanging from a rack above it, and two Toads dressed in unusually high perfectly white turbans swirling frying pans full of mysterious concoctions over the fire. A third toad was chopping something at a table with bowls, a cutting board, and a rolling pin which occupied the center of the room. "Sit down, sit down, children," Tacey said, indicating low chairs around the table.

She bustled over to the shelves and placed six beautiful china cups on a silver tray, and then took a large silvery tea kettle from the range. "Koopas tea, honey?" she said to Brian. He nodded and she lowered the tray and filled a cup for him. "Sugar, honey? Or maybe some honey, sugar -- oh, you know what I mean." Brian nodded; Tacey picked up a cube of sugar with silver tongs and dropped it elegantly into his cup. Soon the children were all armed with steaming cups and saucers. The boys looked at each other; none of them had ever had tea to drink at home and they weren't quite sure what to do. They stared at Clara, who sipped with rather more elegance than they were accustomed to. The boys did their best to imitate her, except Cane, who tried to guzzle the tea as if it were Gatorade and burnt his tongue in the process. Tacey T. gracefully ignored his indiscretion and sat down with her own cup.

"So, dears, what brings you heah to the castle?"

"Well, we're trying to get to Fourside," said Nicholas. "Hedley Medley T. said that maybe you could help us. He said there's some sort of copter that stops here."

"Oh, honey, that would be the Paula Coptah, be heah a bit aftah seven. Why that would give you loads of time. I'm sure that the Princess would just adoah havin' you children join her for dinner, if you don't mind."

"That would be great!" said Tennyson. "I'm really hungry." Clara glared at him. "I mean -- yes, thank you, Miss Tacey."

"Dinner would be -- really nice, I'm sure," said Nicholas. "Do you think Princess Peach would mind?"

"Why, I'll write her this minute, honey," said Tacey, and true to her word she grabbed a recipe pad off the table and scribbled something; then she reached up to a cord hanging from the ceiling and pulled. BOOOOOOOOONGGGGG. A winged koopa popped into the room from a small door in the corner. "Oh, ParaDocs, honey, could you be a deah and take this right up to Peach? Much obliged." The koopa touched his leather helmet in a brief salute and flew back into the little door. "Now, I'm sure the Princess will want to meet all of you charmin' young people, so we must get you dressed properly. My, oh, my. Clara, sweetheart, that will never do. Tee-shirt and slacks are no way for a young lady to dress in the castle. And of course it's black tie for you young men. Dahjeelin', would you be a honey

and take the boys ovah to the wardrobe room?" The toad at the center table collected his chopped vegetables into a metal bowl and, turning, bowed to the boys, making them feel a bit silly. "Come on, honey," said Tacey to Clara. "I'll find somethin' for you in my closet. Off you go, come on," and the boys dutifully followed Darjeeling out as Tacey shooed Mr. Saturn away from her skirt and led Clara down the opposite hall to her chambers.

Darjeeling led them down a somewhat confusing maze of corridors and stairways. As he opened a door marked with the silhouette of a dinner jacket, Nicholas cried out: "Just a minute!" and ran down a short corridor off the main hall. At the end of the hall was a round pink object with tiny orange feet and a fuse on the top: "Galloping Goombas! Bom Bettie! I am so honored to meet you."

"Why thank you so much," she hissed from her fuse. "It's not very often anyone remembers me! You are a very courteous young man."

"Well, you've helped me win a lot of battles. Your Mega Bomb always blows through! I couldn't go by without saying hello. Listen, I always wondered if it hurts when you blow up."

"No, just tickles a bit, dear."

"Well, look, I have to go get dressed for dinner, but it was very nice to meet you in the - well - flesh? You know what I mean."

"That's very sweet. Look, I heard that you are going to dinner with Peach. Watch out for Luigi, and make sure you talk to Dr. Mario: he is very knowledgable and very helpful, as well. Oh, and incidentally, I happen to know that the Princess has an extra beam sword she just might be willing to part with."

"Thanks! Um -- I have to go, so -- keep your -- um -- fuse lit!"

"You'll go a long way with such thoughtfulness, young man. Good day." Bom Bettie bowed (sort of) and then continued her waddling way down the hall to the armory.

Darjeeling led the boys into a huge room, dominated by six very long racks on which hung all sorts of jackets and pants. Along the walls were shelves with shoes, caps, and ties of various kinds. At one end was a large glowing pair of dials: an old-style radio. Darjeeling turned to them and said, "Come in immediately, stand over there," in an Indian sort of accent. "Please wait just one minute while I turn on some appropriate musical entertainment." He walked over to the dials and twiddled them; the kids heard brief swatches of music and talk, and then:

*"There's a lady who's sure
coins that glitter are gold
and she's buying the stairs to
Star Haven..."*

"Ah, yes, very good," said Darjeeling. "You see, children, I have recently changed my second place of employment from The Information Station, where we brought knowledge to young inquiring minds but where the management brought ignorance worthy of the Inquisition, to the Golden Oldies station, where we will cheerfully rethread your heads and bring the past to the present for the future. Indeed, it is a great improvement. But let us now turn to the task of choosing the appropriate apparel and accessories.

He pushed a set of buttons and all the clothes rotated along the racks with a whirring noise. As the jackets zipped past he grabbed one off the rack for each boy without bothering to slow them down, followed by a pair of pants. He then led the boys to a shelf with a rack of bright red bow ties all market with a prominent golden "D.K.", as the music continued in the background:

*"It's been a hard days night
and I've been workin' like a goomba
it's been a hard day's night
while I've been beatin' up a koopa
but when I get to my room
I get some cake made of shroom
and then I feel all right."*

“What’s DK for?” asked Cane.

“Oh, you see, Donkey Kong stopped by several months ago, and was found by the Princess to be inappropriately attired for tea, upon which revelation he was forced to depart in shame, so he has taken the precaution of shipping a large number of items of his preferred apparel to us for storage in the wardrobe, against the possibility that he will once again find himself in need of formal dress.”

While Darjeeling helped the boys carefully fold their clothes into backpacks and go through the unfamiliar exercise of donning a bow tie and cummerbund, Tacey T. was rummaging through her astonishingly extensive closet (half of which, admittedly, was devoted to racks of turbans of varying size, color, and configuration) for the right look. First she had Clara try on a pink frilly thing with billowing sleeves and multiple ribbons around the ankle-length skirt (“Oh, deah, much too old-fashioned, ah’m afraid.”) Then there was the nearly-transparent, black-nylon vee-cut blouse and silk pant suit (“Honey, you got the look but you ain’t got the curves to go with it.”) Finally, she settled on an elegant formal bare-shouldered gown, with a long slitted skirt and white gloves.

By this point, Clara was definitely having second thoughts about the whole affair. It seemed like a lot of trouble to go to for dinner. Why couldn’t they just grab a bite in the kitchen with Tacey T.? She didn’t object to nice clothes, but she had never been very interested in fashion and found the gown uncomfortable and somewhat embarrassing. She couldn’t understand how this was going to get them home and said as much to Tacey T.

“Honey chile, nevah underestimate the powah of just the raht amount of bare flesh on the minds of men and Toads -- assumin’ they have minds, which is not always apparent to the untrained eye. Maybe ah’m gettin’ ahead of mahself a bit, but your momma’s not heah, so I have to stand in her stead.”

“My mother died when I was little. I live with my dad. He doesn’t have me dress up much.”

“Oh, ah am so sorry, sugar, ah had no idea. Course that means its all the moah important for me to look aftah you, chile. You just mind what ah say, chile: the wise always dress for the occasion, no moah and no less. Now heah’s a nice purse and valise for your other clothes and such; and don’ let me catch you with that Supahscope at dinnah! Lahd knows dinners at the Palace are difficult enough without bringin’ heavy weaponry.”

Tacey T. looked up at the clock on the wall. “Oh, deah, we must be gettin’ on. Where are those boyfriends of yours?” There was hardly time for Clara to make a disparaging remark before the boys could be heard arguing as they came down the corridor. Mr. Saturn said “Erin, I think I’ll be off to the Library. Peach and I are not congenial companions. I’ll meet you at the heliport.” Without further ado, he waddled over to what looked like a light switch, fiddled, and disappeared into a passage that suddenly appeared, and just as suddenly disappeared, in the wall. Darjeeling dropped the boys off and hurried back to the kitchen to finish preparing the dinner vegetables.

It was hard to tell who was more nonplussed. The boys were dressed in identical black tuxedos, each with a signature red bow tie, white shirt, and shoes polished to a mirror finish. Clara’s brilliant gown stood out even more strikingly against their dark clothing. “You look -- great,” said Tennyson, uncomfortably aware of the other boys.

“You know, you really do,” said Nicholas.

“Umm -- thank you,” said Clara after a nudge from Tacey T.

“Well, take her arm, honey,” said Tacey to Tennyson. Tennyson looked uncomfortable but even Cane didn’t dare to heckle him with Tacey looking on. So with Tacey in the lead and Tennyson and Clara making a surprisingly elegant couple, they made their way back through the tea room and up the corridor to the main dining hall.

The big double doors swung open to reveal a huge, high-ceilinged, brightly-lit room, filled with music and the noise of excited conversation. The room had a tiled checkerboard floor bisected by a huge red carpet with gold edging leading to a blue door at the back. There were four long tables set with glistening silver and huge crystal goblets. Dual stairways led to a raised platform at the back of the room. The walls were the characteristic sky-blue of the castle with dark blue hangings around the top.

Standing around the tables and in little clumps around the room were a large number of guests: the kids recognized toads, koopas, penguins, dark-skinned dryites, and nomadimice, all conversing in

an animated fashion as they consumed beverages and snacks handed out by elegantly-dressed Toads carrying silvery trays. In one group with a couple of penguins were two pointed guests glowing so brightly they were difficult to look at directly. Nicholas tugged at Brian's shoulder and whispered in awe: "Look! Star spirits!" Near the end of the largest table, standing by a particularly fancy high-backed chair, stood a tall woman with curly red/orange hair and blue earrings, dressed in a long pink-and-blue frilled dress with lacy sleeves: Princess Peach herself.

At that moment Peach looked their way and rapped on the table with a jeweled rod. "Quiet, please, everyone!" she said in a voice accustomed to instant obedience. As the din died, she spoke again: "Let's welcome our special guests --" (at this point a toad dressed in a tuxedo with a red bow tie handed her a list) "-- Clara, Tennyson, Brian, Cane, Erin, and Nicholas!" She began to clap politely, initiating a wave of applause from the crowd. She leaned over to speak to a dapper mustached toad standing on her right.

"Everyone please be seated!" called the Toad. "Tayce T., please bring the children here to be seated."

"That's Ole Fuss T., the Ministah of the Castle," whispered Tayce T. to the kids as she shepherded them towards the head table.

Fuss T. officiously greeted Tayce and led each of the children in turn to a place at the table. Tennyson found himself placed at Peach's right hand. She turned to welcome him to the mushroom kingdom, flashing a glistening smile. He hadn't realized just how gorgeous the Princess was up close; he stood there dumbfounded staring at her as she turned away to see that the other children were properly sited, while Clara in turn glared at him from her place directly across the table.

In a moment the other children were led to their places. Nicholas started to sit down but was halted by a loud "hmmm hmmm" from Fuss T. and a kick in the shins from a short mustached fellow in a white coat, with a huge black bag who was on his right.

Princess Peach spoke again to the crowd: "I know we're all ready to enjoy another of Tayce's delicious dinners, so without further ado, Fuss T. will lead us in the anthem of our beloved Mushroom Kingdom."

Fuss T. walked to an open area in front of the raised platform and placed his hand over his (presumably) heart. The orchestra struck up a martial tune and everyone (except the children, of course) burst into a rather out of tune rendition of what was obviously the national anthem:

*From the Dry Dry Desert
to the Shy Guys Toys
From the Southern Sea
to the Penguin's noise
We'll protect our castle
and our Princess, too,
Even though she's kidnapped
every week or two.*

Everyone burst into wild applause and then the Princess sat down on her elegant high-backed chair, which was apparently the signal for dinner, as everyone else plunked their bottoms down at that point.

Toads bustled up to each diner with a beautifully engraved white and gold card, and patiently waited for them to make a selection. Nicholas picked up the card: it was a dinner menu. It read like this:

The Mushroom Kingdom

Princess Peach Toadstool, Presiding

--dinner menu--

Friday, July 27th

APPETIZERS

Koopa leaf	Goomnut
Lemon Lime	Mushroom
Coconut	

MAIN COURSES

Koopasta	Fried Shroom
Fried Eggs	Honey Ultra
Deluxe Feast	Watermelon
Jelly Ultra	Hot Shroom

Dessert

Coco Pop	special: Tacey T's special cake
Lemon Candy	Big Cookie
Kooky Cookie	Maple Super
Special Strawberry Cake	
Shroom Cake	Nutty Cake

toppings:

Honey syrup	Maple syrup
Jam	Jelly

Beverages

Tasty Tonic
Super Soda
Special Smoothy
Koopa Tea

Thank you for joining us at Peach's Castle to share in the delicious cuisine of our beloved Mushroom Kingdom. Enjoy your meal!

--Tacey T., Supervisor, Kitchen Staff

Nicholas' jaw dropped. He hadn't realized until now how hungry he had become; he was tempted to order everything, but he could almost hear his Mom's voice at his shoulder, and contented himself with goomnut, koopasta, tasty tonic, and a big cookie for dessert. Clara ordered a frugal repast of deluxe feast, shroom cake and koopa tea. Cane, seated on Peach's left, was not inclined towards restraint and his plate was soon piled high. Peach was too polite to show her distaste for such behavior by more than a hostile glance, and focused her attention on Tennyson, who had been more moderate in his choice of fare. Erin ordered all the appetizers and a special smoothy; Brian selected Koopasta and a soda.

The urgent task of arranging dinner having been disposed of, the children turned their attention to their tablemates. Between Brian and Clara was a round pink fellow with short legs, seated on a pile of cushions: Kirby! Brian immediately turned and politely introduced himself: "I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr. Kirby. I'm Brian, and that's Clara."

Kirby bowed slightly but had nothing to say, as he was watching the waiters pile food onto an unusually large platter in front of him. It was quickly apparent that he had ordered double portions of everything on the menu. In a moment, a veritable feast was piled steaming in front of him. He stood

up, to the extent he could on his short legs, and leaned towards the plate: his mouth grew into a huge O, as he demonstrated a new meaning for the colloquialism “inhaling your meal”.

Clara’s jaw dropped. Tayce T., who was puttering around the room supervising the waiting staff, said from behind them, “I declah! Just impossible, that Kirby. Can NOT be taught to behave in a civilized fashion, even though Lahd knows he has a gentle heart. Now, chile, don’t you even THINK about emulatin’ such habits.”

On Brian’s right was a large ape with graying fur, a long beard, and several missing teeth, wearing a curious squarish hat: he recognized Cranky Kong from his early days playing Nintendo 64 games. “Youngster, you’ll never grow strong eatin’ like that!” said Cranky. “You mind ol’ Cranky, I know what’s good for ye’. Why, if D.K. had listened to me when he was young he wouldn’t ‘a gotten into some much trouble with K. Rool over that silly crystal coconut. That boy hasn’t got the sense of a Pineapple. Ought to ‘ve given him to the Kremplings to raise as one of their own, woulda’ been more at home. He could bring home a hundred golden bananas for all I care, he’s still a disaster...” Cranky’s rant continued on as Brian nodded politely at each imprecation.

On Clara’s left was a mustachioed man impolitely wearing a green hat, white gloves, and wrinkled coveralls held up by blue suspenders: Luigi. He was lustily devouring a green jelly ultra. Noticing her attention, he turned and smiled, revealing a few bits of coconut caught in his mustache. “You musta be Clara. You kids are the talk of the castle, you know. It’s so thoughtful of you to show upa when Mario’s not around -- he’s such a glory hound, he’d be sticking his nose into everything you do just to makea sure he gets all the attention. Were you going to eat that a shroom cake?”

“That’s my dessert, I’m not ready to eat it yet.” Clara wasn’t sure what to make of Luigi; she tried not to think of herself as dainty, but she was put off by his earthy habits. Still, it didn’t do to offend such a famous character. “But it is a lot for me to finish; would you like to share it?”

“I woulda be honored, little lady,” replied Luigi, carefully wiping a spot of jelly on the table with his napkin until it was completely clean. He seemed to have different standards for his environment and his person: a significant portion of his meal had already ended up on his shirt. “You come a visit me at my house, yes? We can share more than a piece of cake a,” said Luigi, placing his hand on Clara’s bare shoulder. “You know -- the master bedroom is a very special! You should come a visit -- you don’t need to bring your friends, we can have more a fun thata way--”

Peach’s sharp eyes and ears had been following these events from across the table, as she rapped on her chair with her rod and spoke sharply: “Luigi! What did I tell you about your behavior?”

“Oh, oh, so sorry, Princess. I was just inviting the nice younga lady -- and her friends, of course -- to visit me ata my mansion.”

“Yes. Clara AND her friends. For sodas.”

“Yes, of coursea, what else?” Peach’s glance said you know perfectly what else had better not be involved. Luigi took the very strenuous hint and turned to acquaint himself with Erin, who was sitting to his left.

Erin was not paying attention to Luigi as he was watching the woman at his left. She was dressed in a remarkable suit of some sort of armor which covered her completely except for where she had removed her helmet, revealing an elegant but scarred visage with short-cropped blondish hair and a curious tattoo on her cheek. The Toad waiter on her left was heaping a huge portion of what was clearly raw meat onto her platter. She signaled him to stop when the plate was completely covered with bloody slices; the tablecloth nearby was splattered and stained. The waiter quickly sidled back out of range as she stood up and aimed the laser gun mounted to her right hand at the platter. There was an intolerably brilliant but very brief flash -- PSSSST! -- and when Erin could see again, she was meticulously slicing pieces of the now-cooked beef with a nasty-looking bowie knife she had pulled from a waist-mounted sheath. “Wow,” said Erin. The lady glanced at him and continued to eat. “Warrior Woman Blast Browns Beef, Stroganoff Stymied! Film at eleven,” said Erin. The warrior woman ignored him and slashed another slab of beef. “Do you always cook your food that way?” asked Erin, not to be denied.

“To whom am I speaking?” she finally responded, in a gravelly hard-edged voice.

“I’m sorry, I’m Erin Hollin, I’m in fifth grade at Mountain Elementary.”

"Umm. Game player," she grunted, not bothering to reciprocate.

"Certainly. Smash Brothers, Paper Mario, Diddy Kong Racing, Donkey Kong, Pokemon Stadium -- and Metroid, of course. Though sometimes I watch more than I play."

"It's different playing and being there."

"I've noticed."

She looked at Erin dubiously. "You haven't noticed much yet, I'd say." She slurped up a slice of beef. "An opponent trying to poison you has a harder time if the poison has to go in before the food is cooked. The beam also contains a significant proportion of mid- and deep-ultraviolet; kills bacteria and decomposes any adulterants on the surface of the meat. Besides, it frightens children." She turned back to her food, obviously not wishing to converse further. Erin gave up and turned to Luigi; in a few moments the two were engaged in a comparison of the relative merits of ectoplasmic and conventional vacuum cleaners.

Nicholas had courteously offered his napkin to the gentlemen sitting on his right, whose persistent sneezes had overwhelmed his own handkerchief and napkin. "Thank --- A CHOOO!! -- you, young -- AA AA -- man -- aa CHOO!", he said, blowing his nose loudly. At Tayce's direction, one of the waiters deposited a pile of napkins at the man's side, and he nodded thanks as he sneezed again. The man was dressed in a white laboratory gown and wore a cap with a reflector. He reached down next to his chair and pulled up a black bag. "AAA AAAA CHOOO!" He rummaged through the bag, pulling out every imaginable sort of bottle, vial, pillbox, and syringe, before: "Well! finally!" He pulled two large multicolored capsules out of a green glass bottle and swallowed them with a big swig of tonic. "Ahhhh! That ought to do it!"

"Are you feeling better?" said Nicholas.

"Yes, thank you, young man. I simply can not get rid of this cold without my megavitamins."

"Suffering shy guys -- you must be Dr. Mario! This is really neat. I'm Nicholas; I've used the megavitamins a bunch of times in Smash Brothers. They're great."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Master Nicholas. How is it that you've come to visit us here at the castle?"

"Well, we were just playing Super Smash Brothers, and Cane and Tennyson fell on the game pile, and then this wierd guy who wasn't Tennyson's dad pointed a wand at us and there we were in the Mushroom Kingdom! So we battled against the koopas and then got up the tower and beat the Yoshies, and Clara got a Superscope, and Humtee Dump T sent us to his friend Hedley Medley T and he told us to how to get to the castle, but we got caught in the quiz room and then got out and --"

"Yes, thank you, I see. So this is a very recent development. Do you always dress so elegantly to play Super Smash Brothers Melée? I didn't remember children being quite so attentive to their haberdashery."

"Oh, well, Darjeeling T. got these for us. I think Donkey Kong left them here."

"I see. I hope you're enjoying your visit here at Peach's castle. Will you be staying very long?"

"Well, we're really on our way to Fourside, but the copter doesn't come until seven, so we had time for dinner, and Tayce T. said we should come, so -- um -- here we are."

"Fourside. Lovely place. Striking architecture. Mediocre accomodations, though. I was there on a case not so long ago and had to spend the night; the cuisine simply doesn't hold a candle to Tayce's most forgettable efforts."

"You mean the food there is bad?"

"Exactly, very astute of you. What are your intentions at Fourside?"

"We were going to find a phone to call home. Although I must admit that so far it's been pretty cool here in the Mushroom Kingdom. Except when the Yoshies almost dumped us in the river, that is. But I guess we'd better get home before our parents start getting upset."

"Nicholas, I think you may have need of my services in this quest. Let me see." He rummaged through his bag. "First, take some of these." He handed Nicholas another green bottle, which Nicholas stashed in one of the many pockets that graced his new clothes. "Megavitamins are quite useful for minor

injuries as well as colds and sinus headaches. Remember to take them with a full glass of water, not more than two at once; you can take two more in two hours if the injury is severe. Don't use them for ray gun burns or frostbite, and don't mix them with megatomatoes!" He gave Nicholas a paper-wrapped bundle about the size of a baseball. "This is a party ball. It is indicated for excess hostility and also can be used in the case of an upset stomach. Pull the string at the end to make it expand to full size; then throw it in the air immediately prior to catastrophic annihilation. In the ensuing debauchery you can generally make good your escape, if you have the moral courage to depart when the departing is good."

Nicholas nodded as if he had understood Dr. Mario's remarks. "That's really great, I'll be on the lookout for -- um -- butchery--"

"Debauchery, son, it's an important distinction. That's all right. Are you armed? What about your companions?"

"Well, like I said, Clara got the Superscope, and Tennyson has a Home Run Bat. Cane found a ray gun and shot Tennyson with it -- that was funny!" Dr. Mario didn't look very impressed. Nicholas continued with more sobriety: "Brian took a heart container, and Eric took Mr. Saturn -- well, I guess you should say Mr. Saturn went with him."

"You're with Mr. Saturn? Excellent. Attend closely to him; he is vastly experienced, and beneath his frivolous exterior beats a heart as true as it is misplaced. They have their hearts underneath the liver, you know. I had occasion to attempt surgery on an earlier Mr. Saturn and suffered the embarrassment of erroneous placement of the incision. Sad to report, due in part to my ignorance, he passed away quite untimely. I took advantage of his demise to become familiar with Saturnian anatomy, which is quite distinct from that of humans, Toads, or Koopas, though reminiscent of the Penguin arrangement. So you yourself are then lacking weapons beyond your fists?"

"Well, yeah, I guess that's right." Nicholas hadn't thought about the matter until it was brought to his attention; now he felt a bit left out.

"Let us correct this regrettable inconvenience. You'll need all the firepower you can manage in Fourside and thereafter." He raised his voice across the table. "Excuse me, Princess, may I have a moment of your attention, please?"

Peach was distracted from an intense discussion of forehand volleys with Tennyson, who had been taking lessons since first grade and had been charmed to find someone interested in his tennis game. "Dr. Mario, it is always a pleasure to devote a moment to you. What's on your mind?"

"It has come to my attention, esteemed Princess, that my young companion here faces the remainder of his expedition armed only with his native courage and discretion. It is my thought that those intrinsic traits might better serve the defense of himself and his friends if coupled with a more direct means of application of forceful persuasion. Is it not the case that you have a beam sword given you by Link in compensation for lodging during a period of pecuniary difficulty on his part, which however you do not intend to employ as the blade is the wrong shade of purple for the frilled pant suit and too long to go with your Amazon outfit?"

"Dr. Mario, your memory and your erudition both remain remarkable. I have such a sword. Perhaps it would be more useful in less -- fashionable hands?"

"My thought exactly."

Peach turned to Fuss T. and whispered something. He hustled off through the big double doors behind the head table.

Cranky Kong hadn't stopped for a moment, which at least gave Brian lots of time to finish his dinner. "That numbskull DK was such a bad shot with the hand cannon that once he got me right in the behind when he was supposed to be trashing Army Dillo. I had to use up all the potion I was going to sell to the danged fool. You need TNT to deal with Army Dillo anyway, anyone with half a brain would know. I tell you it's enough to make you put in for a transfer to the X-Box, son, I--"

The whole table had suddenly become dead silent. Everyone was starting at Cranky. The way Peach looked at him, it was lucky she didn't have the beam sword in her hand. "WHAT DID YOU SAY?"

“Um -- I -- um -- I was -- uh -- talking about -- uh -- quack! Quack. She lives in the box. It chases you, you know, we have a lot of trouble in Congo Jungle with her. Takin’ bananas, too, I just can’t abide her b --

“Good. Quack is the ONLY BOX I want to hear mentioned in this castle. IS THAT CLEAR?”

“Sure, Princess, sure, Quack in the box, no complaints by me, oh no...” Cranky mumbled to himself, and suddenly found a reason to attend to his dinner (fried eggs with maple syrup, for which curiosity Brian was quite willing to forgive him if the result was a moment without complaints).

While the Princess was occupied with Kranky Kong, Tennyson turned his attention to the Star Spirit sitting to his right. The Star had toned down his brightness to allow for the close quarters at the table; now Tennyson could see that he wore a pink bow tie. “I’ve never met a Star Spirit in person before. I’m Tennyson.”

“It is my pleasure, I’m sure. My full name is rather laboriously long; Skolar will do.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Skolar. What is it like being a Star Spirit?”

“That is in itself a curious question, Master Tennyson. What is it like being a human child? What is it like being a rock? Perhaps such questions are best left to metaphysics. You should ask rather: what does a Star Spirit do that is notably different from the activities of a human child, in order that you may construct your own perhaps muddled analogy with the events of your own life. Recall that only one’s own mental state is directly accessible to consciousness and that even internally one’s perceptions are as much inference as experience.”

“Uh -- right.” What can I ask to get an answer I can understand? “Do you like the food here?”

“Star Spirits don’t eat, of course, Master Tennyson. Not in the fashion of pure material creatures such as yourselves. Our energy is provided by the fusion of hydrogen nuclei adsorbed at high density into a transition metal matrix structured to catalyze tunneling through the electromagnetic repulsion barrier; due to the high energy efficiency of the process, a single dose of protons at conception is quite sufficient to provide for the normal exigencies of existence. Therefore I have only an esthetic appreciation of the substance of the feast.”

“Oh.” That wasn’t it. “Listen, maybe you can help with something that’s been kind of bothering me. In my real life I don’t really kill anything except maybe spiders, and ants if I step on them by accident. But even the first few minutes we were here we jumped on the heads of the goombas and they -- disappeared, I guess we killed them. And we knocked some yoshies into the water at the tower -- of course, they started it but still they didn’t come out, I guess they were dead too. But nobody seems to mind a lot. Is it just sort of all right to go around killing creatures? Is it OK to kill some things and not others? Maybe they’re not really dying here?” That was great, Tennyson; this will be totally incomprehensible. Oh, well, try to stay awake.

“Master Tennyson, do you eat meat in the real world?”

“Yeah. Whoppers are my favorite. Burger King, you know? I like fried chicken too.”

“Each bit of meat that you eat is the remains of a formerly living animal, killed on your behalf.”

“Okay. I mean, I understand that. Wow.”

“Therefore the moral onus assigned to inducing the end of a being is indeed dependent upon the circumstances. In simpler terms, yes, it is ok to kill some things and not others. Furthermore, the standards of behavior in any given place and time are conditioned by history, culture, and circumstance. Thus, as you will no doubt find, the consequences of what appears to be death for most denizens of the game worlds are not quite the same as those in your world, and the rules of conflict are correspondingly less onerous. Here you will suffer no shame from killing an opponent in battle -- but be aware that your opponent has correspondingly no scruples about eliminating you!”

“You mean that there’s no such thing as a murderer or a murderer here?”

“Not at all. Were you to kill the Princess asleep in her bed, you should be a criminal as well as a coward, and the new Princess would have you executed. Yet if you were to defeat her in a formal contest, you would accrue only the victor’s glory. Still, it is of utmost importance to remember that the rules that we use in our world, and that work very well for all of us, would be both inappropriate and

immoral in your world -- the real world. Have you defeated your friends at some time in, say, Super Smash Brothers?"

"Yeah, sure," replied Tennyson, happy to have a question so easy to respond to. He had been afraid of some philosophical inquiry that would've made him look as stupid as he felt.

"In doing so, your character defeated the character they were controlling, correct? Yet this action would in no way justify you killing your friend, or them killing you. You must learn the ways of our worlds to survive in our worlds and return to yours, but you must unlearn those ways when you reach your goal." Skolar paused for a moment, perhaps reflecting upon the ability of his accidental student to absorb further moral instruction. "You should realize that you will need to learn much about our worlds, for there is no easy way to return to yours. But there is much of beauty, charm, and excitement in the worlds we inhabit. Further, there is great opportunity here for the improvement of your character, and that of your colleagues. I foresee that you will learn much in the days to come."

"Days? Oh, my, but what will my parents think? Am I going to miss school, too? Well, I guess that's not so bad except that I'm going to be in big trouble about it. We all thought we'd get home soon. What are we going to do if we're here for days?"

"The impatience of youth! My child, time experienced in the game worlds is not the same as that of your home. I very much doubt your parents will have had time to miss you by the hour of your return, as I have no doubt at all that you shall succeed in returning."

Tennyson was distracted from pursuing the point further as Fuss T. had reappeared with a large box, from which he had removed a beautiful gem-encrusted sword hilt. He was demonstrating the working of the sword to Nicholas: "Press here and twist to extend the blade," he said, as with a HISS-BOING a glowing sabre popped out of the flat face of the hilt, "and pull here and here simultaneously to retract," BLUUUUP! and it was gone.

"Wow!" said Nicholas. "I mean, thank you very much, Mr. Fuss T.!"

"Don't thank me, I was only doing my job."

"All right," said Nicholas, turning to the Princess. "Thank you very very much, Princess Peach."

"My pleasure, Master Nicholas. Attend to my Minister's instructions; use it wisely and well."

"And thank you, Dr. Mario," said Nicholas in a quieter tone, turning back to his white-coated companion. On Peach's other side, Cane belched loudly and then turned red as everyone (except Kirby) glared at him. "Now, he deserves that bow tie, I'd say, just like Donkey Kong; you can take the boy from the belchin' but you can't take the belch out of the boy -- or -- well, uh -- kids these days! When I was young we were taught to behave at the table!" said Cranky Kong, as he took a long drink from his soda and burped audibly. "Oops, 'scuse me."

Cane, embarrassed by the unwanted attention, turned to the Star Spirit on his left. "Hey, wow, a Star Spirit. What are you doing here?" And then, remembering some manners: "Uh, I'm Cane, I'm in fifth grade."

"Charmed, I'm sure. My name is Klevor. I've never met a human child in person before. Most enlightening."

"That must be pretty interesting," said Cane, pointing to the book that Klevor had been reading at dinner.

"Oh, yes, it's just out: Enter the Cube, about a group of children from the real world projected into the Mushroom Kingdom. I was just reading about them having dinner with Princess Peach. See, it says so right here: 'I was just reading about them having dinner with Princess Peach,' said Klevor," said Klevor.

"Wait a minute. You're reading about us?"

"Exactly. Just the miracle of modern publishing. Amazing, don't you think? Why, look at this: the next thing you're going to say is 'That's incredible.'"

“That’s incredible! I mean -- wait a minute!”

“You just said that. Your next line is, ‘I don’t believe it’.”

“I don’t believe it. I mean -- dang it! Let me see that!”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Well, among other things it says right here: ‘Oh, no, I couldn’t do that.’”

“This is crazy!”

“Yes, so far it has been a very entertaining story.”

“Fine, OK, what happens next?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why not -- and don’t tell me because it says ‘I can’t tell you’!”

“All right, I won’t tell you.”

Luigi was chatting with Clara again, though being a bit more circumspect about where his hands went. “Now, my child, if you’d like to come and visit you really are very welcome. I keep the placea very clean, and there are loads of rooms you could sleep in. I’ve gotta the ghosts out of most of them. Of course,” with a furtive glance at Peach, “you’re alwaysa welcome to come by yourselfa, no?” He took a curious ellipsoid from the pocket of his coveralls. “Just playa the Horror Song and you’ll get a nicea portal into the study, stays open fora 30 seconds, lotsa time to come on over.” He whistled a snatch of a tune: “Like that, got it?”

“Not -- exactly,” said Clara, who was not very musical. Luigi placed his mouth closer to her ear and whistled the tune again.

Nicholas happened to look at his watch, and noticed that it was almost seven o’clock. “Excuse me, Dr. Mario, how late does dinner run tonight?”

“Well seeing as it is Friday, dinner will end early: no later than nine, I should say. On Thursday and Saturday, of course, it is more typical to feast until midnight.”

“Nine o’clock! Holy cow! We need to get going! Excuse me, Princess Peach, we have a copter to catch, may we be excused?”

“Oh, of course, I’m so sorry for forgetting. Thank you very much for coming, children. Fuss T. will show you to the platform.” Peach looked at her very elegant pocket watch. “You have more than six minutes, so there’s no need to hurry unduly.”

“Six minutes!” said Cane. “Ohmigosh, I can hardly move. I think I ate too much.”

“Come on!” said Nicholas. “Where are our clothes?” Looking around, he saw the backpacks and assorted items and weaponry neatly piled by the stairway on the left side, which was where Fuss T. was waiting. The kids said quick goodbyes to their tablemates (none with more relief than Brian) and zipped up the stairs calling thank-you’s to the Princess and Tayce over their shoulders, while Fuss T. gave them quick instructions to the platform.

As soon as they got into the corridor, the boys starting undoing their fancy clothes and dropping them onto the floor as they hurried towards the roof. Clara, bringing up the rear, was suitably aghast. “Boys!” she hissed under her breath, and then louder: “Wait up, I have to find somewhere to change clothes!”

Even Cane knew it was not appropriate to ask why she couldn’t follow their example; he pulled his torn tee-shirt on and kept his mouth shut (for once). Clara stopped at a door with dual silhouettes -- apparently a unisex bathroom -- and was about to enter when suddenly a large rather chubby man appeared around the corner and ran into the bathroom in front of her.

“Sorry, eat a lot, go a lot!” said the man as he slammed the door shut.

“Who was that?” asked Erin.

“Gourmet Guy, I think,” said Brian.

Clara ran to the next door in the corridor and pushed it open. Beyond it was a very bizarre sight: suspended in front of an incomprehensible, dizzying visual chaos was a large rectangular placard, hanging without visible support. It said:

FATAL ERROR 426H:

MEMORY OVERWRITE

TO AVOID THIS ERROR IN THE FUTURE
USE YOUR CONTROLLER ONLY ACCORDING TO
INSTRUCTIONS PROVIDED. IT'S NEVER OUR FAULT.
PRESS RESET TO WIPE OUT EVERYTHING.

"What is that?" said Clara.

Erin looked in the door. "Oh, Microsoft."

"Eeeuuu," said Nicholas. Clara gagged and ran to the next door: behind it was an empty storage room with some shelves and buckets. She jumped in and while the boys stamped their feet impatiently outside, carefully folded the lovely gown and packed it away. Nicholas looked at his watch. "Three minutes left, let's go!" Clara jumped out, carefully placed the valise containing the gown next to the wall, and on they sped down the corridor, up two flights of stairs, through a steel hatch and out onto the roof.

The door opened out onto a large flat area covered with interlocking tiles, wide enough for all the kids to walk abreast, but with steeply sloping edges leading to a frightening fall off the castle edge to the water. A chilly breeze was blowing as the sun descended below the hills looking west; the mushrooms cast huge shadows in the fading sunlight. In the sudden cold and darkness, their rooftop perch seemed precarious. "Where does the copter land?" asked Tennyson.

Erin pointed to a hexagonal platform, cast in silhouette by the twilight, suspended about 3 meters above the roof and somewhat beyond the flat region. At the edge they could see a bulbous outline: Mr. Saturn. "Must be up there," said Erin.

"You sure? Maybe he's trying to lure us up there so we'll fall off the roof," said Cane.

"He wouldn't do that, would he?" said Brian. He didn't sound confident.

"No, of course he wouldn't!" said Erin, too cheerfully. "Mr. Saturn would never participate in a conspiracy to destroy innocent fifth graders by inducing them to foolishly jump to an unreachable platform thereby falling to a horrible drawn-out death, and I would never cooperate with his nefarious schemes!" He pointed upwards. "Never, unless of course I was UNDER THE CONTROL OF ALIENS FROM A UFO!"

A very bright white light had appeared from behind a cloud, nearly blinding the kids on the roof. The wind whipped up and a loud thumping sound drowned out their voices. The light rapidly grew closer and it was easy to wonder if it was a UFO coming to abduct them all.

Then Nicholas recognized the sound: "It's just the copter! Look!"

Chapter 5: Copter, Copter, Overhead, I Choose Fourside for my Bed

As the light descended and no longer shone directly into their eyes, they could see that it was just the downward-pointing landing light of a yellow-orange helicopter, with blue and red stripes and “HELI” stenciled over the side windows. A shape was visible in the cockpit, though in the twilight it wasn’t possible to see clearly. “Paulacopter Travel” was inscribed in small, precise black lettering along the rear rotor boom. The copter set down gently on the platform and the rotors slowed to visibility.

“OK, this is great,” said Cane. “How do we get up there?”

“Oh, you can just jump,” said Clara.

“But what if you miss?” asked Tennyson, staring at the steep roof.

Even Clara was taken aback: could she count on a passing Koopa Paratroopa again? “Maybe we should go back in and get some help.”

“What if the copter leaves while we’re looking for someone?” said Nicholas.

“Usually you have to beat an enemy and then there’s a switch or a rod or something you press,” said Brian.

“What enemy? Do we need to get into a fight with each other?” said Tennyson.

Erin immediately grabbed an imaginary microphone: “In this cornah, weighing in at three hundred fifty three and two thirds avoirdupois: Tennyson Kipling Byron the Poetic Pounder! Floating like a butterfly, stinging like a beedrill! And in this cornah, weighing in at way too much, Cane Whacker, the Poke In Your Eye with a Sharp Stick of which you’ve heard so much! Twenty-seven rounds of chaos and confusion -- brought to you by Peach’s Pears, Royalty in Arrears!”

“That’s not my last name,” said Cane. “You ARE a dufus,” said Clara.

“Erin, that’s not helping. Come on, what are we going to do?” said Nicholas.

“Why don’t we ask Mr. Saturn how he got up there?” said Erin.

“Oh. Good point,” replied Nicholas. “Hey, Mr. Saturn! What’s the trick?”

“The trick, Master Nicholas, is not minding that it hurts,” said Mr. Saturn in a recognizably British accent, putting out a burning match on his nose. “There is no trick to causing the platform to descend to the level of the roof; it is merely necessary to read. The sign. On the platform control.”

Nicholas looked around: there it was, right in front of them, a metal conduit box about knee level with four large buttons each clearly labeled:

ROOF LEVEL	[]
GROUND LEVEL	[]
LANDING LEVEL	[]
TILT	[]

Nicholas flirted with the temptation to find out what TILT did, but then pressed the ROOF LEVEL button and with a sighing sound the platform sank quickly to the edge of the walkway. Mr. Saturn had popped open a small door behind the passenger compartment, where the kids could stow away their backpacks and weaponry. After a bit of fiddling Clara figured out how to open the main door and everyone piled in.

A female voice came over the speaker mounted on the roof: “Welcome to Paulacopter flight thirty-four, with non-stop service to Fourside, continuing on to Brinstar, Pop Star, and Congo Jungle. Please buckle up; Mushroom Kingdom Regulations forbid departure until all passengers are securely belted in place.”

There were five passenger seats for the six kids; the boys being boys had taken them all without thinking about Clara, who was holding the door open until everyone got in. Tennyson, sitting in the odd chair at the back of the passenger compartment, met her about-to-get-mad glare and gestured: she

somewhat awkwardly climbed in, sat on his lap in the chair and buckled the seat belt around them both. Tennyson hesitated and put his arms around her shoulders -- just to keep her safe, of course -- and Clara snuggled into the crook beneath his chin, looking happier than she would admit to. Fortunately, they were out of sight of Cane. Mr. Saturn was hiding in the baggage compartment, presumably exposed to the risks of the flight.

“Destination, please.”

Brian spoke up. “Fourside, ma’am. All of us.”

“Eleven coins per passenger. Please deposit coins in the receptacle.” A little box popped out of the front cabin wall, with a coin slot in the top. Brian reached into his backpack and got out the bag of coins he’d won at the Quiz game; he counted out 66 of them while the kids waited impatiently. A BING! announced the acceptance of each coin.

With a high-pitched whine, the huge rotors started to spin up, shaking the copter momentarily as they passed through resonances on the way to takeoff speed. There was a slight bump as the blades pitched up to lift the copter off the platform, and they were off.

The cabin spun as if on a string, and then settled onto a steady course as they rose rapidly into the clouds. None of the kids had ever been on a helicopter before, and they were apprehensive at first (except for Clara and Tennyson, who were occupied with discovering that they liked sharing a seat). It was several minutes before anyone ventured to speak: Nicholas tried address Erin, in the seat to his left, and discovered that conversation was challenging in the whining, thumping, whooshing environment of the noisy cabin.

He finally cupped his hands and shouted: “DO YOU KNOW HOW LONG THE FLIGHT LASTS?”

“WHAT?” shouted Erin.

“HOW LONG IS THE FLIGHT?”

“GOT ME. ASK MISTER SATURN!”

“HOW? HE’S IN THE BAGGAGE COMPARTMENT.”

“WHAT?”

“HOW?”

“WHAT?”

“NEVER MIND!” said Nicholas, throwing up his hands in dismay.

A few bumps and dips later, they came out on top of the cloud deck, as the last rays of the setting sun cast deep reds and yellows across the sky. The seat belt sign went off, and the female voice said: “You are now free to move about the cabin. When in your seat, please keep your seat belt loosely fastened.” Clara released their seat belt and got up before their privacy could be compromised, joined in a moment by the others. They found that they could converse by speaking directly into each other’s ears, but it was hardly worth the effort. Instead they took in the view as the clouds sped by below and the stars slowly brightened in the sky. After what seemed like a very long time (but was only a bit more than half an hour by Nicholas’ watch), the whine of the engine changed pitch and they seemed to descend.

“ARE WE THERE YET?” shouted Nicholas to Erin. Erin shrugged his shoulders and pointed out the window to a bright object just visible in the distance. Nicholas pressed his nose up against the glass: “What the heck is that?” No one could hear him clearly, but his gestures produced enough curiosity to draw everyone to the port side windows.

With the passing of the minutes the object’s nature could be discerned: it looked like a roadside rest stop, with a gas station and a restaurants, but suspended above the clouds. Off to one side was a huge post with a bunch of signs attached in differing orientations. As they grew closer the signs became legible:

EARTHBOUND
POKEMON STADIUM
KANTO
JOHTO

MUSHROOM KINGDOM
ICE CLIMBER MOUNTAINS
DK ISLES
HYRULE
MARIO'S ATHLETIC CENTER
PIKMIN PLANET
GOLDWOOD

The gas station was painted orange with green neon light trim; a gleaming red neon sign proclaimed: Conker's Fill 'n Go. Around the gas station were several brightly-lit buildings: a squarish one with a glowing green sign above it -- BURGER CUBE -- a second longer building with a brilliant pink sign saying Rock n Roll Diner, and a third with green trim and roof and another pink sign, Rivet's Diner.

The copter settled gently onto the platform next to a pump. In the next space was a bizarre looking craft: a ship about 50 feet long, brilliant red with complex white trim, a huge helicopter-style rotor on top and four additional props on the back, and huge feather-like oars shipped against the hull. Brian recognized it immediately: "The Rainbow Cruise boat!" A couple of Koopas in bright blue leather helmets were puttering around cleaning the bowsprit while a hose stretching from a gas pump apparently was delivering fuel, as evidenced by the rapidly changing numbers showing on the pump.

The copter engine slowed to a whirring idle and the speaker popped again: "We will have a brief refueling stop. Passengers wishing to refresh themselves or use the facilities may deplane at this time. Please be back in your seats in 10 minutes."

"Wow, I never thought I'd enjoy quiet!" said Nicholas, as he reached over to unlatch the door. Nicholas and Erin jumped out of the copter; Nicholas turned to help the others get out, while Erin unlatched the luggage compartment door to release Mr. Saturn. Cane sprinted over toward the main building looking for a restroom.

As Tennyson awkwardly lowered himself to the ground from the door, he pointed towards the gas pump near the copter: "Look at that!" Nicholas followed his gaze: the hose was disengaging itself from the pump latch and traveling through the air towards the copter. A little door on the copter popped open, and a gas cap unscrewed itself. The self-motivated gas nozzle slipped into the fill pipe and the trigger slid up, as gas started pumping.

"Whoah. Talk about 'self-service'!" said Erin.

"That's amazing," said Nicholas. "Do you think the pilot's doing it?" He walked around to the front of the copter and waved at the indistinct shape inside the cockpit. "Hello!" he shouted. "How much longer to Fourside?"

There was no response. Nicholas tried again, with the same result. Tennyson joined him, to no avail. Clara went up close to the window and shielded her eyes from the glare of the lights: "You guys can stop jumping. There's no one there."

"What?!" said Nicholas.

"It's just a cardboard cutout. Look!" Nicholas pressed his face against the glass and shielded his eyes. Inside was a pair of seats surrounded by numerous glowing dials and knobs. In one seat a life-sized outline of a female pilot was strapped; the image of a young girl wearing pink coveralls, wearing a cap with a pair of wings and a prominent "PaulaCopter" insignia, perched over a head of blonde hair and an absurdly cheerful smile. Across the breast a placard prominently proclaimed:

PAULACOPTER PILOTING SERVICES
WE FLY BY PSI

"Geez, you're right, there's no pilot!" said Nicholas.

"I'm not getting back in that copter," said Cane, back from the bathroom.

"She got us this far," said Clara.

"Who?" asked Tennyson.

“Paula, of course. Don’t you remember? She has all sorts of PK powers. She’s the one grabbing the hose from a distance to refuel the copter.” The said hose was at that very moment picking itself up out of the fill pipe and returning to the pump. “She must be controlling it.”

“Clara’s right,” said Brian quietly. “I remember that Paula has all kinds of psychokinetic abilities. She taught Ness his best attacks.”

“Well, if she’s not in the copter, she could just change her mind and do something else,” said Nicholas. “She doesn’t get hurt, only us.”

“Be sensible,” replied Clara. “She loses the copter if it crashes.”

“Maybe she has lots of copters, maybe she doesn’t care. Let’s wait here for a copter with someone flying it!” said Nicholas.

“Are you sure about that?” said Brian. The doors of the Rock N Roll Diner had just swung open. The dance music was really loud -- really LOUD -- and the kids were a hundred feet away from the building. “I thought you’d discovered you liked quiet!” shouted Brian. Nicholas only heard the last word, as the door swung shut again. Two purple dragons with bright red wings had left the Diner and were walking towards them. Puffs of flame burst from their mouths. They were having a very animated conversation. Suddenly one of the dragons spun around, whipping his tail out. The other dragon stood for a moment and then fell into two pieces, each spurting a sort of disgusting yellow fluid.

The remaining dragon looked up at the kids. He didn’t look friendly.

“I think we should get in the copter,” said Nicholas.

Clara was too busy climbing through the door to gloat. Erin virtually threw Mr. Saturn back in his compartment and jumped in. Cane got stuck on the door rim and Tennyson and Brian grabbed him by the belt, scraping his face across the cabin floor as his legs flew in the air. They slammed the door shut and everyone scrambled to their seats as the engine revved up. “Please fasten your seat belts securely and observe all safety precautions. In case of dragon-like space pirate attacks during flight, your seat cushion may be used as a flotation device. Lot of good that’ll do you, as we’ll burn up long before we hit the water. We’re outta’ here!” The accelerating rotors carried them away from the platform. The remaining dragon spat a long tongue of searing fire in their general direction, though it seemed without any serious intent to do damage; perhaps it was a dragon alien’s way of saying goodbye.

Within a few minutes they were cruising over the darkened clouds; the night sky glistened with stars. Brian, whose dad was an avid amateur astronomer, tried to identify them, but the constellations were completely unfamiliar. Erin was tapping out messages to Mr. Saturn, though as he knew no Morse code he had no idea what any of them meant. Cane was standing with his face in the air inlet on the ceiling, trying not to think about what incipient air sickness feels like, so Clara and Tennyson were able to share a seat happily without interference.

The speaker popped: “We hope you are having an enjoyable flight.” Cane groaned. “If you look outside to the right, through that break in the clouds, you can see the lights of Onett Township, hometown of Ness and host of the annual Alien InvaderFest. We will start our descent to Fourside Heliport in approximately 5 minutes, and expect to arrive precisely on time at 8:12 PM. We know you have many choices in gameworld transportation, and thank you for choosing PaulaCopters Travel for all your travel needs. Please return to your seat and fasten your seat belt for landing.”

The descent through the clouds was fairly bumpy, and Cane started to look positively grim. The sojourn in the overcast was mercifully brief; they broke through into the clear suddenly, and all the kids gasped at the stunning sight of Fourside’s imposing skyscrapers laid out glowing below them. The copter dodged back and forth between brightly lit towers in an aerial dodgeball game that left them breathless, then abruptly slowed to a hover. They settled gently to a landing on a tiny platform marked with an H, adjacent to a flat, well-lit rooftop.

“Welcome to Fourside Heliport. Please check around you for your personal belongings before exiting the copter. Please exit by the left hand door only, in order to avoid falling to your death on the other side. Your luggage is waiting next to the copter. Thank you for choosing PaulaCopter Travel; we hope to see you again!”

The kids piled out onto the platform; Erin and Mr. Saturn handed the backpacks and weapons, neatly piled next to the copter (presumably by means of Paula's psi powers, since no one else was on the platform to greet them) to the others. The rotors started to spin up and they hurriedly jumped to the roof a few feet below, ducking to avoid the backwash from the spinning propellers as the copter lifted off the heliport and headed into the night skyline.

They found themselves surrounded by a forest of towering buildings, windows lighting up the night, many with their tops illuminated in glowing colored lights. Behind a pointed pinnacle lurked a huge moon or moon-like planet. The roof ended abruptly in a sheer drop; Brian ventured to lean over the edge and look down, but not for long. "Wow. It is a long way down. A long way down."

Tennyson ventured to join him. "Whoah. You're right," he said, as he carefully edged away from the precipice.

"Now what?" said Clara.

"I guess we need to find a phone," said Nicholas. "Who's that? Maybe we can ask him." He pointed at a shadowed stretch of the roof: dimly visible was a small person, perhaps even another kid, doing something rapidly with one hand. "Excuse me," called Nicholas, as he walked towards the mystery figure.

"Say hey," said the figure as it strode out into the light. It was indeed a kid: he was wearing a red hat with the visor turned to one side, blue-and-yellow striped shirt, and blue shorts. He was flicking a yo-yo around in the air with his right hand, so fast it was difficult to see in the flat lighting. In his left hand he carried a baseball bat. "It's about time you showed up."

"Excuse me?" said Nicholas. "Showed up for what?"

"To help me out, of course. Paula told me you were coming; why else would you be here? So you must tell me, what weapons have you got to work with?"

"I've got a Home Run Bat," said Tennyson.

"Look, I got a ray gun!" said Cane, thrilled that someone was interested.

"Wait a minute," said Clara. "Help you out with what?"

"To whip Fox! Obviously. Is that a Superscope?"

"Yeah," said Clara hesitantly. "So what?"

"That should work very effectively against Falco; I think you should seek him out."

"Falco? I thought you said Fox. What's going on?"

"You are very simple. Even foolish, yes? You must occupy the others so I can defeat Fox. He is clever; I could not hope to win if I had no help."

"This is stupid," said Nicholas. "Why are you fighting Fox? Who else is helping? Why should we help you?"

"Yes, you are all very foolish, to come like this to a fight without even knowing the opponents in advance. I thought at first you were clever. The Superscope deceived me, I see it now. Well, OK OK. It is Fox with Falco and Roy whom he thinks he is coming to fight. But when they discover I am waiting they will forget their little resentment in favor of the haine de corps, you see, their shared and common hatred of those of courage who are not afraid to resist the Givgas. So with Paula. So with me. So with you, no? You came in the copter not the stinking treacherous alien saucer. You are human. You will battle with me, not them," he concluded with finality.

"Oh, I get it, you're Ness!" said Erin.

"Duh," said Ness. "Duh," repeated Mr. Saturn in a perfect imitation of Ness' curious accent.

"OK, so you're Ness, that still doesn't explain--" said Nicholas, but he was interrupted by a growing high-pitched whine coming from behind them. All the kids turned to look: a flat silver double-saucer as big as an airplane was approaching from between two skyscrapers, its running lights glinting in the night. "Yow, a UFO!" said Nicholas.

"It is certainly not," said Ness, as unperturbed, continued to fling his yo-yo rapidly in complex intertwined trajectories. "To be a UFO, an object must both be flying and unidentified, and while this object is most certainly flying, it is not at all mysterious, as it is transportation provided by the

despicable alien scum, in which we will most certainly find that Fox and his opponents have secreted themselves.”

“Oh,” said Nicholas. “Well, fine, it’s still a flying saucer.”

“Of course. Prepare your weapons, my friends; it is time to kick some alien-loving butt.”

While all this was going on, Erin and Mr. Saturn had walked and waddled, respectively, to the far edge of the roof past the heliport platform. “Wow, this place is really impressive! It reminds me of San Francisco at night,” said Erin.

“I would’ve said Manhattan,” replied Mr. Saturn. “Of course, that’s based only on my reading; I’ve never been to either place. To me it’s just home.”

“Home? Did you grow up in Fourside?”

“Oh, not in Fourside, but Onett is not that far away. Coming here to Fourside is still pretty exciting, in a way: it’s the big city, you see. Big buildings, traffic, tourists, the best of everything. Of course, Fourside is really a business center, not much for culture other than game arcades.”

“Other than arcades? What more is there?” said Erin. Mr. Saturn looked like he would’ve kicked Erin if his legs were long enough, but said nothing. “They do have a wonderful central library. It’s that octagonal building over there.”

“That tall one? Seems kindof silly to put a library in such a tall building. You’d have to take an elevator all the time, wouldn’t you?”

“Yep, it’s like that: one floor for every subject category and seventeen floors of alphabetized fiction. Over there is the public arcade,” said Mr. Saturn, using his nose to indicate a building with a sort of stepped-pyramid top illuminated by a series of orange spotlights. “Thousands of game consoles, hundreds of games, all just a coin per play. Very impressive. Of course, I can’t play very well. PK powers are alright for turning the pages of a book and such but I never developed the delicacy required by game controllers.”

“So Mr. Saturn, I’ve been meaning to ask you. You do seem to know a lot about all sorts of things. What do you do?”

“Well, Erin, mostly I travel the worlds finding libraries and talking to folks. I don’t usually get much respect, any more than I did here: in the gameworlds folks don’t put much value on anybody who can’t fight. So that gives me lots of time to read and learn. Ness, on the other hand -- maybe someone like me should say, on the other nose -- Ness spent all his youth learning to fight like most kids. He has a much shorter nose than me, but he still can’t see past the end of it in most respects. Watch what’s about to happen and you’ll see what I mean.”

The saucer slowed to a hover a few feet above the heliport. A port opened in some mysterious fashion on the side, and out stepped a tall lean character with big ears protruding from a white flight helmet, garbed in a white-and-green flight suit, a stubby firearm in his left hand. Brian immediately recognized Fox. Fox leapt lightly down to the roof, followed in short order by three more warriors: a bird-like but man-sized creature, and two human swordsmen, garbed in brightly colored capes, elegantly emblazoned tunics and loose-fitting pants. The two humans had elegantly jeweled swords in their hands and immediately set to a series of practice thrusts and parries, apparently a warmup ritual. Fox and the birdlike creature -- “Who’s that?” whispered Nicholas; “Falco”, replied Brian under his breath -- stood facing each other separated by a few paces, conversing in an obscure tongue.

“Well, let’s get on with it, enough blathering; remember we’re waiting our turns!” said the swordsman with the purple cape.

“Speak for yourself if you’re going to utter such nonsense, Marth” said the other human. “Such courtesies as these are entirely fitting, and recall the chivalry of an earlier, happier time. Continue, gentlemen, please.”

Falco bowed to Fox and pulled a stubby pistol similar to that borne by his adversary from a holster. The two turned their backs to each other and took several paces, then pivoting back face to face. The purple-cloaked swordsman -- Roy? -- raised his glistening sword near vertical to signal that the combatants should take a ready position.

Just at that moment, Ness stepped out of the shadows. "Gentlemen. Here for a duel, no doubt. You are aware, I should think, that this behavior is against the law. Human law, that is."

Falco turned to Ness and spoke in a high-pitched trill. "Why, Ness, fancy meeting you here. We were just about to indulge in a bit of -- exercise. You are welcome to join us as a -- spectator. We can promise you a fine entertainment without the least trouble on your part."

"Sadly, it cannot be. I'm afraid we must arrest all of you for violating Fourside's strict ordinances in this matter." Ness paused. "And of course for being alien-sympathizing rebel lapdogs of the Givgas. Put down your weapons and come peacefully and you shall only suffer moderate humiliation. Refuse and we kick your alien-loving butts."

The four saucer refugees huddled together briefly, presumably agreeing to resolve or postpone the differences that had been about to lead to blows between them. During this brief pause, Ness attempted to collect his forces, with Clara, Cane, Tennyson, and Nicholas advancing somewhat reluctantly to his side while Brian, Erin, and Mr. Saturn remained as safely out of the way as was achievable on the narrow rooftop.

After a moment the four invaders turned, weapons in hand. Fox tapped his flight helmet with his right hand and said loudly, "I guess we're gonna' have the honor of charging you. Take 'em, boys!"

The combatants advanced upon one another, not without some method on the invaders' part and trepidation on that of the kids. Ness, of course, charged straight at Fox, who raised his pistol to snap a shot only to have it knocked aside by an amazingly quick strike from Ness' yo-yo. Marth advanced on Cane and Tennyson, who, remembering their experience against the Yoshies, positioned themselves at the corners of an imaginary square and tried to coordinate their attacks. Falco selected Clara as his adversary, though he seemed more intent on convincing her of her incipient humiliation and defeat than actually doing anything to bring it about. Roy advanced on Nicholas, who had after a brief struggle managed to extend his beam sword and held it in front of him.

The battle between Fox and Ness was the most intense and evenly matched, as Fox snapped off shots that narrowly missed while dodging the flying yo-yo and equally quick baseball bat, while Ness advanced relentlessly to try to keep the fight in close quarters where Fox's pistol was vulnerable.

"A little slow today, eh, Fox? What will you do (ooohmph!) now that there is no saucer to come to your aid, eh?" said Ness, landing a wicked blow from the bat that glanced off Fox's flight helmet.

"All that big talk doesn't make you anything other than another cheap Onett punk," said Fox, reaching out lightning-quick to grab the yo-yo string and yank it out of Ness's fist. Ness leapt off the edge of the roof onto the top of a nearby brick-faced building. Fox had gotten the yo-yo string tangled around his hand and was distracted for a moment, affording Ness time to charge up a sort of ball lightning attack to toss at Fox, and precipitate himself back down onto Fox, knocking the pistol away with a quick poke of his bat and forcing Fox to retreat to a corner.

Cane and Tennyson found Marth a far more formidable adversary than the poor Yoshies. He was quick on his feet and alert, easily avoiding their awkward attacks. "I'm such a pain, eh?" said Marth, as he landed nasty whacks with the flat of his sword on Cane's arms. Tennyson swung the bat at him, but Marth easily ducked and, catching Tennyson leaning forward, ducked under him and tossed him to the ground, Tennyson landing painfully if harmlessly on his behind. "Sitting down on the job, son?" said Marth as he launched a vicious kick at Tennyson's head, which Tennyson just managed to avoid. Marth continued spinning and caught the bat with his fist, knocking it out of Tennyson's hand. Tennyson had the sense to roll on the ground out of range of the flashing warrior's attacks, while Cane had recovered enough to fire a shot at Marth's back. "In the back, eh? Treacherous, don't you think?" taunted Marth, seeming not to notice the ray blast, as he spun his sword to reflect the next blast back at his attacker, catching Cane smack on the nose.

"This is like the game, Cane. Keep firing! push the button!" said Tennyson, running to get his bat.

"What if my ray gun runs out?" replied Cane, snapping another pair of shots off.

“Forget about it, shoot!” Cane starting pressing the button as fast as he could, landing several shots in quick succession and forcing Marth to retreat around the tower wall.

“Come on, I want to show you something,” said Mr. Saturn, and led Erin straight across the roof, paying no attention to the combatants’ flying swords, yo-yo’s, bats, and blaster bolts. Erin followed a step behind, and they continued their conversation: “The economy here was traditionally based on the export of manufactured goods (pow! swoop!) to less advanced worlds, like Hyrule or the Mushroom Kingdom (woosh!).”

“Oh! that makes sense. I always wondered (pshkow!) how it was that these really primitive places -- whoah, ‘scuse me! watch where you’re putting that beam sword, Nicholas! -- would get such nice lighting and such, not to mention indoor plumbing.”

Nicholas was rather too busy to pay much attention to Erin’s complaints. He had found his awkward attempts at attack with the beam sword easily deflected by Roy. Rather than using the openings for more deadly responses, Roy spun around and whacked Nicholas with the flat of his sword blade on the behind. “Thrust, don’t swing wildly, boy,” he said as he returned to the ready position. “The sword is an extension of the wrist not the shoulder.” Nicholas had at first been a reluctant combatant, but his sore butt and this condescending treatment was starting to make him angry. He tried to picture the boring old Errol Flynn movies his dad liked to watch: how did they use their weapons? He pictured the whiplike motion and swung the sword tip as he slid forward with one foot. Roy easily parried but smiled and nodded. They crossed sword tips. A flick of Roy’s wrist sent his weapon towards Nicholas’ midsection, but just in time Nicholas inverted the position of his arm and parried the cut. “Better, better. The four basic positions will do to begin with,” said Roy as they exchanged thrusts. “This is the first parry, primus, arm forward, wrist flexed, like so.” He paused, allowing Nicholas to do an awkward imitation. “Good -- secundus, comme ça, excellent, tert, and finally carte. The simple thrust attacks (oomph!) are organized (clang) by quadrants of the chest -- weapon arm top, weapon arm bottom, left side low, left side high,” and with each description he tapped Nicholas in the chest, too quickly to parry, making a small but painful cut in the corresponding position. Nicholas was so frustrated with his inability to block Roy’s effortless slices that he hardly noticed the sting.

Nicholas’ whole arm ached as if it were ready to fall off, but he was getting the hang of the exercise. Instead of backing off in rhythm as they had been doing, he batted Roy’s blade to the left and tried sliding his own down his opponent’s edge. He found himself virtually face-to-face with the smiling but deadly teacher, swords crossed at the hilts. “Excellent! Excellent! You are doing very well. Now watch as we disengage,” said Roy, stepping backwards and twisting his blade to keep Nicholas’ sword trapped while the tip swung in a blindingly fast arc, slicing right through Nicholas’ jeans to make a nasty gash on his thigh as he retreated.

“OWW!!” said Nicholas, backing away. “That hurt!”

“Yes, the past can hurt,” replied Roy, advancing again with a swinging arc of the sword across his body, “but as I see it, you can either run from the past,” as they once again clinched together hilt-to-hilt, “or -- learn from it!”, trying the same cut again. Nicholas wasn’t able to parry but had the sense to twist as he retreated, keeping his injured leg barely out of reach of the flying sword tip.

Clara had sensibly retreated into a sheltered location behind a big vent pipe, making it hard for Falco to get at her. Falco was able to use his shield to deflect her blasts, but had to retreat to cover each time he did so, as the shield only lasted for a second or two and then he had to wait an additional few seconds to recharge before he could fire. “Come on out and take your punishment, little girl!” he taunted, but Clara knew a good thing when she saw it and wasn’t about to fall in the trap. “I’m fine where I am, thank you very much. Come in and get me if you’re so tough.” She was watching a little dial on the Superscope which changed each time she fired a shot; she had inferred that this was some sort of charge state indicator, but as she didn’t know where the “empty” position was, all she could do was worry about it without being able to take any action.

“That’s the University, the one with the yellow cone top,” said Mr. Saturn. They had reached the opposite corner of the roof, near the brick building. “You can imagine what it was like for a kid like

me from a small town, who had never seen more than a one-room school. (pskow! foosh!) But then there wasn't much chance they would let a long-nose in the building, much less admit one as a student."

"Gee, I guess I always took it for granted I'd go to college wherever I could get in. My dad is always telling me I should become a doctor of pee itching or something like that. Didn't seem very appealing."

"That's a Ph.D., Erin. Don't feel bad. People never appreciate what they have until they lose it. It's like that everywhere."

By now Cane's ray gun was exhausted; he threw it at Marth, who knocked it aside with his sword. "Help me out here, Tennyson!" cried Cane as Marth advanced, blade at the ready. Tennyson had recovered his bat and swung it around over head, trying to show a confidence he didn't feel: "Come on, you jerk, try that again!"

Tennyson was more cunning this time, swinging the bat low to force Marth off his feet and then launching a vicious home run stroke -- but the wily warrior was still too quick. He did a somersault in the air and spun around on landing, sinking a spinning rounhouse kick into Tennyson's solar plexus: "I don't need to try, I succeed!" said Marth as his shoe sunk into Tennyson. That was enough: Tennyson sunk to the ground, unable to breathe and clearly hors de combat. Marth backed Cane to the edge of the roof, and Cane put hands up shouting "I give up! I give up!" as he looked over his shoulder and contemplated the extremely long vertical drop one step behind him.

Fox had jumped onto the heliport platform and was lying flat, using the bit of cover afforded by the platform to deflect the psi-blasts from Ness. Ness thought he had his opponent whipped, and with a running start he leapt up onto the platform hoping to finish Fox off with a violent swing of his bat. This turned out to be overly audacious: Fox was waiting for the moment during the jump when Ness was exposed and snapped off a perfectly aimed blast hitting Ness in the behind. Ness lost his balance in the air, and Fox caught him with both legs and projected him past the edge of the platform, simultaneously grabbing the string again to prevent Ness from saving himself with the yo-yo. Fox leaned over the platform to see Ness plummet down towards the walkway far below, and then turned unperturbed back to the battle.

By this time, Nicholas, unaccustomed to the intensity of the exercise, was just about exhausted. He tried one more thrust, but Roy effortlessly knocked the beam sword out of Nicholas' shaking hand, punching the off button on the sword -- SWOOP! went the blade as it retracted -- and handed the hilts back to Nicholas, who was sitting down panting. "Not bad for a first lesson, son. Come see me some time in Etruria and we'll make a warrior out of you yet."

Clara was still holed up in her corner, but now all four of the invaders gathered round her and called on her to surrender. Realizing that, with Ness out of the picture, she wasn't even completely sure why they were fighting, she turned her Superscope up and walked out, whistling a theme from Smash Brothers Melée. The four warriors dipped their weapons in acknowledgement of her courage. The battle, such as it was, was over.

The wounded had gathered by the sheltered side of the roof. Clara sauntered over, still whistling. "That was interesting," she said. "Falco is kindof cute."

"Oww, my head," said Cane. "Cute?" gasped Tennyson, finally getting his breath back. "If getting a cavity filled with no pain stuff is interesting, then that was interesting," said Nicholas. He was rummaging through his backback with his left hand; his right hand was still too tired to use.

"What happened to Ness?" asked Clara.

"Bring your Superscope and I'll show you," said Brian. He had stayed out of the way near the heliport. Now he was leaning over the short retaining wall. Clara walked over and handed him the Superscope. He knelt down and stared through the big eyepiece on the weapon. "Yep, that's him. Ugghh."

He handed the Superscope back to Clara. She leaned over and stared through the scope. The high magnification image revealed a walkway far below them; she could see the tops of several heads as people walked back and forth through the city streets, though no cars or vehicles were visible. Directly below them was a rather gruesome lumpy object with red spattered around it. She didn't look too

closely. The people in the walkway seemed to pay no attention, but after a moment she noticed some sort of wheeled cart being driven by something that looked rather like a clone of Mr. Saturn driving over to the stain. It drove back and forth several times, and then went away, leaving a patch of blue in the walk. "Well, that's the end of Ness, I guess," she mumbled to herself.

"Naaw, he'll be replaced," said Falco. "Maybe a different personality but the same no-'count Onett punk. Can't get rid of him so easily."

"Replaced? Replaced. Does he remember getting squashed like that?"

"Oh, no, you're replacement is not you, it's just a sort of clone -- the same sort of person, not the same person. I mean, I've met a lot of folks who knew me previously, that is, the one Star Wolf blew up last year. Sometimes it's pretty embarrassing, like over at the Rock 'n' Roll diner, there was this really cute chick -- female bird, you see -- she started getting kindof cozy with me and I didn't even know who she was! Turns out she and my previous self were, you know, goin' steady you'd probably say. I guess that worked out OK once I figured it out, though."

"I wonder what happens to us. Do we get replaced?" asked Clara.

"I never thought about it. That would be frightening, that you would just -- end -- no other lives. Wow. Don't you get scared?"

"Naaw," said Clara, but she backed away from the edge of the building and looked very thoughtful.

With the battle over, Erin walked over to Fox. "So what were you guys arguing about before you got here, anyway?"

"Oh, that," said Fox, smiling ruefully. "Let's see, what haven't I done lately? I was running down the corridor and bumped Falco on sore arm -- I teased Roy about his girlfriend's -- umm well I can't really explain that, you're too young. And then I told Marth his cape was silly. And that was just today. Take a lesson from this, youngster: life brings you enough enemies, don't make it worse with a big mouth."

Nicholas pulled out a small bottle and cried, "Aha! Lucky I remembered to get these out of those other clothes. Now, if we can just find some water..."

"What's that?" said Tennyson between groans.

"Megavitamins. These will heal us up. I hope. Do you have some water?"

"I don't carry water in my pockets. Ask Clara."

"Geeze, I don't have any water," said Clara pre-emptively. "Just swallow the pills. Duh."

"Right, OK." Nicholas popped the purple capsule in his mouth and looked distracted as he tried to get it down his dry throat. "(cough cough) It's stuck! (cough) Does anybody (cough) have any water?"

Mr. Saturn waddled over to Erin and gave him what for all the world looked like the end of a garden hose. "Bring this to Nicholas," he said, as he waddled back into the shadows. Erin walked towards Nicholas, saying "Here, I've got something," but the hose didn't reach. Nicholas rose with some difficulty, favoring his injured leg, and began to make his way over to Erin just as Mr. Saturn did something by the wall. A powerful stream of water gushed out of the hose, soaking Nicholas but filling his shocked open mouth with water. Erin deflected the hose away from Nicholas, thereby soaking Cane. "What was that for? I didn't ask for water!" said Cane.

Nicholas swallowed his pill and stood dripping: "Thanks. I guess."

"Sorry," said Erin, turning the hose farther to the right, causing Clara to duck rather suddenly. "Watch where you're pointing that thing!"

"Hey, Mr. Saturn. Can you -- uh -- turn it down?" said Erin.

"Oh, sure. Just a second. Is that better?" Now water dribbled out the end. Nicholas picked up the pill bottle (which he had fortunately closed, preventing all the medicine from becoming waterlogged), and distributed megavitamins to Cane and Tennyson, who carefully took drinks from the end of the hose. Then he sat down and sighed.

"What's with you?" said Clara.

“What’s with me? What’s with me? I’ll tell you what’s with me. My pants are covered with blood, I’ve got a mess of cuts and every one hurts, I’m soaking wet, I haven’t got any clothes to change into, and we got beat.”

“We didn’t get beat, we got our butts whipped,” said Tennyson. “My stomach hurts.”

“My brain hurts,” said Cane.

“That’s an improvement, at least you’re sure you’ve got one,” said Clara.

“You didn’t get whipped, you got annihilated,” said Mr. Saturn.

“Annihilated? They got discombobulated!” said Erin.

“Thanks for your support, Erin,” said Nicholas. “I didn’t notice you helping us. I guess you were busy.”

“Come on, guys -- and Clara -- we’re here to find a phone and get home, right?” said Brian. He gave the Superscope back to Clara and pointed at Fox and his friends, who were gathered by the heliport chatting happily. “I’ll go ask them.”

“Are you sure?” said Cane. “What if they whip you too?”

“They won’t. They only fought you because you were with Ness. Watch.” Brian made his way across the roof to Fox. “Excuse me, now that you’ve won, could you help us out? We’re trying to find a phone so we can call home.”

“Yeah, sure, kid. You know, this is the Metroid building, the access doors on the roof here are locked after 6 in the evening. But that brick building over there is the WinnStar Hotel, you can certainly find a phone. Do you kids have somewhere to stay? It’s getting pretty late. You could probably get a room there, too, they aren’t usually full. Don’t eat at the restaurant, though, the food is seriously bad.”

“Tell your friends they ought to choose their sides more carefully next time,” said Marth, chewing on a slice of something that looked like beef jerky. “We’ve nothing against them, but if they side with Ness they’ll get little mercy from us.”

“Uh... right. Thanks a lot. WinnStar Hotel. How do we get there?”

“Jump, of course,” said Roy. “Or fly,” said Falco.

“Jump. Right.” Brian looked down over the edge and swallowed. “OK. Thanks again.”

“You could come with us instead,” said Falco. “We’re going to grab dinner, maybe take in a show or hit a coupla bars. You ever been drunk?”

“I’m -- kindof too young to drink alcoholic stuff,” said Brian. “I got sick eating too much cotton candy once, does that count?”

“No. I guess you’d better go to the hotel. Good luck, kid, we gotta’ go.”

With that, the four victorious warriors strode past Brian across the roof. Circling round the tower along the narrow edge, they made their way to the opposite end of the building and, as if it were nothing, jumped across the gap to the neighboring tower, which was only partly completed. Brian and Erin watched amazed as the four clambered and leapt from girder to girder, hanging by one hand hundreds of meters in the air, making their way down down to the street level far below.

“Well, I guess we’d better go to the hotel,” said Erin.

“Come on, guys,” said Brian, turning back to the group. “Fox said the next building is a hotel where we can stay.”

“How are we going to get there?” asked Nicholas.

“Jump. I guess,” replied Brian.

“I can’t do that, my leg is -- hmm.” Nicholas pulled apart his slashed-up pants. “Wow. It’s not bleeding any more.” He stood up. “It doesn’t hurt! Hey, I feel really great! Those megavitamins are something!”

“You’re right,” said Tennyson. “Wow, I feel fine. In fact, I feel wonderful! This is cool!” Tennyson grabbed Clara’s hands and started spinning her around him. “We’ll just fly right over to the hotel. I’ll toss you from here, watch!”

“No no no,” said Clara. She appreciated the attention but on the fifth spin she was starting to get dizzy. “Stop! Stop! I didn’t take any megavitamins!” Tennyson wasn’t listening. “Oh ... oh.. I’m dizzy.” Tennyson let go of her hands and she staggered backwards, falling on top of Cane.

“Ger off me!” mumbled Cane. He pushed on Clara and she flew up into the air, fortunately landing on her unsteady feet. “Hey, that’s cool. I could never do that before! Geez, Nicholas, thanks. You were right about those megavitamins.”

Clara didn’t think getting thrown into the air was cool but before she could complain about it, she had to catch the backpack Nicholas threw at her. “Come on, guys -- and Clara!-- Brian’s right. Let’s get to the hotel. Where do we go?”

“We jump over to that building there,” said Brian. Now that he thought about it, it was a long way to jump, even though the brick roof was comfortably lower than the building they were on. Did jumping work the same here as in the Mushroom Kingdom? “Uh. Nicholas. You go first.”

“Okay.” Nicholas was still flush with megavitamin-induced energy and without a moments’ hesitation sprinted to the edge of the roof and leapt into the air. “Cowabunga!” he shouted as he flew across to the roof of the brick building. Having given little thought to his landing, he got his feet tangled in what might have been some clotheslines and narrowly missed cracking his head on the gravel roof, ending upside down staring back at the other kids. “It’s great! Come on over!” said Nicholas. “But be careful where you land!”

With that advice, the others proceeded rather more gracefully. Erin tossed Mr. Saturn through the air to Clara, a process all parties found entertaining. Brian and Cane were last, Brian hesitating at the last second and causing Cane to miss his launch point, so that they tangled up as they landed. Brian ended up on top. “Why does everyone land on top of me?” said Cane. Tennyson said: “You can’t go to Paper Mario World if you don’t get flat!” and jumped on top of the pile. “This kid pile is about to go critical, Mr. Saturn; I’m afraid we have to drop the emergency damper rods!” said Erin, jumping on top. “Gerrroffffmuu!” said a now-muffled Cane.

“For once I agree with Cane,” said Clara. “No more megavitamins for you!” She and Nicholas grabbed whatever extremities were available and pulled. After some effort, they got the boys settled down and Nicholas led them over to a red-painted door with big block letters in flaking white paint: “WINSTAR HOTEL” and below that: “STARMEN NOT WELCOME!” and below that “WIPE YOUR FEET!” At the foot of the door was a very dirty rubber mat which didn’t look as if it would clean anything. Nicholas pulled the door open, revealing a dimly-lit hallway. In he went.

Chapter 6: EZ Phone Home

The kids all piled in, carrying their stuff. The hallway led down a stairway to another heavy steel door; they pushed through it into a long corridor covered with worn outdoor carpeting, smelling somewhat of mildew, interrupted at irregular intervals by doors with numbers on them: 1511, 1512, 1513... Some of the digits were missing. Clara was the last one through; she closed the door behind her, noting the markings: "ROOF ACCESS. AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. KEEP THIS DOOR LOCKED." It wasn't.

"Well, this sure looks like a hotel, at least," said Nicholas.

"Yeah, we go to a place just like this in Stockton when my parents go to visit Grandma," said Tennyson. "Smells like this one, too."

"Are we going to stay here? It's gettin' pretty late, even if we can call home. I'm tired!" said Cane. The megavitamins were wearing off.

"I have to have my own room!" said Clara.

"Why?" said Brian.

"Why? Because I'm a girl! That's why. I'm not about to share my bathroom with you guys."

"Fine, fine, let's figure out how to get a room," said Nicholas. "Usually my Dad goes into the lobby."

"Where's that?" said Tennyson. "This doesn't look like a lobby. Don't they have a desk for people to register or something?"

"Yeah, yeah, the lobby is usually on the first floor. We need to go down," replied Nicholas.

"Well, here's the stairway," said Cane, pointing to another metal door close by the roof access. "Do we have to go all the way to the first floor?"

"That's where the lobby is. Let's go," said Nicholas, and without further discussion he opened the metal door marked "STAIRS" and started down: a nice bed was beginning to sound awfully attractive to him too.

Erin, who had started down the corridor with Mr. Saturn, was in one of his oblivious moods: "The chicken heart moved out into the corridor -- BOOM BOOM! BOOM BOOM! rang for the elevator --" at which point he and Mr. Saturn happened to find themselves in front of one -- 'FOURTH FLOOR aaaaah slllluurrrrp!'. Six feet six inches tall -- in search of human blood!" He stepped into the mirror-walled elevator car as Mr. Saturn mumbled something about "chicken heart? chicken heart? I though I knew every boss..."

The rest of the kids had by this time made it to the twelfth floor -- or at least, to the landing marked "12" in big red letters. They were getting awfully tired. Nicholas was still wet enough to leave moist footprints on the stair rungs, but he kept doggedly proceeding down the stairs. Cane started to complain about his left foot and even Clara was rather downtrodden. No one seemed to notice that Erin and Mr. Saturn were missing. By floor 7 Tennyson's loud complaint at each landing: "Seven! Still seven to go!" was beginning to get on the others' nerves.

"That's what you said on floor 8! And 9! They go down one at a time!" snapped Clara.

"Yeah, if you don't have something better to say, shut up," said Nicholas.

"Shut up yourself," said Tennyson.

"My foot hurts," said Cane.

"You shut up too," said Nicholas.

"Shouldn't we look for an el--" started Brian, for the fourth time.

"You shut up too!" said Nicholas. "No more complaining! Let's get to the bottom of this stair!"

Finally they reached the door that said "L". They piled out into a bigger room with several worn couches and divans. Cane immediately collapsed onto the first chair, with Tennyson, too tired to even bother sitting down on top of him, sinking to the floor next to the chair. "Get off of me," mumbled Cane

out of habit. Clara stretched out on the couch and sighed. Brian was completely winded and fell face first onto a padded bench. Nicholas took the second armchair, which turned out to recline backwards, leaving him trapped.

Just about then there was a DING DING! and two doors opened up just in front of Clara. Out stepped Erin and Mr. Saturn. "It's outside of your door! And it's coming to eat you up!!" said Erin. Mr. Saturn still looked puzzled.

Erin noticed the kids. "Oh, where were you guys? I was waiting and then figured you'd gone to the lobby, so we took the elevator."

"Elevator? ohhhh," said Tennyson.

"I told you," said Brian, but no one heard him.

"Why didn't you tell us there was an elevator?" said Nicholas, unable to see Erin from his position folded up inside the reclined recliner.

"You didn't ask. Look, you guys take a rest, I'll go find out about the phones." Erin walked over to what looked like the Registration desk. Behind it was a tall fellow smoking a cigarette. He had thinning black hair tied up into a pony tail, big arms that had the look of someone who had once been powerful, a beer belly spilling over a knotted belt, and a pack of cigarettes rolled up in his torn t-shirt sleeve. He was reading a worn-looking hardback book. Erin read the title: "THE EGAD CONSPIRACY-- how back room deals sold out Eagleland".

"Good evening," said Erin. "We're looking for a phone to call home, and maybe also some rooms for the night. Could you help us?"

The man looked up. "Whaddya' doin', bodderin' me, kid? Where's yur fadda? or mudda?"

"That's kind of the problem; we got into the game cube here and we'd like to call our parents."

"Oh yeah? Well we ain't got no pay phones heah, just what's in da rooms. I could maybe let you use da office phone but it ain't woikin. Ain't never woiked right, dat's what I say. You wanna room, you getta phone wid' it."

"I think that might be OK." Erin looked back at Clara and thought a moment. "Actually, I guess we would like two rooms, maybe next to each other if that could be arranged. How much is a room?"

"Oh, course ya got da little lady what gets her own room, right? Goils is like dat. How much, hmmm? Dat depends on what kinda room. How tired are ya? Ya want someplace ya can sleep, ya better get one on the upper floors, it ain't so noisy mosta da time. Ya tired?"

"Well, actually I think we are very tired. You see, we didn't exactly plan any of this. We were just going to play some video games after school. But then we ended up fighting Yoshies and playing the quiz game, and we had dinner at Peach's castle, and then the helicopter ride and this battle and -- well, it's been a long day."

"Long day he sez. Long day! I'd like just have a long day. What haven't I had? I'm tellin' ya, everywhere bad, we been dere. Earthbound, we been dere-- Mother 4, we been dere -- cancelled, rejected, deleted, we been dere -- Lost Underworld, we been dere. My worthless brodda, he grabs a Casey bat and what does he do? he hits ME three times in a row, anybody ever hoid of hitting anything three times wid a Casey bat? Nobody ever hits anything more than once EXCEPT MY BRODDA HITS ME!" He was getting a bit red-faced and spitting in Erin's face as he talked. Erin backed off a couple of steps. The man lit another cigarette and calmed down as he took a long drag. "Sorry, kid, ya' know sometimes I get a little bit carried away. I guess I kinda get annoyed what wid everybody always sayin' how great my brodda is, it's Poo 'dis, it's Poo 'dat, and wat dat I looked afta him all when he was little, does anybody rememba Winnie? Not your fault. You kids must be tired, eh? I tellya what, I got a coupla whatcha callem adjoinin' rooms, I give 'em to ya for thoity coins a night. Can't get a betta deal dan dat anywhere in town, not even in Onett! Waddya say?"

Erin turned to call to Brian: "Can we afford sixty coins?"

"Yeah, that's ok, I've got quite a few left still," replied Brian. He took his bag of coins out of his backback and walked over to the desk, limping slightly.

"Kid, ya got somethin' to loin about whatcha callit negotiatin. Don' tip ya hand quite so easy. Ah, dat's ok, I ain' gonna joik ya around. Tellya what I'll trow in a laundry token, you kids look like you could use some. I'll even toin on the TV in da room, but don't you be lookin' at any doity movies now, right?"

"Uh... ok," said Brian. "The rooms have a telephone?" Winnie nodded. "Thirty coins is what you wanted?" He counted them slowly out onto the desk.

"Yeah, thanks. Now just sign ya name heah and let me getcha keys." The man rummaged in a drawer and took out two very ornate looking keys with numbers on them. "Head ya' are, two quiet rooms, connectin' door, you can lock it if ya want, fifteen eleven and fifteen twelve."

Erin took the keys. "Thank you very much. What floor is that on?" said Erin.

"Oh, da fifteenth floor, what else?"

Tennyson, who had just got up, fell backwards on top of Cane. Brian turned to Erin and said, "I think we should take the elevator this time."

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Rooms 1511 and 1512 were tucked away at the end of a short corridor opposite the elevator. Clara pointed the boys towards 1511 and took 1512; the boys all piled in and dumped their backpacks on the floor. Clara set hers neatly in the closet.

Each room had two double beds neatly turned down, a writing table and chair, a television set set into the wall, and a small bathroom and sink behind a sliding door. Between the beds was a nightstand, with a fancy telephone handset and another device the kids didn't immediately recognize. A connecting door between the rooms was set into the common wall by the windows, which opened to a truly lovely view of the still-glowing towers of Fourside. On the writing table was a copy of Fantastic Fourside. Erin opened the magazine and flipped through the pages, most of which were covered with advertisements for restaurants, nightclubs, and arcades.

Nicholas opened the connecting door and called to Clara. "Come on, let's try calling home. I'll go first." The other kids sat down on the edges of the two beds while Nicholas pressed the speakerphone button: BEEEEEEEEEP. "Sounds like a regular phone. I wonder if I need the area code?" He punched in his home phone number, hearing the familiar touchtone sounds. RING - - - RING - - -

"Hello." It was definitely a kid's voice. Nicholas thought it sounded strangely familiar, but not at all like his little sister, Emily. He decided to charge ahead:

"This is Nicholas. Is Mom home?"

"Nicholas. I don't know any Nicholas. My Mom is in Pallet Town, I don't know if she's home, call her there!"

"Ummm -- are you -- Emily?"

"Emily! What's the matter with you, you can't even tell boys from girls? Who are you, anyway?"

"I told you, my name is Nicholas, and I'm trying to call my Mom. Who are you?"

"Tom Ato, who do you think I am? Wait a minute. Is this Brock? Brock, it is you, isn't it? Not funny! Call me when you have something for me to eat. Goodbye!" CLICK.

"Geeze louise, Nicholas, can't you dial your own home phone right?" said Clara. "Move over, let me try!"

She punched the buttons: RING - - - RING - - - RING - - - RING - - - RING - - - RING.

"Hmm, the message machine should pick up..." Clara mumbled to herself. Then:

"Ohhhh, man." It was a male, teenager type of voice. "Yo, this is Rickey." (The sound of a yawn.) "Whoah, it's not even noon yet! Who the hell is calling me at this hour?"

Clara looked momentarily disconcerted but wasn't about to concede defeat after upbraiding Nicholas a moment before.

"This is Clara. Is Dad home?"

“What Dad would that be, Daddy? Sorry, dude. Ain’t no Dad here -- unless something happened with Serena that I should know about. You one of Serena’s friends? I was just bein’ friendly-like, you know, I didn’t realize she’d just like have a cow, man. I mean, lady. You’d think it was, like, her first time, I mean, do you think she and Nigel were just holding hands? yeah right. What did you say your name was, dudette?”

Clara was blushing but not ready to give up yet. “I’m trying to reach Dr. Victor Dumont. Dumont. Can you help?”

“You need a doctor, dude? I mean, that’s heavy. Too early for that. Ohh, my head.”

“No, no, he’s my dad.”

“He’s not a doctor?”

“Yes, he’s a doctor -- well, he’s a doctor of philosophy, that’s what he said it means.”

“You broke your philosophy? Dude, that’s heavy. Go hassle Nigel, I can’t cope.” CLICK.

Clara closed her eyes in thought. “Seven two five three seven three nine. Three seven three nine. That’s what I dialed.”

Cane stood up. “I can’t believe you guys. What is there to a phone? Press the buttons. And she says I’m a dufus.” He pushed Clara aside, causing her to land in Tennyson’s lap. While she was busy deciding whether to be upset or secretly pleased, Cane ostentatiously pushed buttons.

Brian was shaking his head in the background. “You guys, this isn’t going to work,” he said quietly, but as usual no one was paying any attention. Erin and Mr. Saturn had retired to the writing table; Mr. Saturn was making derogatory comments about the various establishments advertising their wares in Fantastic Fourside.

RING --- RING ---

“Hello, what?” It was a deep, raspy, unfriendly sort of voice. Cane didn’t hesitate.

“Yo, this is Cane, who’s that?”

“Cane? That’s no name for a Koopa. What kind of creature are you? I don’t waste my time with Toads and other lowlives.”

“You callin’ me a lowlife? I’ll whip you in Paper Mario any day. Smash Brothers. Wave Racer. Doesn’t matter. I’m the best.” Clara rolled her eyes.

“Is that a challenge?”

“Any time you want. Is this George? What are you doin’ in my house? Are you messing with my stuff?”

“YOUR STUFF! Is this Baby Bowser again? This is NOT FUNNY, young koopa. Spending your time on stupid phone tricks when you should be practicing for the ultimate destruction of that meddling scum Mario! Get back to work immediately!”

“Work? Work! I’m too young to work. I’m too me to work,” replied Cane, pressing the SPEAKER button with a quiver of dismay.

“Unusually insightful,” noted Mr. Saturn from the Corner. “Yep, when he’s right, he’s right,” added Erin.

Tennyson got up, unobtrusively releasing Clara’s hand, and squeezed in by the phone, causing the mattress to sink enough that Cane lost his balance and slid backwards into the middle of the bed, legs dangling in the air. Tennyson moved a pillow out of his way (on top of Cane’s face) and addressed the group: “I think we’re not going to get anywhere this way. Let’s try one more time... I had to call the tardy line this morning, so I remember the number. I’ll dial it, but I bet I don’t get the school!” He punched in the numbers, reciting them so the other kids could check him: “Seven four two three nine nine one!”

RING -- RING -- RING -- RING -- Then there was the CLICK of a message machine picking up. Tennyson felt a moment of optimistic surprise, then the greeting began: “You have reached Princess Peach’s Library in her castle in the Mushroom Kingdom. Our office hours are 9:30 in the morning to 7 in the evening each weekday. If this is Mr. Saturn, please be advised that your books are cumulatively four hundred forty two weeks overdue; it is Library policy to turn your account over to the Metroid Bounty Hunter’s League at four hundred fifty total weeks. Please return your books if you do

not wish to be reduced to a cinder after dismemberment. If this is not Mr. Saturn, please leave a message after the tone.” BEEEEEP.

Mr. Saturn didn’t bother to look up from the magazine. “They’re always saying that. Actually, the Princess is too cheap to pay the BHL’s fees.”

“You just left that message,” said Erin, pressing the SPEAKER button.

“Well, the truth is a dangerous weapon and I used it,” replied Mr. Saturn.

“I can’t decide if he’s really brave or really dumb,” said Nicholas.

“Is there a difference?” said Erin.

Brian took advantage of the momentary lapse in the conversation to call their attention back to the contretemps with the phone: “I guess it’s obvious that these phones don’t call our home; they call places in the game world. We weren’t dialing the wrong numbers, we just can’t call the real world from here. What are we going to do now?”

“Hey, who had the idea of phoning home anyway?” said Cane.

“I think it was Tennyson who suggested it,” said Nicholas.

“Tennyson! I shoulda’ known. What a dufus idea!” said Cane. “Anybody would know that you can’t just call home, you hafta have a magic supercommunicator or transmogrilater or like that.”

“You’re just making that up!” said Clara. “There’s no such thing as a transmogri -- transmogri - - whatever.”

“No such thing!”, said Erin feigning surprise. “And I just paid twenty-seven ninety-nine for my model 32Z with leather grip and automatic grill heater! Why, when I find that Transmogrilater salesman I’ll give him a piece of my mind! If I have any left after today.”

“Oh, that’s not what I meant,” said Clara, stamping her foot. “Besides I didn’t hear you -- or for that matter, anyone else -- proposing that the phones wouldn’t work.”

“Then it’s Brian’s fault! He’s the one who said we should go to Fourside!” replied Cane, not easily turned aside from his search for a scapegoat.

“Wait a minute,” said Brian quietly. As usual he was ignored.

“Wewease Bwian!” said Erin, and chuckled. “I don’t get it,” said Mr. Saturn. “Oh, you had to be there,” replied Erin.

Tennyson took over the defense: “It’s not Brian’s fault. We all agreed to go looking for Fourside; he didn’t make us do it.”

“Besides, all I said was that we might find a phone in Fourside,” said Brian. “Like that one!” he finished, pointing triumphantly to the nightstand.

“Okay, okay, let’s get serious about this,” said Nicholas. “It’s kindof all our fault. We didn’t really think about it when Tennyson suggested finding a phone, we just sort of all accepted that that’s what we should do. We didn’t stop to discuss what else we could do; we didn’t consider that maybe a phone here wouldn’t call home, we didn’t even ask if there were already phones in Peach’s castle!”

“Obviously there’s at least one in the library,” said Clara. “Unfortunately,” added Mr. Saturn.

“So instead of trying to figure out who’s fault it is, we need to try to figure out how to get home. Okay?”

“I don’t know, I think it’s a lot more fun to blame somebody,” said Cane. Everyone glared at him. “Oh, okay.” Everyone was still glaring at him. (Cane had a lot of glare stored up in the group and was apparently using some of it up.) “Well don’t look at me! I don’t have any ideas for getting home. I’m just good at complaining about it.” He stopped for a moment. “Gee, I guess that’s true.”

“For once I agree with Cane: we certainly can’t rely on him to get us home!” said Clara. “We have to figure this out.”

“Good, we’re all agreed,” said Nicholas. “Any ideas?”

“We could ask Professor E. Gadd,” suggested Brian. “He does a lot of research. Maybe he would know a way.”

“Who is that?” asked Tennyson. He was not a Luigi’s Mansion fan.

“Oh, he lives in Luigi’s Mansion and studies the ghosts that haunt the Mansion,” said Brian. “Yeah, he invented the Poltergust 3000!” added Nicholas.

"The what? Oh, never mind, it doesn't matter 'cause how do we get there?" said Tennyson.

"Well, Luigi gave me this," said Clara, taking the ocarina out of her backpack. "It's supposed to get me to the Mansion if I play the right tune.

"Where does that leave us? Are you going to come back for us?" said Cane.

"Of course she would," said Tennyson. "Wouldn't you?"

Clara looked embarrassed and took Tennyson's hand back in hers. "Of course I would come back. Oh, but I don't know if it's just me, maybe we would all be able to go."

"Gee, I'm not sure that's such a great idea," said Brian. "Isn't the Mansion all haunted? I'm afraid of ghosts. I mean, they're fine if you're not there but we'd be in the game, not playing it."

"Yeah, that's a good point, how do we deal with the ghosts?" said Nicholas.

"How do you capture ghosts inside a mansion?" sang Erin, to a tune that sounded vaguely familiar to Clara though not the others (it was, of course, from *The Sound of Music*). "How do you find the Poltergust and then -- How do you suck the ghosts behind the transom? the dining room ghosts? the family room? the den? How do you capture ghosts inside the mansion? How do you hold their slime inside a pen?"

The other kids were mystified. Mr. Saturn made a clapping sound with his nose against the nightstand. "That was amazing, Erin! A new high (or low)." Erin bowed to his appreciative audience and ignored the kids.

Nicholas decided it was time to return the favor and start ignoring Erin again. "I think Brian is right; we'd better not intentionally head to a haunted mansion unless we have some idea of how to deal with the ghosts. What else could we try?"

"What about the Princess?" asked Tennyson. "She helped us to get to Fourside because we asked. We never thought to ask her if she could help us get home."

"That's right!" said Clara. "She is the Princess, after all. Even if she doesn't know herself, she would know a lot about the Mushroom Kingdom; she might know someone there who can help us."

"And of course she could command her subjects to help if she wanted," added Nicholas. "Yeah, and cut off their heads if they refused!" added Cane. ("Off with her head! off with her head!" said Erin. "Hardly up to your standard, don't you think?" said Mr. Saturn. "You're right, I'm running as fast as I can just to stay in the same place, all right," replied Erin.)

"One problem: do we have enough coins left for copter fare?" asked Nicholas.

"Oh, yeah, we're fine," said Brian. "I got five hundred coins at the quiz, and so far we've spent -- um -- sixty-six for copter fare here and sixty for the rooms. That leaves us almost four hundred. We're fine."

"Okay, that's settled then," said Nicholas. "Tomorrow we'll take the copter back to Peach's castle."

"When?" said Tennyson. "Yeah, do we have time for breakfast?" asked Cane. "And where do we go to get it?"

Nicholas was stumped. "That's a problem. We don't actually know when the copter gets here going the other way. I guess we'll need to ask the hotel guy."

"What if it doesn't stop here except on the flight we took?" said Clara. "I mean -- maybe it flies in a circle, so we would have to go the rest of the way. That might take a while."

"Well, if that was true we'd certainly have time to get breakfast tomorrow!" said Nicholas.

"All right!" said Cane.

"Do you think you ought to call the desk tonight?" asked Brian.

"Oh, I don't know, it's getting pretty late," said Nicholas. "We can check tomorrow morning. I'm going to get ready for bed." He yawned and then stopped. "Hmmm. How do I get ready for bed? I don't have my toothbrush or my pj's."

"Or toothpaste, for that matter," added Tennyson. "Or clothes to change into."

"At least we have bath towels," said Brian. "I checked. They look clean too."

"I'm not wearing a bath towel to bed!" said Tennyson.

"That's not what I meant. But how are we going to wash our clothes? I mean, without running around with nothing on."

"Wash our clothes?" said Nicholas, dismayed. "My Mom does that. I don't know how to wash clothes."

Clara rolled her eyes. "Boys! Still, you're right. I wish I'd kept that gown. I'm certainly not going to run around naked while my clothes are in the wash, but it sure would be nice to have something clean to wear."

"Too bad," said Mr. Saturn.

Clara glared at him. "I can see why you got in trouble with Princess Peach."

Cane apparently had no interest at all in whether clean clothes could be obtained or how to get them. He had wandered over to the armoire and pulled the doors open, discovering a large flat-panel television display and another more mysterious device. He hunched over the box reading instructions and then called to Brian: "Hey Brian, gimme' a couple coins."

"What for?"

"This thing. I wanna charge up my gun." He directed Brian's attention to the embossed placard:

PowerUP RAYGUN RECHARGE STATION

Just plug the Universal Adaptor into your power receptacle

Fits every weapon known to Nintendo

Two coins per charge

Below there were three cables with differing plugs attached and a slot for coins. Brian dug into his pouch and gave Cane a couple of coins; PLINK PLINK! The green START button lit up. Cane pulled out his ray gun and mucked around until he found the right cable, then pressed START. Clara watched with interest, and then asked Brian for two coins herself. "I'm sure my room has one too. I'll go charge my Superscope. Then I'm going to take a shower, so you guys stay out! I'm locking the door."

Meanwhile Nicholas and Erin were arguing over beds. "Mr. Saturn doesn't need to sleep on a bed. Geez, the bed's small enough just with both of us!" said Nicholas.

"Fine, you can share with Cane! I'll bet Brian doesn't mind Mr. Saturn, right, Brian?"

"Where am I going to sleep?" asked Tennyson. "I'm not sharing with Brian and Erin and Mr. Saturn. I'll fall off the edge of the bed!"

"I guess you could share with us," said Nicholas, indicating Cane, who was now perched on the edge of the bed watching TV.

"Share with Cane? No way! He'll kick me all night."

"How do you know? Did you do a sleepover at his house?"

"I don't have to, he's just like that." Cane was ignoring them, his attention consumed by the image on the box. "Besides he's going to stay up 'till all hours watching that stupid thing. I'd rather sleep on the floor!"

The connecting door opened up. Clara appeared wrapped up in a huge bath towel, with a second smaller one bunched over her hair. Mr. Saturn whistled until Tennyson buried him under a pillow.

"Can you guys keep it down! Always fighting over stupid things. Tennyson can use my other bed."

"I thought you said we had to sleep in here!" said Brian.

"Mmmmp hp mphp mfm m m f r m m m p m m m p h," said Mr. Saturn.

"Um -- thanks -- I guess," said Tennyson, letting Mr. Saturn up.

"Bleeaah!" said Nicholas. "You want to share a room with her?"

"Gee, thanks," said Clara.

"Well, it's not personal, you're just a girl!" said Nicholas.

"To remove foot from mouth, step 1: stop talking," said Mr. Saturn.

"It's better than being stuck on the floor in here!" said Tennyson defensively. He gathered up his backpack and followed Clara. Clara ushered him into the room and shut the connecting door behind her.

"Where's she going to get dressed?" said Brian.

“In the bathroom, stupid,” said Erin.

“I’m still waiting for that discourse on girls’ bathrooms,” said Mr. Saturn.

“Well, you can wait another night,” said Erin, yawning. “I’m going to sleep. Turn off the light, will you?” He pulled the covers up and rolled over, crunching Mr. Saturn’s nose under his elbow.

“Geeroff me!” said Mr. Saturn.

“That’s my line!” mumbled Cane. Then he turned his attention back to the TV set. He had been channel surfing for about 15 minutes so far, and was up to channel 73:

BEEP! A room with a podium in front and a group of toads sitting in plush wooden chairs. One of the toads was standing in front of the rest working at an easel with a long wooden pointer: “If you will refer to chapter 3.1.2 of the ToadTown Master Plan, you will note that Merlin Avenue is not zoned for retail food establishments, except under the waiver to subsection 5.11 in which we see--”

BEEP! A garishly-dressed young man, vaguely recognizable as Link (the warrior from the Zelda games), was screaming directly into the camera. “When I’m through with Bowser there won’t be more than two bouillon cubes to stick in a cup of soup! I’ll masticate him! I’ll slice him up so thin you can eat him in a sandwich! Listen up you Bowsenated wimp! This is LINK talkin’ to you! You’re GOING DOWN!”

BEEP! “It’s a hard grounder up the middle -- and past Wills for a base hit! Johnson holds at second as Davis charges to field the ball. And here comes Alston -- it looks like Koufax is done for the night --”

BEEP! “Albert -- oh, Albert, how could we ever be happy like this?”

A very attractive young lady in a stylish gown, her arms wrapped around an overdressed, overmuscled, over-coiffed and rather wooden male lead: “Elizabeth, what does all that matter? It’s you that I love! I’ve always loved you -- and I always will whatever else happens.”

“Oh, Albert -- kiss me, you fool!” The romantic scene shrunk to the left half of the screen while on the right half:

NEXT on Peach’s Romance Channel...

A Spear in Her Heart:

a warrior princess afraid of nothing --
except love

a deadly enemy who captures her heart!

EXCLUSIVELY on the Romance Channel. (Cane stuck his tongue out and pressed the button...)

BEEP! “It’s not the years -- it’s the mileage! Don’t let your racer end up like this! Tune up at Tails’, a full-service source for all your pod racing needs. Our expert maintenance droids will have you back battling the sound barrier instead of the overtemp lights before you can say Nika wapipi Sebulba! “

“Cane, turn that down!” said Nicholas. “The rest of us are trying to get to sleep!” Cane pressed a button and the sound sank to an unobjectionable level. The last thing Nicholas saw before drifting off to an exhausted slumber was a rocket ship landing in a bucolic meadow, with a just perceptible hypnotic narration: “Next on the Pikmin channel ... Building a better bridge -- it takes determination and it takes sticks. Both are equally necessary, and with our help you too can learn how to be determined and how to collect enough sticks...” Snore. Snore. Snore.

“Good night, Tennyson.”

“Good night, Clara. Sweet dreams. That’s what my mom always says to me.”

“My dad is really kind but he’s sort of formal. I just can’t imagine him saying anything like that. It must be nice to have a mom.”

“It is. But don’t tell her I said so.”

“Boys! Go to sleep.”

- - - - -
Nicholas had to go to the bathroom. After an extended struggle with his intense desire to remain curled up under the covers, discomfort finally got the better of him and he wearily pulled his eyes open.

Cane was still perched on the edge of the bed staring intensely at the television; the sound was turned down to a level just perceptible.

Nicholas got up and looked over Cane's shoulder. There wasn't much to see: the view through the windshield of a truck of some sort, which seemed to be driving along a perfectly straight road through a desolate, unmarked flat plain. Nicholas watched for a minute or so, assuming that some event was about to take place, but nothing changed. Finally he spoke: "What are you watching?"

Cane didn't turn around. "The eighteen wheeler pro trucker channel."

"But there's nothing happening!"

"Oh, yes there is. He's going for the twenty-fourth parking place."

"Where? I don't see a place to park."

"He's not there yet."

"Oh. How much longer?"

"um... about five hours."

Nicholas rolled his eyes upwards. "I'm going to the bathroom. And then I'm going back to bed. And don't wake me up when he gets there. Good NIGHT."

- - - - -
Nicholas was dreaming about a large cardboard box, with a picture of Mr. Classen on the side. The eyes in the picture were moving; the box started to shake; then the whole world started to shake.

"Nicholas, wake up!" It was Cane, shaking his shoulders.

"Go away," mumbled Nicholas without opening his eyes. "I don't care about the parking place." He turned over and tried to get back to sleep.

"Wake up!! wake up!!" said Cane.

"Urmfmurm," said Nicholas, covering his ears with a pillow. Then there was a very loud explosion. It was NOT part of his dream. Nicholas jumped up in the bed, heart pumping. "What was THAT?"

"I told you, we have to get up!" said Cane. Another more distant explosion rocked the building. "Look!" He pointed out the window. Nicholas jumped out of the bed, catching his foot in the bedspread and landing face first on the carpet. Crawling over the chaotically tangled bedding he reached the window and stuck his nose over the sill.

The street below was packed with tiny white figures, punctuated with occasional yellow flashes (apparently the launch of some sort of weapon, as they were followed shortly by the sound of an explosion). A sort of chant or song was faintly audible: after a few repetitions Nicholas' ear adjusted to the curious accent and made out -

We are the Starmen

We never lose

We are the Starmen

We do as we choose

endlessly repeated.

"Geeze louise, we'd better go!" said Nicholas.

"Duh," said Cane.

"Come on, everybody up!" shouted Nicholas. He pounded on the connecting door to Clara's room and threw a pillow at Erin, who was groaning and hiding under the covers.

"What's going on?" said Tennyson, as he opened the connecting door. Another nearby explosion nearly knocked him off his feet.

"Some sort of attack!" cried Nicholas. "Come on! Grab your stuff, let's get to the elevator! Get your weapons! Get your back packs! Get Mr. Saturn!"

"Thanks for noticin' me," mumbled Mr. Saturn; it was difficult to hear him as he was tucked under Erin's arm.

The phone rang. Brian picked it up.

"Get out, get out!" said Winnie's voice. "The Starmen is attackin', get the 'ell outta -CLICK-" The line went dead. Brian looked pale.

Clara appeared a moment later, her superscope at the ready. Nicholas threw open the door and the kids charged out into the hallway. Nicholas led the way down the hall to the elevator and pressed the CALL button. Just as he did so a loud explosion shook them almost off their feet and smoke poured out between the cracks in the elevator doors. "It wasn't my fault!" said Nicholas. "I just pressed the button. It's not my fault!"

"I guess that's not going to work," said Erin. "We'll have to take the stairs."

"The STAIRS?!" said Cane. "Not the stairs again!"

"Why, is there something wrong with them?" said Erin. He grabbed the metal door to the stairway and pulled. Black smoke boiled out into the hallway. "Yes," said Mr. Saturn. "Thanks, I hadn't noticed," said Erin.

The chanting of the Starmen was growing louder; apparently they were inside the building. The sound was also coming from outside, as the tinkling sounds of shattering glass signified the destruction of many of the hotel's windows.

We are the Starmen

We never lose

We are the Starmen

We do as we choose

It was getting a bit frightening, especially when accompanied by the ongoing destruction of the building around them. "What are we going to do now?" shrieked Cane.

"Keep calm, keep calm, we'll figure something out," said Nicholas, though he didn't look very calm. He led the kids back into the room, and started looking around for something that would allow them to get down safely through the now-shattered window.

"Wait a minute!" said Tennyson. "Clara, what about your ocarina? Didn't Luigi say you could use it to get to his mansion?"

"What about the ghosts?" asked Brian.

"I'll take ghosts that might be there over Starmen about to blow me up any time!" said Nicholas. "Great idea, Tennyson! Clara, Clara, where's the (BOOOOM!) ocarina?"

Clara was digging frantically through her backpack. "Here it is," she exclaimed, waving the oblong instrument triumphantly in the air.

"Come on, come on, don't celebrate, play!" screamed Nicholas.

Clara brought the ocarina to her lips and tried to remember the melody that Luigi had taught her. Her father had insisted on her studying piano and clarinet, but her practice had made little impression; music did not come naturally for her. After some awkward first attempts a melody of a sort came out:

"That's the Smash Brothers music!" said Brian.

"Oh, yeah, sorry," said Clara. "At least you recognized it. I'll try again." Her forehead creased with thought. A loud cracking sound -- automatic weapons fire -- echoed down the hallway, accompanied by the now chillingly loud monotonous chant, apparently coming from very close:

We are the Starmen

We never lose...

Clara looked distracted. She played another tune...

"That's Happy Birthday!" said Nicholas, disgusted.

"Come on, she's trying!" said Tennyson. He put his hand on her shoulder. "Just relax and try to remember Luigi at dinner yesterday. It was only yesterday."

"If you don't come up with it soon you might as well start playing 'Taps'!" said Cane, looking outside the door. "The Starmen are coming down the hall!"

Erin put his hands to his mouth to emulate a trumpet and started singing: "Day is done gone the sun --"

Clara jumped in the air. "That's it!" She put the Ocarina to her lips and started to play again. Brian recognized the song that Luigi had sung to her and nodded. The new melody seemed to grow

louder and louder, and the space around her seemed to twist until the kids were staring down into a bizarre sort of tunnel that had appeared in the air at Clara's feet, growing larger and larger until it was more than head high. The rumble of the Starmen's feet and the pounding of their unending chant, punctuated by explosions and the zapping sound of rayguns, rose to a crescendo as the first Starman burst in the door.

"Come ON!" said Nicholas, pushing Brian into the tunnel. Erin went next, carrying Mr. Saturn, as Cane snapped off a ray gun shot at the invading Starman, freezing him for long enough for Cane to jump through. Tennyson grabbed Clara's hand and they jumped in. Nicholas threw a pillow at the next Starman and leapt as a blaster bolt crackled above his head.

"WE ARE THE STARMEN (BOOM!) WE NEVER LOSE! WE (CRACKLE) ARE THE STARMEN WE --"

Nicholas felt a wierd twisting sensation as if he were being folded inside out, and then landed on top of a mass of kids with a dull thud. He looked back down the tunnel: a Starman was pointing a nasty-looking gun barrel right at him, when ZZZZZZIIIIIP! the opening disappeared. For a moment everything was silent.

Chapter 7: Ghost Busted

“Get off me!” said Cane. “You should talk!” said Brian, who was under Cane. “I can’t get off you until Tennyson gets off me!” replied Cane. Nicholas rolled off to the floor, which was covered with a beautifully embroidered but unyielding rug. He turned back and helped Clara up; she in turn pulled Tennyson off the pile, allowing the rest of the kids to disentangle themselves.

“Well, that was one heck of an escape!” said Nicholas. “Thanks, Clara, even if you did wait until the last minute.”

Clara wasn’t quite sure how to respond to such unusually graceful behavior. Tennyson smiled at her and pressed her hand: “That’s right, that was fantastic, Clara!”

“Fantastic? She almost took long enough to get us killed!” complained Cane.

“I guess we should’ve left him behind,” said Erin, getting off of Brian.

“No, we need the comic relief,” said Mr. Saturn. “Thank you very much, Clara. Starmen don’t like folks like me at all. I was toast.” He executed as much of a bow as his stubby legs allowed.

“Yeah, way to go, Clara,” said Brian from where he was still lying on the floor. “I thought we were done for.”

“Well -- that’s very nice of you all,” Clara replied, and then remembering Cane, “or most of you. I guess we’re safe for the moment. What do we do now?”

Nicholas helped Brian up and then stretched and yawned. The shock of the Starman attack was wearing off. He began to take in his surroundings. A row of bookshelves lined the back wall. Chandeliers lent a pleasantly yellow glow to complement the light from a crackling fire in the fireplace. An elegant coat rack stood near the door, and on a comfortable-looking green recliner sat a ghost reading a book.

“It’s a ghost!” screamed Brian.

The ghost jumped up in surprise. “A ghost! Where? Where?” he said. Then he stopped and bonked his head with the book, or tried to, as the book went right through his head and came out the other side. “By Jove, what a damn fool I am, it’s me!” He stood up straight and bowed politely. “And where are my manners? Let me introduce myself: I am Neville, ghost in residence here in the study, at your service and your family’s, I’m sure.”

Brian’s voice squeaked a bit at first as he answered. “Umm... how do you -- do? I’m -- uh -- Brian and we’re -- um --”

“We’re trying to find out how to get home,” interrupted Nicholas. “Do you think you could help?”

“And who do I have the pleasure of addressing?” asked Neville.

“Oh, sorry, I’m Nicholas and this is Clara and Tennyson and that’s Cane and you’ve already met Brian and over there are Erin and Mr. Saturn.” The latter pair, having already evaluated the ghost and found him only moderately shocking, were over by the bookshelves checking out the reading resources.

“I’m honored to welcome such distinguished guests to the Mansion. Of course we shall be grateful for the opportunity to be of assistance, but first, we must elucidate the potential complications. Just where, pray tell, is your home, did you say?”

“I didn’t,” replied Nicholas. “We come from -- from the real world, not from a game.”

“By my faith, the real world? Remarkable. Now, I must inquire, how was it that you ended up here in the mansion? I was so absorbed in my novella that I missed your entrance completely.”

“We used the ocarina--” said Nicholas.

--that Luigi gave to Clara --” interrupted Tennyson.

--because the Starmen were about to kill us!” said Cane.

--and I only just remembered the melody in time,” finished Clara.

“Ocarina, indeed? From Master Luigi? Ah, we must inform the master directly, he’ll be overwhelmed with excitement.” The grandfather clock chimed twice: 7:30. “Ah, but first I have an engagement with Mistress Lydia. I shall be back promptly, be assured.” Neville put his book on the divan and walked straight out of the room through the middle of the wall. A moment later he reappeared: “By Jove, I’m forgetting my manners again. Granted, one’s memory becomes a bit porous, one might say, after one’s been dead for a while. Have you broken your fast this morning yet, children?”

“Is my fast broken?” said Cane, looking down his shirt front.

“He means have we had breakfast,” said Brian.

“Precisely,” added Neville.

“Breakfast! Wow! That’s a great idea, I’m starved!” said Cane.

“You see, the Starmen attacked before we were even awake,” said Nicholas. “We didn’t have time to do anything but grab our stuff and go.”

“Starving children, indeed. Would never do. Utterly ghastly hospitality. Come, children, I shall locate some comestibles to tide you over until the Master is found. I’ll guide you, just follow along.” Neville opened the door and left the room in a more conventional fashion.

“You coming?” said Clara.

Erin waved them to go on without him. “We’ll be here,” he said. “I’m not hungry yet.” He turned back to the bookshelves. “What’s this one? It looks like a quick read,” he said, pointing to a book so thin it was very difficult to read the title printed on the binding.

“Oh, I recognize that one. The Wit and Wisdom of Kolorado the Explorer. It’s a short book.”

“Well, let’s see.” He moved to the next rack. Two full shelves were filled with a series of monstrosously thick books with identical red and green covers. “What are these? Hmmm.... The Life and Good Works of Mario, volume I.” Erin pulled the book off the shelf with difficulty and laid it down on the table, with a loud thump. “Wow, that is one heavy book.” He helped Mr. Saturn up onto the chair so he could see, and opened the book. The inner cover had a brief blurb and what looked some reviewer’s remarks:

The beginning of a life of virtuous distinction: volume I of Mario’s authorized autobiography. Required reading for Mario’s fans or anyone wishing to follow in his illustrious footsteps.

Read what the reviewers said:

“Repetitive and self-aggrandizing. Mario, to hear him tell it, has done nothing but good deeds from birth. If he were really that sweet he’d dissolve in water!”

-- Authory T., The Toadtown Times

“Begins with promise but bogs down in unneeded detail and mind-numbing drivel by the time the self-proclaimed hero is out of diapers. If you wanted to understand how Mario rose to his current celebrity status, don’t bother to read this book!”

-- Kover J. Udgin, Koopa Village Review

“Too long.”

-- Mark Penguin, Chill Out Magazine

“Hmmm,” said Erin. “Looks like they didn’t like it very much.”

“Well, if you knew Mario you’d probably agree. Let’s take a look.”

Erin opened the book at random to a spot about in the middle; it happened to open at a chapter heading. “Chapter twenty-seven: I Save My Fourth-Grade Class. Yow. Chapter twenty seven and we’re only at fourth grade!”

“Well, Mario has a lot to say about how wonderful his life has been. Look at this!” Mr. Saturn pointed with his nose at the bookshelf. Erin squatted down and started counting the books:

“Volume 29: Mario Defeats the Dinosaurs. Volume 32: Mario the Kart Racer. Volume 37: Intimations of Flatness. Volume 39: Paper Mario Takes Shape.” He looked down the shelf: “Geez! There’re about fifteen more volumes. Who could possibly read all this stuff?”

“The powerful intoxication of celebrity, my young friend. I’ll tell you one thing, nobody’s asked me to write my life story!”

“Let’s see what else is in here...” Erin moved to the next book case. He picked up a moderately thick blue-covered book and read the title: “‘Bowser’s Guide for Young Koopas: How to Capture Beautiful Princesses and Devastate your Rivals, by Bowser the Magnificent, King of the Koopas and Emperor of the Surrounding Spaces’. Has anyone around here ever heard of the idea of modesty?”

“Oh come on, Erin, it’s called marketing,” said Mr. Saturn. “Now here’s a good one: ‘A History of the Metroid Wars’, by Vingot and Samus Aran. That sounds interesting; I’ve always wondered what turned her into such a hard character.”

“Yeah, that looks fun. Let’s read it.” Erin pulled the book out and laid it on the reading table. He put Mr. Saturn on the table next to the book and pulled up the very elegant, leather-covered reading chair. He read aloud: “Chapter 1: The Origin of the Brinstar Controversy. Authorities differ widely on the beginnings of the Metroid tragedies, but we feel strongly that one must begin with the dubious financing of the Brinstar Corporation. This fraudulent transaction set the stage for the unfortunate chain of events that was to follow. Let us first examine the charter upon which the Corporation was founded. In general structure, the charter differed little from those of similar ventures of the time, being composed of a legally required preamble stating the aims and means of the joint development partnership...”

Meanwhile Neville led the others down the corridor. The walls and ceilings were elegantly appointed with carved wood trim and amply lit by stylish chandeliers like the one in the study. They proceeded down a wide staircase with intricately decorated wooden banisters and thence through another corridor. Neville was chatting all the while:

“You see, the rebuilt mansion was modified in several respects from the original plan. The Master has added an enhanced grand ballroom in addition to the more modest dining room to which we are repairing currently. Though I must say that those of us ghosts who have re-established ourselves here in the mansion find the new design -- how shall I put this delicately? -- not an improvement on the more traditional arrangements to which we had become accustomed.”

“What is he saying?” whispered Cane.

“They don’t like the floor plan,” said Brian.

“Who?”

“The ghosts.”

Neville spoke again: “Oh, here we are, just through that door,” gesturing vaguely to his left.

Cane rushed ahead towards where he seemed to be pointing and reached out to grab the doorknob: “Wow, I can almost taste that bacon!”

“Oh, no, not that door, young Master!” said Neville, but it was too late. As soon as Cane’s hand touched the knob, the door flew around, smashing him against the wall. Clara gasped. Nicholas put his hand to his mouth. Tennyson’s jaw dropped.

The door slowly pulled back from the wall. Where the kids expected to see a bloody pulped mess, instead there was Cane: flattened to the thickness of a piece of paper but otherwise apparently unharmed. The support of the door being removed, Paper Cane flopped down from the head and floated out away from the wall, twisting sinuously like a wind-blown leaf until he landed, slightly crumpled, on the red carpeting.

“Wow,” said Nicholas. “This way we can just roll him up and put him in our pockets.”

“He’ll eat less,” said Clara.

Brian knelt down and grabbed the flattened Cane; he started doing something complicated that Nicholas wasn’t able to follow. “What are you doing to him?”

“Origami.” He had folded Cane’s arm and hand into a complex, symmetrical figure. “See, it’s a paper crane!”

Tennyson looked at it. “A Cane Crane. Something of an improvement on the original.”

Clara slapped him gently on the head. “You are terrible. Brian, unfold Cane! You guys.”

“I wouldn’t have thought you’d be coming to his rescue,” said Nicholas.

“Come on, how would you like to be flattened and then have your friends play paper airplanes with you?”

"That's origami!" said Brian. "I don't know how to do paper airplanes."

"That's not the point!" said Clara.

"Oh dear," said Neville, "I do wish he had listened more carefully."

"He never does," said Brian.

"Well, fortunately the charm only lasts a moment. Saints be praised! look; he's beginning to reflate already." Neville pointed to Cane's toes, which suddenly popped up off the floor.

From the expression of the flattened face, it appeared that reflatng was an unpleasant process, but at least it was mercifully brief. In a moment the three-dimensional version was restored, holding his temples and muttering, "Oh, my head!"

Neville tried to help Cane up but his hand passed through Cane's body. "Stop that! That's wierd," complained Cane.

"Oh, I am so sorry, Master Cane, but if you'd only listen carefully we could avoid these little contretemps."

"That means when you mess up," translated Brian.

"Precisely, Master Brian. The dining room is through this door. Shall we?"

The thought of food was sufficient to restore Cane to full health (or at least full hunger). He charged right through Neville to the door. The others followed more politely behind and entered the dining room.

The dining room was centered around a huge wooden dining table covered with a white tablecloth and several candelabra. The walls were decorated with false columns and wooden arches, each surmounting a large oil painting, with intricately carved woodwork below. A Toad was puttering away at the table when they came in; he looked up and smiled at Neville. He was wearing a tall white hat atop his Toad-esque head gear and had curly mustaches, the first they'd seen on a Toad. "So, it is ze jeune garçons, oh mais non, c'est une belle jeune fille aussi! What vill you be sinking of nexte, Monsieur Neville? You are ze strangest ghost I have ever had ze privilege to meet."

"Children, may I present the esteemed head chef and culinary master of the mansion, Monsieur Bonapa T.? And Monsieur, I am most honored to introduce to you Mistress Clara, Master Nicholas, Master Brian, Master Tennyson, and Master Cane. They have been without refreshments this morning. May I be so bold as to trouble you to provide them with a modest repast, whilst I seek out the Master?"

"But of course! It would be a pleasure, n'est-ce pas? Sit, children sit! I vill provide an illustrious meal worzy of the King of Siam! Oh, mais non, zat would be too spicy, yes? But perhaps a paté, de quiche Lorraine, and of course ze piece de résistance -- a spinach soufflé. Does zis not make the mouth water and ze heart pound?"

"Um -- could I have some hash browns?" said Cane. For once Clara didn't roll her eyes; she was thinking the same thing but hadn't the nerve to say it.

"Oh, but of course, les pommes frites! 'ow could I have oubliée ze potatoes? Sit, sit, my children, I vill return in ze blink of an eye with a feast to satisfy ze appetite of a boolossus!" He bustled out through a swinging door into the next room.

The kids sat down in oversized, heavily padded chairs, their legs dangling far from the floor. Nicholas whispered to Clara, "Do you think there will be anything we can eat?"

"I don't know," said Clara. "My dad once took me to a fancy French restaurant and it was terrible! There was some stinky cheese and soup filled with onions, and I had to chew the meat for hours."

"I heard they eat esparro! It's some kind of snail," said Cane. "I ate a snail once on a dare. It was awful." He looked thoughtful. "Maybe I should've cooked it first." Brian looked like he was ready to throw up.

Tennyson leaned over to join in. "That's escargot. It's disgusting. The bread is really good, though; I usually just have lots of bread and butter when my family goes to places like that."

Almost as fast as he'd promised, Bonapa was back. The childrens' fears were quite unfounded; the appetizing aromas of quiche and fried potatoes were confirmed by an initially cautious nibble or two, and soon they were all squabbling over who had the right to the last crumb of crust. Even the paté was

found acceptable by Clara and Tennyson, though Cane refused to touch it (“already digested, doesn’t need my help”).

Once the most serious hunger pangs were assuaged, Nicholas remembered his manners and his curiosity. “Gee, this is great! Thanks, Mr. -- um --”

“Oh, you may just call me Bon, Monsieur Nicholas,” replied Bonapa T. Nicholas was very impressed that the Toad had remembered his name. “It is my pleasure, as well as my, how do you say, my job here at ze mansion! It is wonderful to have someone else to cook for, n’est-ce pas? Until now, it is only Luigi and ze Professeur, and of course Mr. Fuggs, but ze other ghosts do not eat, you see, so it is a bit of ze ennui, a bit dull.”

Nicholas didn’t quite understand most of the reply but guessed that it was favorable. “Yeah, well, we really appreciate it! Even the -- um -- pattie?”

“Paté! Paté! Zut alors! you have so much to learn, but then zat is ze privilege of ze young ones, mon petit garçon.”

“Well, anyway, you see, we didn’t really mean to end up here in the mansion, but since we are, I wonder if you could tell us where to find Professor E. Gadd? We’re trying to get home, and we thought maybe he could help us out.”

“Le professeur E. Gadd? But of course! Sauf que -- however, hmmm, it is possible zat he is en voyage, zat is traveling, you see. But I can take you to ze shack of the Professeur, and if he is not zere, peut-etre his friend le Renard des queues will help you. He is very kind, zat one.”

“Thanks a lot!” said Nicholas.

Clara, who had been attending to the conversation while the others continued to stuff themselves, asked “Lerenar? I don’t remember him from Luigi’s Mansion.”

“Oh, la la, ma charmante petite fille, le Renard! Ze, how you say, ze Fox! Oh, but he does not live in ze mansion, of course, he is a friend of ze Professeur, visiting from le monde de la bande d’une coté -- ze Planet Mobius, I sink.”

“Oh, Sonic’s friend!” said Brian. Bonapa T. nodded approvingly.

“Précisément, mon ami. Ah, but ze Renard, he is not only ze friend of Sonic, but of many others; he is very clever and at ze same time very wise, plus que son age, non?”

“Well, that would be really helpful!” said Nicholas. “Either one. So could you show us where he is?” He stopped and with a visible effort added: “After we -- uh -- help you clean up.”

“Mais non, ze ghosts and I vill clean up after ze meal. Everyone is very ‘appy, yes? We can go see ze Professeur as soon as you are préparé, ready, non?”

Everyone except Cane nodded; he was busy finishing up the last of the quiche.

The Mansion was set off from whatever was beyond by a high hedge and a taller metal fence; an ornate gate blocked the narrow road which seemed to be the only entry to the estate. The professor’s lab was in a modest building next to the front gate; the Toad called it a “shack”, perhaps from habit, but it appeared to be a spanking new structure of glistening steel and concrete. The apparent size was also deceptive; as soon as they passed through the door it was immediately clear that the building above ground was only the gateway to a much larger underground complex, reached via a series of escalators and moving walkways. Bonapa T. begged off after showing them in, as he needed to return to his kitchen to prepare lunch. The kids were left to wander into the laboratory on their own.

“Where do you think we can find the Professor?” asked Tennyson.

“We might as well head down, there isn’t much up here,” said Nicholas, and hopped onto the rapidly descending escalator. Cane was groaning with dismay created by that last serving of potatoes and quiche, and as a consequence was too preoccupied to comment as Tennyson and Clara stepped hand in hand to descend. Concern for the state of his stomach absorbed most of his attention as they descended, so that he paid little heed to the music until it had grown quite loud:

*“...this is not simply my way NO NO!
my own style
gotta get a hold of my LIIIIIFE!”*

The music was so loud it was difficult to localize its source, as it echoed from the walls and control panels. Nicholas searched assiduously as he reached the end of the escalator and walked off in what he hoped was the right direction; the others followed, save for Brian who hated loud noises and hung back by the escalator. As they got closer the sound became painful; Clara covered her ears as she walked.

*“... I wanna fly HIIIIIGH!
so I can reach the
highest of all the HEAVENS!!!!”*

The destructively powerful sound, Nicholas discovered, was coming from a doorway into a room that seemed to be filled with all kinds of complex junk in various stages of disassembly. A couple of huge speakers were piled on top of what looked like the giant vacuum cars used to clean parking lots. A figure was flitting about head high through the room, dancing and leaping in complete defiance of gravity. Nicholas tried to call to the creature but his voice was completely lost in the over-amplified singing. He turned to Clara and mouthed “WHAT DO WE DO NOW?”. Clara pointed with her elbow (which enabled her to leave her fingers jammed in her ears) at a box next to a broken vacuum cleaner by one of the speakers, and mouthed “TURN IT OFF!” Nicholas nodded and scrambled over the junk, nearly losing his balance but preferring to take a fall rather than remove his ear protection, until he got to the control box. Taking a deep breath, he guessed which knob controlled the volume and took his hand out of his ear to give it a twist (I hope it’s the right way!!).

“... I will never see the LIIIGHT!!! now’s the time to -- to --
Hey! who turned off the music?”

The creature did a loop followed by a flat roll, pulling out as he spotted Nicholas. Now that it was more or less stationary Nicholas could see that the creature was a fox, with brilliant orange fur. The fox was wearing red tennis shoes and white gloves, and was equipped with an invisibly fast whirring tail or tails that appeared to hold him up in the air. “Whoah, who ‘re you?”

“We’re looking for Professor E. Gadd,” said Nicholas. “I’m Nicholas and that’s Clara and Tennyson and Brian’s somewhere and--there he is, and Cane. And you must be Tails, right?” Brian edged around the door carefully, making sure the sound was off.

“Yeah, dat’s me.” The fox dropped down onto the ground, bouncing lightly on soft shoes and padded paws, and circled around Nicholas sniffing in a disconcerting fashion. Now that they had stopped rotating, Nicholas could see that he had two tails, orange with white tips. “Well, the Professor ain’t here. He’s off on a super-top-secret mission.”

“Where did he go?” said Clara.

“Geez, Clara, if it’s super top secret he’s not gonna’ tell you where the Professor is!” said Cane, entering the room still holding his stomach.

“Aww, he’s at Ark. You know, in Sonic’s world.”

“What’s he doing at Ark? I thought that was an abandoned space station taken over by Dr. Noodnik.” said Tennyson.

“Robotnik,” said Brian.

“Naw, that was just a red herring,” replied Tails. “A big coverup. Ark is actually being used for the secret project what I was tellin’ ya’ about.”

“If it’s so secret how come you know about it?” asked Brian.

“I know about lots o’ things, kid. Truth is, nobody much cares to ask most o’ the time. The ghosts don’t like the Professor anyway, seein’ as he’s imprisoned most of ‘em. Luigi’s too busy tryin’ to get famous like his brother to care if Gadd is gadding about. Hey, that’s a good one! Gadd gadding about. Get it? Naw, ya’ got no sense o’ humor. Course some o’ my friends would be curious but I ain’t seen ‘em lately, I been around here helping the Prof out.” While the fox talked he moved incessantly, popping up into the air, dropping back on his head, flipping upside down, rolling around in circles chasing his tails.

“What are you helping him out with?” said Tennyson.

“Oh, ya’ see the portraificationizer whatsis ain’t workin’, it’s the upgrade the Professor ‘been workin’ on wid’ me, it’s got a bunch o’ new features like automated colorizing for colorless ghosts, and grayscalizing if’n ya’ don’t like the colors, and ya’ can delete a ghost from a portrait without lettin’ the others get out, an’ -- let’s see -- oh, yeah, you can transfer ghosts from one picture to another, ya’ can talk to ‘em, ya’ can even put ‘em together like to do a play or play a game and ‘den send ‘em home! I mean, back to their original portraits, oh an’ you can design a custom picture frame, plus it’s a lot smaller than the old one.”

“That sounds pretty cool. What’s wrong with it?” said Tennyson.

“Aaah, ya’ see it tends to mash up the portraits over where they come out. The ghosts don’t like dat at all, they get snippy. Probably don’t hurt ‘em none, they just don’t like bein’ trapped in the portraits anyway. It’s over here, come on.” He popped into the air and flew over several disorderly piles of stuff, turning somersaults as he went. The kids followed with some difficulty; at one point Cane got his foot caught in what looked for all the world like an enlarged pop-top soda can. When they caught up with Tails, he was prancing around on top of a metallic box, with a silvery frame and white painted side panels, about the size of three or four refrigerators, with a control panel and computer display monitor in one corner. On one side there was a socket of some sort with a complicated set of levers under a big red button. “See how small this one is? We got da homogenizer, da smasher/basher, the da electrifier -- a new model, glow discharge, ultra-high frequency, ya know -- all in ‘dat little box! Really compact ghost plumbing too. We replaced all ‘da gears wid’ continuous drive torque motors, and ‘da controls are simplified too!” He pointed at the socket and levers. “All ya’ have to do is connect up any model of Poltergust or even ‘da cheapo replacements to dis’ here universal ectoplasmic socket, and adjust da’ confinement alignment consignment levers deah until da leakage goes under ‘da red zone -- dat’s 3.3 milliplasmas or less -- and ‘den press ‘da red button.”

“You mean this one?” said Cane.

“No, don’t press ‘dat button! Oh, well.” With a slluuuuurrrping sound Cane was sucked into the universal ectoplasmic socket. Tails popped up into the air and hovered in front of the computer screen. “Well, might as well see what’s goin’ on.” He punched a key and the screen lit up. The monitor was divided into several areas; at the top were a series of incomprehensible labels with rapidly-varying numbers next to them. On the left side were three virtual dials, red, green, and blue, with fluctuating levels, and a sort of simplified diagram of the machine showing the location of the ghost -- well, the kid in this case -- being processed. On the right was a video tracking Cane’s progress through the machine. At the moment he was in the homogenizer, spinning rapidly around and stretching in what looked like a fashion unpleasant just to watch, to say nothing of to experience. The red dial popped up and down and then the image changed: a very elongated Cane slurped into the bottom of some sort of cylinder, and then a piston started coming down and squashing it into a tiny flattened floppy-kid-disk. It was probably fortunate that they couldn’t hear whatever it was Cane was trying to say. After twenty or thirty smashes the disk was apparently unloaded into a glowing chamber. The blue indicator popped up to the top and the chamber turned alternately yellow and deep orange as the disk flattened out and merged into a background image.

There was a deep rolling and screeching and Tails hopped over to the right side of the equipment and grabbed two levers. “If I can get these adjusted he’ll come out wid’out gettin’ squashed!” There was a bnnnnzzzzt of electric motors and then a hiss of steam, and out dropped a big picture in a frame. The background appeared to be a stained glass window, perhaps in a church, with the sun gleaming through, and a large group of ornamentally-dressed folks. Leading the procession, holding what was probably a large cross in the air, dressed in gold-lined robes and a tall hat -- yep, it was Cane.

“Can we get him out?” Brian asked Tails.

“Wrong question,” said Nicholas. “The right question is: should we get him out?” finished Clara.

“Yeah, he looks kindof at home,” said Tennyson. “I never thought of him ecclesiastically.”

“Ekleezawhat?” said Nicholas.

“Ecclesiastical. It means church things. I learned it in Sunday school.”

“You go to school on Sundays? Don’t you get enough during the week?”

Tails interrupted: “Hey, what do I do wid’ this guy? You want I should get him out?”

“Does it hurt to leave him in?” asked Clara.

“Naw, only the ghosts always get ticked off about it. I guess it’s boring!”

“This is the guy who watched the 18 wheeler pro trucker channel all night,” said Nicholas. “He can handle it.” The Cane in the portrait looked upset but it was hard to say whether it was in reaction to the remarks or the situation. “So let’s get back to business here. If the Professor is gone, maybe you can help. We’re trying to get back home to the real world. Do you know anyone who can help us?”

“The real world? You mean you’re like, people? Not created by Nintendo? or even--” he looked around and lowered his voice: “--Sony?”

“Nope.”

Tails’ eyes went wide. “You mean you’re from Mm -- Mm --” (he was reduced to a hoarse whisper) “Microsoft?”

“No, you don’t understand. Nobody created us,” said Nicholas.

“At least, no game company,” said Tennyson.

“We were born,” said Clara.

“The real world,” repeated Tails, looking more thoughtful than usual. “Now ya’ got me reminded o’ somethin’. What da’ Professor said; dat’s what they’re doin’ at Ark, they’re making a real world. Or a bridge to a real world. Or takin’ a trip there. Or somethin’ like ‘dat.’”

“That’s great!” said Nicholas. “We have to go there! They can help us. How do we get there?”

“Oh, man, now dat I know about. Ain’t no party gettin’ into Ark. Out in space, surrounded by asteroids and guard robots armed with lasers. Guard robots inside too, and aliens, an’ who knows what else.”

“OK, so we need to get a spaceship,” said Nicholas. “Where could we do that?”

“Well, Fox can get you there if anybody can. My bud, Starfox. But he ain’t gonna do it for free! No, no, not Ark. Cost ya’ maybe six thousand, maybe seven thousand, at least! How many of you?”

“Well, five unless we let Cane out,” said Tennyson.

“Allright, ya’ ain’t got da’ guts for ‘dat, six. Six. Hmmm. I betcha’ seventy-five hundred coins at least. Yep. And cheap at the price. And you’ll hafta probably help out, too, need all your gunners to get through ‘dem asteroids.”

“Seven thousand!” exclaimed Nicholas.

“Seventy-five hundred,” said Brian.

“What’s the difference, it’s a lot more than we have,” said Nicholas. “Where are we going to find that much money?”

“Brian could do the quiz show circuit” said Tennyson. “He’s pretty good.”

Brian went pale. “Don’t you remember what happened to Spiky T? No way I am doing another quiz show.”

“Whoah whoah whoah whoah whoah!” said Tails, bouncing inverted in the air with each word. “You guys gotta’ learn to listen a little. I don’t know that the Ark project goes to the real world, I just heard somethin’ from the Professor once. Don’t you think you oughta’ like check it out first ‘fore you go runnin’ off to spent seven, eight thousand coins?”

“Gee, I don’t know,” said Nicholas. “Erin’s the one who likes to think a lot. Course that usually means he doesn’t actually do anything.”

“Dudes, like, if I’m gonna’ fix da portrifactionizer output drive camshaft connector alignment, I don’t just like rip da whole machine apart! I think it through a little bit, figure out like what tools I’m gonna need, what’s probably wrong, like dat. Maybe I even read the manual, if I’m like, in the mood. But like ya said ya gotta tear into it ‘cause half the time what you think is wrong ain’t the problem anyway. I ain’t tellin’ ya’ what you should go do research for twenny years, I’m saying you should ask around a little bit. Ya might wanna ask Luigi; you know Mario’s pretty famous, he knows a lot about

what's goin' on, an' he's got a big mouth always blabbin' off, anything he knows Luigi probably knows too."

"He's right, we should think this through," said Clara. "Remember what happened the last time we went off without checking things out. All that work to get to Fourside for nothing."

"Oh, come on, at least we got a place to sleep," replied Nicholas. "You even got a shower!"

"I still didn't get clean clothes, though," replied Clara.

Nicholas rolled his eyes. "Girls!"

"Why don't we take Tails' suggestion and talk to Luigi?" said Tennyson, trying to get the conversation back on track. "Remember that Neville was going to fetch him after his appointment."

"That's a good idea," said Brian. "Maybe he can help us about the money, too. We could do work for him. Maybe he needs help with something."

"Oh, you could get coins outta Luigi, all right," said Tails, sniffing the back of Clara's neck. "But -- maybe you'd be better off working for it."

"What does that mean?" said Tennyson.

"I don't think you want to know," said Brian.

"Smart kid," said Tails.

"I worked for my father before," said Clara. "It wasn't so bad; in fact, it was fun sometimes. Anyway, think about it: we're going to need coins even if it turns out Ark isn't the right way to get us home."

"Aren't we supposed to be going to school, not working?" said Nicholas. "We're kids. I don't want to work for a living. At least not yet. That's what my dad is for."

"Moms can work too!" said Clara.

"Well, fine, mine doesn't," replied Nicholas.

"Clara is right, we're going to need some money whatever we end up doing," said Tennyson.

"You're always taking her side," said Nicholas.

"That's because she's usually right," said Tennyson.

"We don't have to decide this yet," said Brian. "Let's go back and see if Neville has found Luigi. We can ask him, like Tails suggested."

"Smart kid," said Tails. He was beginning to get bored. "Hey, look, I gotta get back to fixin' the output drive. You can come with me, I got dis new album from Darjeeling, it's great, ya wanna listen?" Brian started twisting up his tee shirt sleeves to fit into his ears. Nicholas looked uncomfortable: he actually disliked overly loud music but was reluctant to offend the very helpful fox. Fortunately, at that moment, a ghostly shape popped through the wall into the room: Neville.

"Oh, there you are, children. The Master's had me looking all over for you. You are invited to lunch with Master Luigi in the Grand Ballroom at 11:45 precisely, and as it is now 11:30, we must repair directly to the antechamber."

Tails smiled in a carnivorous fashion, showing his fangs. "Hey, Neville, can ya' come down here a sec? I need somebody to test the portrifactionizer on, kids don't really count, it's not the same as a ghost. I asked da other ghosts, nobody wanted to do it."

"I should say not! How ghastly! It's only through good fortune that I escaped that infernal portrait prison! I shan't be volunteering to return."

"Aww come on, I'll let ya' out." Tails was drifting backwards in the air towards a little closet, with several vacuum cleaners piled on top of one another.

"A fox guarding the henhouse, in the literal sense, I should say. No, thank you! Ah, but children, you must come at once. I shall lead you to the ballroom. If you please."

"Thanks, Tails, we gotta go," said Nicholas.

"Yeah, we'll have to check out your music later," said Tennyson.

Clara cleared her throat. "Aren't you forgetting something?" she said.

Nicholas looked blank. Tennyson looked guilty. Brian just said, "I thought we should get him out."

"Oh, all right," said Nicholas. "Hey, Tails, can you get Cane out of the portrait?"

"Oh, yeah, I gotta work on 'dat anyway, just a minute." Tails jumped up over the portrificationizer, reversed his course in midair, and reached backwards over (well, actually, under his head, as he was upside down) to grab the edge of the box and pull himself down. He started digging through a disorderly pile of assorted framed pictures, including several that looked like they had been run over by a truck. "Does anybody remember where I put dat picture?"

"I don't remember," said Nicholas. "We were too busy arguing about him to keep track of him."

"Did you throw him in the pile or into that chute?" said Tennyson.

"Hmmm," said Tails. "Hope not, that's the Disposall. 'Nother one of Prof's inventions -- turns anything you throw into it directly into ectoplasmic goo and then vaporizes it into water vapor and carbon dioxide, environmentally harmless, and some poopy stuff you can use as fertilizer. If I threw him in 'dere we ain't gettin' him back."

"I don't know if I always liked him, but I didn't want him turned into fertilizer!" said Tennyson.

"At least he'll help the flowers grow," said Clara, but she looked distraught.

"I think you left him right next to the machine," said Brian. He pointed. "Right there by the levers." Sure enough, there was Cane's picture. Nicholas laughed nervously and slapped Brian on the behind; "Sharp eyes, Brian!" Clara sighed and suddenly hugged Brian. He looked distinctly uncomfortable from all the attention: "You just have to watch," he said.

Tails picked up the portrait and typed some commands into the computer, pressed a couple of buttons, and then turned a lever. The machine hummed and then suddenly stopped. Tails whacked it sharply with his elbow, eliciting a BRRZZZT-- WHZZZZ and then a return to the steady humming. "Are you sure this thing is safe?" said Clara.

"Kinda' don't matter, it's the only way to get anybody out of a portrait, gotta go," said Tails, and without further discussion he popped the portrait into a slot just under the computer monitor. A different display, containing a number of pointers and a black window, appeared on the screen, with "SCANNING" at the top in block letters. The black window resolved from the top into a reasonable simalcrum of the painting; as the image was completed the title changed to "REBUILDING" and then "COMPILING". There was a sound like a balloon blowing up, and Cane was -- the only way to describe it is extruded -- from the slot.

Clara had a moment of fear that he would come out dressed as a cardinal, or (worse still) naked, but Cane was wearing his tee shirt and jeans, just as he had been when he pressed the button. He swayed for a moment or two, and then sat down heavily on his butt. "Ow," he said.

"You all right, Cane?" said Tennyson.

"Now you're concerned. You guys practically left me in there! What kindof friends are you, anyway?"

"Hey, what was it like being a cardinal?" asked Brian. "Did you talk to the other people in the picture?"

"People? People! They were all ghosts! All they did was complain about how boring it was, and how lucky I was that I was going to get out, which was not so obvious to me. I still can't believe you left me in there."

"Cane, we did not press the red button, you did," said Clara.

"You sound like my mom," said Cane.

"Well, somebody has to," replied Clara. "Don't blame us for what you did. Come on, you're out now, let's go get some lunch."

"Yow! Lunch! That's a great idea. Where do we go?"

"Just follow me, please, children," said Neville, turning around and walking directly into the wall.

"Neville!" called Nicholas. "Neville, we can't walk through the walls."

"His brain probably worked better when he was alive," said Tails. "See ya' 'round. Come by if ya' wanna hear some hot tunes. I got lots." He flew a sort of helical path back over the portrificationizer.

“Let’s get up the escalator before he turns the music back on!” said Nicholas, causing Brian to head for the landing at full speed. “Didn’t know he could run that fast,” Nicholas added, thoughtfully.

Neville reappeared from the wall: “So sorry, I’ve been dead so long I quite forget myself. This way, please, children. We shan’t keep the Master waiting, you know.”

“What about Erin?” asked Nicholas as they rode back to ground level.

“Why, Master Nicholas, of course I’ve seen to such details. I’ve already spoken to Erin and arranged for him and his friend, Mr. Saturn, to meet us at the ballroom directly they are finished with their perusal of the books. I do so love reading in the study, you know. Quite the best way to pass the time. Do you like to read, Master Cane?”

“Well, not as much as I like to eat. Or watch TV. Or play video games. Or mess up Tennyson’s room. Or skip doing my homework. Or hide my sister’s toys. Or dig up Mom’s plants.”

“We got the point,” said Clara.

“Oh, you did? What was it?” responded Cane.

- - - - -
Erin and Mr. Saturn were waiting outside the ball room. They were engrossed in an word game when the rest of the kids came up.

Your topic is...homework.” said Mr. Saturn. “Ready...set...go!”

“Homework is the sort of thing that most kids don’t like even to think about but I kind of swim in it, because I got lost once on my way home from school and ended up in homework valley, where all the kids live inside houses built from homework and do -- uh --”

“You blew it! You said ‘Uh’. I win!”

“Oh, man. How could I blow such an easy one. All right, all right, your topic is: parrots. Ready ... set ... go!”

“Parrots are members of the order psittiformes, sub-orders cactuidae and psittacidae, containing a number of genres of geniuses, at least of the bird world. They are typically multicolored birds living in deep forests, and are characterized by remarkable intelligence and astonishingly accurate memories, as well as the affection they often bear their human masters when living in captivity. Parrots are frequently displayed in zoos and shopping malls, where their able imitations of the actual gibberish that passes for speech amongst human beings earns them the moniker of the most intelligent of avians.”

“Thirty seconds! You win again. Geez, how do you know so much about real stuff? There aren’t any games about parrots, are there?”

“What are you guys doing?” asked Nicholas.

“Improvising,” answered Erin. “Talking thirty seconds on any subject without hesitation.”

“Just talking?” exclaimed Cane. “That’s easy! I could do that.”

“Okay,” said Mr. Saturn. “Your topic is rice. Ready - set - go!”

“Well, rice is -- uh -- you know, it’s really boring to eat and -- um --”

“You lost three times already,” said Erin.

“Well, I’m too hungry to talk,” said Cane.

“You children do go on,” interrupted Neville. “Master Luigi is waiting for us. Please.”

“Lead on, MacDuff, and cursed be he who first cries ‘hold! enough!’” said Mr. Saturn.
Nicholas just opened the door.

The Ballroom was huge. A long dining table was set between two circular tiled dance floors, each beneath a glistening crystal chandelier. Portraits and cushioned chairs were set into curtained alcoves around the perimeter of the room. Bonapa T. and a ghost they hadn’t seen before were bustling around the table pushing a pair of carts laden with plates of something that smelled delectable. At the head of the table was a short man in a green hat and blue vest with yellow buttons: Luigi.

Luigi bounced out of his chair as soon as he saw them, and came jogging over to the door. “Welcome, it’s a so good to see you again, children! Neville told me how you have a not so good a time at that Eagleland place, I never liked it much, you know. Sitta down, you musta be hungry as a Tubba Blubba, of course you are so much a prettier than Tubba Blubba, I mean a Clara, of course.”

“Thank you,” said Clara, though she wasn’t sure how much of a compliment she had received.

"He's the champion," said Mr. Saturn.

"Yep, talk about nothing for hours without hesitation," said Erin. "Let's learn from the master."

"You musta sitta down here, Clara, righta next to me, anda Nicholas, over there, anda--"

The ghost interrupted Luigi: "Now, now, ain't fittin' for the Master to be gettin' the guests on their butts, you let me do that. Y'ain't scared o' ghosts, is ya?" (The latter remark, of course, was directed to the children.) "Sit down, lesse' ya's goin' over there, whasyer name? Oh, yeah, Neville dun tole' me, lessee, Erin and the little weirdo" (indicating Mr. Saturn) "at the end, Brian's dere, Tennybun -- say, you youngun's don't smoke, do ya?"

Tennyson laughed. "We're too young for that." Then he looked around -- "We are too young for that, right?"

"Geez, Tennyson," replied Nicholas. "We've been hanging around with each other since second grade, you'd know if any of us smoked."

"That's good, I'm right frightened of that fire stuff," said the ghost. "Scare's me half to death! I mean, half to life. I mean -- well, real scary, that's what it is."

"Dat'sa some ghost, dat' is, it'sa Shivers, I shoulda introduced him, I'ma sorry. But it'sa time to eat, you've a met Bonapa T, yes? He'sa gotta lunch, whatta cook, I'ma so happy he's a workin' here, eat! eat!"

Each place was set with a glistening China plate, decorated with a smiling portrait of Luigi outlined with gold filigree, and surrounded by so many utensils that they reminded Clara of a dentist's office. Two tall fluted glasses of a slightly blue tint were placed next to the plate, and a cloth napkin embroidered with the initials LM resting in an engraved wooden ring completed the arrangement. Three large golden platters were already resting in the center of the table, piled high with (respectively) steaming fresh rolls, something that looked like potatoes but smelled of mustard, and brown strips of a sort of bacon. Ignoring the finery, Cane reached out to grab a slab of bacon. Shivers passed right through the table to whack Cane's outstretched hand with a serving spoon. "Ain'tcha got no manners, ya' young whipper-snapper? Wait'll the Master is seated a'fore ya' c'n eat!"

"You can dress him up but you can't take him out," said Mr. Saturn. The kids sat down, and Clara and Brian knew enough to place the napkins on their laps; the other kids (except Cane) picked up on the trick and within a moment all were in a state resembling decorousness. Luigi nodded and took his seat. "Eat! eat! you look thin anda tired."

Nicholas snagged the roll he had his eyes on and traded the platter to Brian in exchange for some potatoes. Through a mouth partly full of bread he addressed Luigi: "Gee, Mr. Luigi, this is really nice of you (munch chew). These are (bite) great! And breakfast too. You guys sure are a lot nicer (swallow) than the Starmen." Shivers stood next to Nicholas, cleaning up the crumbs that fell on the tablecloth with a little brush, making Nicholas feel like a slob.

"Itsa my pleasure, itsa lonely at the mansion sommatimes, itsa so nice to have visitors. Lemme tell ya' somethin', you know you're a little bit desperate whena you talk to the ghosts likea they were your friends." Shivers glared at Luigi but continued helping Bonapa T. to serve out a sort of vegetable in a mushroom sauce with thin slices of brownish meat on the top. "You stay as long as you want, my house is your house a!"

"Are there still ghosts here?" said Brian dubiously. "I mean the other ghosts, not Neville." Shivers turned to start lecturing him but Brian beat him to the punch: "Or Shivers."

"Still'a ghosts? Still'a ghosts! Lemme tell ya' I got da' ghosts, too many ghosts, its'a crazy, no? I had all the ghosts stuck away ina da portraits, like the Professor wanted, hada my nicea new mansion just the way I like it, even a better than Mario's house if you aska me, she's a beautiful, no? But then thosea crazy Nascar guys, they livea down the block, they'sa racin and a speedin, they'sa crashed right into the pole, the power she's a goin' out, ana the ghosts they got outta the portraits, at least the ones that were awake, you know."

"You've got NASCAR driver neighbors?" exclaimed Cane, who had gone through a phase of intense interest in racing games the previous year. "Cool! Who is it? Richard Petty? Dale Earnhardt?"

“Ya got me, I don’t talk to them much, only when they crash into my fence because of the curve in the road just up the slope from my nice mansion.”

“Why don’t you just vacuum up the ghosts?” asked Brian.

“Just vacuum, eh? It’s a hard work, vacuuming up the ghosts, it’s a no Mario Party! Oh besides, it’s true, some of the ghosts, their nice ghosts, like Shivers here or Neville, who would want to capture them again anyway? And then there’s a van Gore, he’s a makes such a beautiful pictures, he painted my treasure chest a so good you could take coins outta da picture. Who’s a gonna vacuum up such a ghost?”

“Yeah, I guess Neville was pretty nice,” said Brian. “Maybe some of the ghosts are ok.”

“Come on, Brian,” said Cane, “ghosts can’t do anything to you anyway. What’re you afraid of?”

“Leave him alone, Cane,” said Tennyson. “You’re scared of grasshoppers.”

“What’ya have to go telling everybody for? That was a secret. Besides you’re scared of dogs.”

“Well, I’m getting over it,” said Tennyson defensively. “I talked to Tails without running away.”

“That doesn’t count,” said Cane. “He was a fox.”

“Well they look just like dogs, pretty much. At least back home they do.”

Clara took advantage of the pause while Cane tried to invent a rejoinder to get the conversation back to something more productive. “Mr. Luigi, it’s really nice of you to help us out like this instead of getting killed by the Starmen,” said Clara. “But we really do need to get home. Mr. Tails told us that maybe the space station at Ark had some sort of a secret project that could help us. Is that something you know about?”

“Of coursea!” replied Luigi. “I know all about it, my brother Mario told a me everything. Let’s see, how did it go?” He thought for a moment.

“The space station Ark is the home of a top secret project,” he began, while:

“The space station Ark is the home of a top secret project,” said Erin at exactly the same time. Luigi looked puzzled but continued.

“It’s a top secret so nobody is supposed to know what it’s for,” said Luigi.

“It’s a top secret so nobody is supposed to know what it’s for,” said Erin.

“But I can tell you the project is to create a model of the real world,” said Luigi.

“But I can tell you the project is to create a model of the real world,” said Erin.

“All righta, all righta, what’s a goin’ on here?” said Luigi.

“Well, it’s in Mario’s book. Volume seventeen, chapter -- hmm --” said Erin.

“Twenty-three,” said Mr. Saturn.

“You reada my brother’s book!”

“Well, we skimmed it,” said Erin. “It’s a long book.”

“Right,” said Mr. Saturn. “So we just picked out some interesting spots. Like the part about Ark.”

“Didja read about when I saved a Mario from the haunted mansion?”

“Oh, we already knew that story, we didn’t bother to read it again,” said Erin.

Luigi looked disappointed. “How about when I saved Mario from being arrested for his parking tickets?”

“No, I don’t remember seeing that anywhere. When was that?”

“Oh, Mario usedta like to park his kart in the loading zone, or sometimes even in the handicapped spaces, he got so many parking tickets they made a summons for him! They were gonna throw him in da jail and he didn’t have no money because he spent all the money working on the party games, he was flat broke! But I paida the parking tickets so he wouldn’t have to go. He didn’t write about that time?”

“Not a word. Did you see anything, Mr. Saturn?”

“Fat chance, Erin. I don’t recall seeing anything that didn’t glorify Mario at everyone else’s expense.”

"Yeah, he'sa like that. Not that I don't a love my brother, you understand, but he'sa so good, and he never getsa tired about a tellin' you about it."

"Twenty-nine volumes so far," said Mr. Saturn.

"So do you know anything else about Ark, Mr. Luigi?" asked Nicholas.

"Oh, it'sa big huge spacea station witha lotsa computer stuff, you know."

"No, I mean about the project."

"Well, I don't remember mucha dat. When wasa that, oh when my brodda comea to borrow some money after they get the Princess back downa so he can get a new suspenders for the party, and he saysa to me, 'Luigi, what you got so many rooms in your house an' no gamesa to play', and I saysa 'Mario, we livea ina the best game ina da world, dat'sa my mansion, of course, whaddya' need a game to play?' and he saysa to me 'Luigi, somea day we gonna makea da games to live in, not just livea in da games likea they thinka we shoulda be', an' I says to him 'Mario, whattya crazy? Whaddya gonna do datsa better? Maybe you getta ridda 'dat racer guy upa da street what drives likea Conker on megavitaminsa, what else ya need?' and he saysa to me, 'Luigi, ya gotta no imagination, itsa that vision thing, ya gotta see likea ina da light from a star' or somethinga like that, an' he saysa to me, 'You talka to de Professor sometime, whena he'sa back from Ark, you learna something', but you know I talkeda to the Professor an' he looka over his shoulder and say 'Luigi, whatta you asking about stuffa lika dat, you ain't a supposeda to know abouta this, you coulda be in bigga trouble you go talking likea dat'."

"The light from a star? What does that mean?" said Brian.

"Brian, Luigi is the champion talker but not necessarily the champion communicator," said Mr. Saturn.

Erin looked a bit miffed that Mr. Saturn had volunteered assistance to someone else, as he had come to look on the little guy as his private companion. "What he means is that Luigi is making this all up," said Erin.

Luigi was not pleased. "I'm not makin' it up, I'ma tellin ya' just almost like it happened!"

"I'm sure he didn't mean that," said Tennyson. "Anyway, sounds to me like Ark really is tied up somehow with the real world. We haven't heard of anything else. Maybe if we go there we'll at least learn what the next step is."

"You heard Tails!" said Nicholas. "We're going to need six thousand, maybe seven thousand coins to hire Fox! Where are we going to get so much money?"

"Datsa great idea to hirea StarFox!" said Luigi. "He's the best flyer there isa, excepta for Samus Aran but you can't hire Samus unless you want maybe to have her shoot you if she'sa ina bad mood, da Fox a he could get you to Ark if anybody could, but Tails is righta, he ain't a gonna worka for no cheapskate."

"Do you know of anywhere we could go to work to earn some money?" asked Clara.

"Oh, you don't needa to go, I tellyou what, you cleana upa my mansion, the ghosts they don't do so gooda, they try but there'sa not too many anda Neville he keepsa forgetting, he readsa when he'sa supposta be workin! I pay you to clean upa, whattya say I pay you, oh, a hundred coins a rooma, theres a lotsa rooms dat needa cleaning, maybe twenny, maybe thirty."

"A hundred coins a room!" said Clara. "That's great! We could make a bunch of money."

"You're a too nicea, it's just a little bit, maybe I'm not payin' enough, I tellya what, you find anything in the roomsa, some extra coins or jewels or like that I forgot to put away, you can keep em."

"Thank you, Mr. Luigi!" said Clara.

"Let's see, you said thirty rooms?" asked Nicholas. Luigi nodded while he chewed on a strip of bacon. "I think we'd better split up for this. With three teams that would be ten rooms per team. Brian, you work with Cane, Tennyson with Clara, and Erin and me. Two of us could probably clean up a room in an hour or two; if we start after lunch we could probably finish by tomorrow evening or the next day."

"Work after lunch?" said Cane. "I'm eating!"

"When you've finished eating," said Nicholas.

"Then I'll be sleepy! Come on, we hardly ever do anything at school after lunch."

“You mean you don’t pay attention after lunch,” said Tennyson.

“Hey, if we’re going to need to work tomorrow, where are we going to stay?” said Brian. “I’m not going back to Fourside!”

“No way!” said Nicholas.

“Gee, the TV there was pretty good,” said Cane.

“Get a clue, Cane; that TV is dust buried in rubble,” said Clara.

“Watta you saying you needa placea to stay?” exclaimed Luigi. “Whattya think a mansion isa for, you havea guests anda throwa them out? I got a lotsa rooms, you can eacha have your owna rooma, I insist! Shivers, which roomsa we gonna give our guests?”

“Danged if I know, Master Luigi, what with Neville always muckin’ ‘round with the cleanin’ lists and that danged Inky hanging ‘round wherever he durn well pleases, why he’s made the pool room a goldurned catastrophe! I guess we could put some’of em in Nana’s room, it aint’ got much ‘ceptin dirt ‘n dust, ‘n then there’s the conserv’try, git some nice music fur to sleep by.”

“Isn’t there an artist’s studio on the third floor?” asked Mr. Saturn.

“Tarnation, ya’ bin up to the third floor already?” replied Shivers.

“Hardly, but perhaps you could arrange for Erin and me to lodge there? I’d like to see what’s been added since you’ve bought the new place.”

“O’ coursa, itsa beautiful the paintings ona da walls!” The tall grandfather clock against the wall chimed once and Luigi jumped out of his chair. “Mama mia! One’a o’clock, I gotta go! The audition for my new gamea, I don’ wanna be latea. Shivers, you take ‘em to Neville to figure outa what’sa gonna get cleaned up, I’ll be back later!” and with that Luigi ran out of the room.

“Finally git some peace ‘n quiet around here fur a while!” said Shivers. “Take yer time, the master never gits back from them auditions ‘til late, if’n he don’t git drunk and git stuck there ‘til tamarrer.”

“Mon Dieu, it is rare indeed for me to agree with Monsieur Shivers, but he is right,” said Bonapa T. “Zut alors! c’est finalement plus tranquille -- so sorry, it is more quiet with ze Master out of ze house! Mes amis, how did you find ze pate de Shroom et aiguilles?”

“You mean that gray stuff?” said Cane. “Tasted kinda like Cup o’ Noodles that you forget about and let it sit on the shelf all day.”

“Cane! You ate three plates of it, I watched you!” said Tennyson.

“Yeah, of course. I like Cup o’ Noodles after I forget about it.”

“Geeze, you probably eat frozen waffles too,” said Clara.

“Yeah, they’re really great when they’re not just a little thawed on the edges!”

“Ze frozen waffle! Freeze ze crepes? Oh, mon Dieu, even to think of such a thing, you should be forced to spend ze day listening to Bowser talk about himself!”

“Come on, we need to get to work if we’re ever going to get that money,” said Nicholas.

“Forget about the frozen waffles. Let’s find Neville, he’s the one with the schedule.” Nicholas stopped and thought for a moment, and then remembered: “Oh yeah, thanks, Bonapa T.! That was great! Do you need us to help you clean up?”

“You are too kind, mon ami, it is our pleasure. Shivers and I will take care of everything, no?” Shivers the ghost appeared to have been old when he died; he was curled up on a chair in the corner, fast asleep. “Ça ne fait rien! Go on, children, allez! I will take care of it.”

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Neville was in the study again, immersed in Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets. “I do so love the death day party! It’s very nostalgic. But all these other characters are always getting in the way of the ghosts, don’t you know?”

“Uh, Neville, we like Harry Potter--” began Nicholas.

“Oh, do you know him? Could you have him include more ghosts in the next book?”

“Neville, Harry Potter is a fictional creation,” said Nicholas. “Made up. Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz.”

“Kansas is imaginary?” said Cane, shocked.

“Geez, you are a dufus!” said Clara. “Kansas is not imaginary, your brain is imaginary.”

“Come on, gu-- people!” said Nicholas. “Neville, Luigi said he would pay us some coins that we could use to hire Fox if we helped clean up the mansion, and that you were the one who knew what needed to be done. Can you help us?”

“Of course, children! Just let me mark my place -- Bloody good show, that Baron! Now, let me see, where did I put that list?”

“Perhaps this one?” said Erin, pointing at a manila folder labeled “Schedule of Rooms to be Cleaned” sitting on the writing table.

“Oh, quite, quite, thank you!” Neville opened the folder and unfolded a huge thick paper, with a set of diagrams on the left and a table crowded with miniscule handwriting on the right. “You see, here are the diagrams of the mansion showing each room in its proper relative location, and here on the right a depiction of the status of each room.”

Nicholas leaned over the table to get a closer look, bumping heads with Clara in the process. The table looked like this:

ROOM	CONDITION	WHITE GLOVE TEST	CLEANING TOOLS
Twin’s Room	clean but untidy train crash	passes	Poltergust 2000+ map of assigned toy locations
Nursery	sheets on floor	fails	dust mop wash rags linen bag
Cellar	huge dust piles	buries white glove and tester	huge trash cans Poltergust 3500 Turbo cheap labor

and so on down the whole very tall page. It was a bit disheartening.

“That’s a bit disheartening,” said Erin. “There are a lot of rooms to clean.”

“There aren’t so many,” replied Neville. “Keep a stiff upper lip and all that, you know.”

“Is the table current?” asked Clara.

“Oh, yes, I check every day,” said Neville.

“Do you ever clean any of the rooms up?” asked Nicholas.

“No, of course not! I’m supervising.”

“Oh,” said Erin. “That explains why the records are neat and the rooms aren’t.”

“Enough complaining!” said Nicholas. “We’ve got coins to earn. Would you rather be in school? Let’s see... is the list in any special order, Neville?”

“It is in exactly the order it should be in.”

“But not in order of size or dirt or anything like that, right?” The ghost did a sort of ectoplasmic nod. “OK, then, we’ll just divide the list up in three sections...” Nicholas folded the paper carefully and tore it along the creases. “Clara, here’s your section. Brian, you and Cane take these, and Erin and I will get what’s left. Now let’s see -- oh, the table lists cleaning supplies; where can we get those, Neville?”

“What a tomnoddy I am! Come, let’s to the store room!” He walked off through the bookshelves and the wall.

“Yo, Neville!” said Tennyson. “You forgot again. We can’t walk through the walls. Wait up!”

“How could I be so thoughtless? I attend you in the hallway, children.”

The kids made their way down the hall and down a flight of stairs into a wood-paneled, dimly-lit room packed with junk. Piled on the top of some old mattresses were several buckets, some brooms,

assorted rags (not too clean to begin with), and three distinctly different but obviously very special vacuum cleaners.

“Now, children, these are Poltergust-class ectoplasmic inhalation capture packs, not toys!” said Neville. “They are to be used with care and attention. May I have a volunteer?”

The other kids stepped backwards, leaving Cane in front. “Thank you. Place the Poltergust on your back using the shoulder straps, so! The adaptor can function as vacuum or exhaust, controlled by this switch here. The vacuum function is indispensable for cleaning dust from the floor, upholstery, and other places it collects. The lower class have also been known to vacuum up ghosts, though of course a gentleman would never think of behaving in such a fashion. This red button allows you to enable the flame thrower function, and the blue oblong button engages the water spray. Press the white lever to activate the freezing function.”

Cane pointed the brush-tipped adaptor at Brian and said “Like this?” Fortunately, he pressed the vacuum button: Brian’s cheek was sucked instantly onto the brush.

“Turnnnn itt orrrff! tuurnnn itt orrrff!” Brian tried to say through his distorted lips.

Unfortunately, Cane pressed the mode switch instead of the off switch, reversing the flow and injecting a blast of very old dust into Brian’s mouth.

“Geez! (cough cough spit spit) What was that for? (hack cough)”

“Uh. Oh. Sorry,” said Cane.

“At least he didn’t hit the flame thrower button,” said Tennyson.

“Children, how you do run on! Let me once again emphasize that these are tools for the professional, not toys! Please attend to the control functions in the future.”

Nicholas grabbed the second vacuum cleaner -- a Turbo 3600 with integral ghost compressor, according to the name plate. Clara picked up the last, a Ghastly 28Z with tip illumination. Tennyson grabbed a bucket and some rags and distributed them; he was in a low-tech mood after what had happened to Brian.

“Okay, we’ve got our stuff,” said Nicholas. “Let’s meet back in the study at --- when is dinner here, Neville?”

“Dinner will be at five thirty precisely, unless of course it isn’t. Naturally you’re all invited to join the Master. Bonapa T. is preparing a wonderful dish of ghosted roast -- or roasted ghost -- or some such French nonsense.”

“OK, everybody meet back here at four thirty and we’ll see how far we’ve gotten. Let’s get to work!” Nicholas rolled up his slice of paper, grabbed Erin by the sleeve, and headed out the door.

“Sounds like I’m not part of the cleaning crew,” said Mr. Saturn. “The disappointment will doubtless stunt my growth. Hey, Neville, what else you got to read around here?”

Chapter 8: Pipe Dreams

“So this is the Twin’s room?” said Clara. “What a mess!” She was standing just inside the door, next to a small table holding a large globe. The room was decorated with cheerful blue and white striped wallpaper. A bunk bed lay on one side, a desk on the other. A mobile of string and tiny toy planes hung from the ceiling. A toy chest was in the corner, open and nearly empty, its contents strewn all around the room. There were tennis rackets, rubber balls, dolls, wooden trains, cars of various sizes, models, and construction, rocket ships, coloring books, building blocks, boats, dinosaurs, crayons, a pop gun, a doll house, balls of string, lengths of rope, buckets, shovels, marbles, magazines, polished rocks, a miniature tea set, jigsaw puzzles, large pieces of chalk, action figures, drawing books, watercolors, and stuffed bears, beavers, rabbits, macaws, fish, frogs, dolphins, whales, moose, weasels, otters, anteaters, bluebirds, eagles, and a slug (a stuffed one, of course). “What does the map say?” she asked.

Tennyson entered, carrying some rags and a bucket. “Let’s see... here it is. Well, looks like everything is here. He’s even included a diagram of where the toys go in the toy chest. Oh, and here’s a warning note: ‘toys shrink when placed in the chest and expand when removed’. That Neville! For a ghost who doesn’t actually do much of anything he’s really helpful.”

“Where do we start?” said Clara.

“How about this?” said Tennyson. “I’ll start at one corner, you start at the other, and we’ll toss all the toys close to the chest. Then we can just grab things and stow them in the chest in order according to the map. It shouldn’t actually be that hard.”

“Okay,” replied Clara. She took the Poltergust off and laid it down next to the bunk bed; the room was just as represented in Neville’s list, untidy but not actually very dirty. She knelt down at the back of the bed and started to pick up the various small toys collected there, tossing them over her shoulder towards the toy chest. Tennyson was doing the same at the other end of the room; for a minute, all that could be heard was the periodic thump as a flying toy landed on the carpet. Clara flung a locomotive backwards and reached under the bed to grab the tender, when whack! something hit her in the behind. “Ow!” she said. She looked back and saw the locomotive lying on the carpet. “What did you do that for?”

“I didn’t do anything,” said Tennyson. “What happened?”

“What happened?” said Clara. “You hit me with this train engine!”

“I did not. I was picking up marbles over here, not locomotives.”

“Well who did?”

“Did you hit yourself? Maybe you threw it straight up.”

“I don’t think so.” Clara hesitated, not eager to get into a big argument (and not really believing that Tennyson would throw something at her intentionally). “Well, maybe you’re right.” She turned back to snagging junk from under the bed: golf ball toss!, teddy bear toss!, Pokemon card pack (stop and look -- “ooh, look, a Clefairy!”) toss!, when suddenly whack! something else hit her in the butt.

“Okay, that’s it!” Someone giggled. It didn’t sound like Tennyson; it was high-pitched, and Tennyson wasn’t given to giggling anyway.

“Was that you?” said Tennyson.

“Was that me what? I didn’t throw it at myself again!” replied Clara.

“Throw what? I meant was that you laughing at me?” said Tennyson.

“Of course not. Are you throwing stuff at me when I’m not looking?”

“Would I do that? I’d only throw stuff at you when you’re watching. Besides you always catch things.” Tennyson started to walk over to see what had hit Clara and tripped on a pile of marbles -- thump! he went down on the carpet. Somebody started laughing uproariously. Tennyson started to complain to Clara when he saw that she was silent.

“Who’s in here?” said Tennyson.

“Nanner, nanner, can’t catch me!” said a high-pitched voice.

“Can so!” said another voice.

“I meant the old folks, not you!” said the first voice.

Clara’s eyes narrowed. She reached back to grab her Poltergust and strapped it on. “All right, come out or I’ll vacuum you out!”

“Aww, aren’t you gonna’ play with us?” From behind a large wooden box next to the toy chest protruded a ghostly translucent blue head topped with neaty combed blonde hair parted in the middle. The disconcertingly green eyes blinked and the ghost said, “Who are you? I haven’t seen you before. I’m Henry! Want to play?”

“Oh, it’s the twins,” said Clara. “Where’s your brother?”

Another similar ghostly head popped out upside down from the center of the mobile. “I’m not his brother, he’s my brother! He’s just Henry. I’m Orville! I’m the big brother.”

“We’re twins,” replied Henry. “You can’t be the big brother. Besides you were the big brother yesterday!”

“Would you play hide and seek with us?” said Orville, forgetting about the argument.

“Gee, we’re kind of in the middle of cleaning the room up,” said Tennyson.

“Are you our new parents?” said Henry.

“No way!” said Clara. “We’re just staying here for a couple of days, so we’re helping Mr. Luigi tidy up.”

“Oh. Are you our new baby sitters?” said Henry.

“Are you gonna play hide and seek or not?” said Orville.

“Look, we really have to clean up the room, we don’t have time to play hide and seek today. Some other time, OK?” said Clara.

Orville grabbed the locomotive and tender. “Never mind, let’s play trains, Henry!” The two ghosts were soon huddled next to the toy chest just like live kids, grabbing pieces of track and train cars. Clara shrugged her shoulders and said “Well, maybe this will keep them busy while we clean up.” She put down the Poltergust and the two live kids went back to collecting toys.

When Clara turned back to the toy chest, though she thought only a few minutes had passed, the ghosts had assembled a truly impressive wooden trackway. There were several switches, bridges and tunnels, signals and watertowers, and a roundhouse in the center. The set spanned about half the room. Tennyson was reaching up to put some stuffed animals away in the toy chest when Orville said, “Ready?”

“Ready!” replied Henry. “Toot! toot!”

Without any apparent mechanism, the two wooden trains the ghost twins had assembled on the tracks started to move. Each made surprisingly loud sounds appropriate to the startup of a steam-driven locomotive: the whoosh of steam pulsing out of the cylinders and into the smokestack, the scream of the whistles, and the smacking of the couplings as the engine jerked the train into motion. It was pretty cool, if you liked trains. Within moments the two toy trains were moving at a jaunty pace along the tracks, trailing ghostly smoke that disappeared a few seconds after emission.

“Oh oh!” said Henry. “The signalman is fast asleep!” He knocked over a tiny blockhouse next to a switch, just as one of the speeding trains crossed it.

“Stop the train! stop the train!” said Orville, laughing.

“It’s too late!” said Henry. “Stop your train!”

“My train can’t stop, it’s the express! I’m coming through!”

“No you’re nooooootttt!” screamed Henry. Both ghosts were giggling gleefully; the two trains came round opposite corners of the outer track, heading full tilt at each other, tooting their whistles wrathfully but with little effect.

“There they go!!!” said Orville. SMASH!!! POW!!!! The two trains plowed into one another, in a violent collision that sent train cars and parts flying in all directions. It appeared the tender was really

full of coal, much of which landed on Clara's face as the tender burst asunder in the explosion. Tennyson's jaw had dropped, which was unfortunate as a tank car flew right into his mouth.

"Geioe br rr nlkn mrrsss," said Tennyson.

"Take the car out of your mouth," said Clara.

"Right," said Tennyson, having done so already. "What a mess. You look silly."

"You do too. Well, I guess they're just --- oh my gosh!" As the smoke dissipated, Clara realized that the train collision had scattered not just the track and trains, but many of the toys she and Tennyson had so carefully piled up near the chest. She reached for the vacuum cleaner. The two ghosts, who had been laughing themselves silly floating over the wrecked trains, looked blank for a moment and then pointed at each other and simultaneously said, "HE DID IT!"

Tennyson stepped forward, pushing the Poltergust to one side as he passed. "That's enough, kids. You're going to have to play at something else that won't mess the room up. If you can't behave, we'll have to talk to Professor E. Gadd and he'll put you in a portrait. You know how boring that would be."

"Awww, we were just having fun," said Orville.

"Besides, we didn't know it would make a bit mess like that," said Henry. "Usually it just makes the tracks go everywhere." Clara's wrist tightened on the handle, but Tennyson held her hand back and spoke again:

"I'm not saying you meant to make a bit mess but you did. We'll clean it up but only if you keep out of the way. We could play hide and seek later if you let us finish." Tennyson looked around. "Why don't you play with your airplanes?"

"Wow, airplanes! I'm first!" said Orville.

"I'm first," said Henry. "I'm the oldest."

"You are not! I'm the oldest. I go first."

"You were first yesterday! I'm first."

"Henry -- Orville -- it doesn't matter who goes first," said Tennyson. "The airplanes go in a circle anyway. If you stop arguing you can play together and have more fun."

"Okay, you're right, but I'll go first!" said Henry. He floated up onto the tiny toy airplane that formed one half of the mobile; his brother mounted the other and they started the propellers whirring. Soon they were whizzing around in tight circles screaming "Whee! Whoooo!"

Clara took Tennyson's hand. "You were really good with them. I was just going to vacuum them right up, I was so mad. You were like my Dad is when I do something stupid. He just tells me what I did wrong and he looks so disappointed, I wish he would just hit me or something but he never does."

"Thanks, Clara, but I don't know. I remember that the Twins are really mischievous, and not all that nice sometimes. Well, let's get back to work." He took one of the cleaning rags he had in his belt, wet it in the bucket, and began to dab the coal dust off Clara's face. "Gee, we're both a mess. We could use a bath and clean clothes tonight. I wonder if there's some clothes we could borrow so we can wash these up?"

"Thanks, I guess I'm OK for now," said Clara. The two knelt down and soon were busily at work collecting toys. Everything went smoothly for a while, enabling Clara and Tennyson to get through the tennis rackets, rubber balls, dolls, wooden trains, cars, rocket ships, coloring books, building blocks, boats, and dinosaurs (more or less in that order), when suddenly the Twins lost interest in the airplanes and crowded around Tennyson.

"Let's play hide and seek now! You promised!" said Henry.

"That's right, you promised, you promised!" chimed in Orville.

"I want to go first, though," said Henry.

"Go first at what? We're both going to hide!" said Orville.

"I want to hide first. You PROMISED!" replied Henry.

Tennyson sighed and finished tucking the blanket in the corner of the lower bunk. "Okay, I guess I did promise. I'll count to ten and then come looking for you." He turned to Clara. "I'll try to

keep them from messing anything else up.” Then he pressed his face against the bunk post and started counting. “One ... two ... three ...”

He could hear the Twins giggling in the background. “I wanted to hide there!” “No, I thought of it first.” “I’m the oldest, I get to go!” Tennyson raised his voice to try to warn the silly ghosts: “EIGHT -- NINE -- TEN! Ready or not, here I come!”

As he turned, he could see a toy box wiggle out of the corner of his eye, and a bookshelf shake. He intentionally ignored the clues and wandered randomly, wondering aloud where the clever Twins might be found, freeing Clara to finish up with the crayons, rope, string, and tea set. After what seemed like an appropriate amount of time he wandered over to the box and tapped on it. “I wonder if there’s a ghost in here?”

“There is not!” came a voice from inside. “You cheated! I’m not hiding in here anyway! You should have found Orville first!”

At this another voice came from behind the books: “You are too found and I’m not! My hiding place is better and he doesn’t --” There was a pause. “YOU BETTER NOT BE LISTENING! YOU CAN’T FIND ME NOW, THAT’S NOT FAIR!!”

“I win! I win!” said Henry popping out from under the box.

“You do not!” said Orville. A dart, presumably from a reservoir of lost toys behind the bookshelf, came flying out at Henry, passed through him, and stuck quivering to a wooden building block.

“Neville said not to throw things! I’m going to get you!” said Henry, grabbing the dart.

Tennyson tried to intervene: “Stop! stop! it didn’t hurt you anyway!” but it was too late: Henry flung the dart wildly in the general direction of Orville, completely missing the bookshelf but striking Clara smack on the behind as she was leaning over to pick up a pair of doll pants under the bed.

Fortunately the pin struck the seam of her jeans pocket, preventing it from doing serious damage, but the indignity was quite sufficient. “All right, this time that really is it,” she said quietly. She reached back, pulled the dart out and threw it at the target, where it stuck tip buried completely in the bullseye. Then without a word she grabbed the Poltergust, flinging it onto her shoulders in a single motion and flipping the switch. Tennyson made no effort to check her, though the steel in her eyes showed that it would have taken more than just an effort to change her mind. The Twins laughed and started to run drunkenly away, thinking it another game, but within two seconds ZWOOOP! Henry was sucked up. Orville screamed and tried to flee to the corner of the room, but Clara was much too quick for him: he was caught in the slipstream and, after a moment of unsuccessful struggle, disappeared into the maw of the Poltergust with a faint whimper.

“I don’t think I’d like you to be mad at me,” said Tennyson.

“I don’t think I’d like to be mad at you,” said Clara. Then she laughed. “That was cool. I like winning. Oh well, let’s finish up.”

It didn’t take long for the kids, now undisturbed, to get things more or less properly arranged. However, they were left with several toys (a model of Peach’s castle, a paint set, and a pair of toy goombas) that simply would not fit into the toy chest, despite its amazing trick of shrinking toys as they passed the plane of the top. Clara tried shoving them in with little success, and shaking the whole toy chest with no better result. Tennyson leaned over and looked into the collection of toys. “Hmmm... I think the problem is this -- looks like an airplane -- stuck down here in the corner on the top of this mushroom-- the wings are blocking the other toys. Now even then this paint set won’t fit, but if I make some more room we should be able to get everything else in.” He put the paint set aside and reached in between the toys, dragging the airplane out of the chest.

WRRRRRRRZHIEEP! The little hand-sized airplane grew amazingly: within a second it was as big as Tennyson (who dropped it on the floor at that point), and within two seconds it filled half the room. It had a single two-bladed propeller in the front and high wings secured by a pair of metal spars from the bottom of the fuselage, which was white with a blue stripe to the tail. “Cooool!” said Tennyson.

“Wow! I wonder what’s inside?” He leaned over to look in the window: there appeared to be a full instrument panel. “This is too cool. Do you think it can fly?”

“Oh, come on, Tennyson, there’s not enough room to fly this in here! And it’s too big to get it out of the house.”

“I just want to see what the cockpit is like.” He pulled on what looked like a handle and the door popped open. There were two seats, each with a control yoke. “Come on, Clara!” Tennyson said as he grabbed the spar and jumped into the front seat.

“No way,” said Clara. “Besides, it doesn’t work, it’s just a toy!”

Tennyson strapped the seat belt on and puzzled over the instrument panel. “Let’s see... airspeed -- altitude -- engines -- throttle. It’s just like my simulator.” He grabbed the yoke and pulled back; looking over his shoulder he could see the elevators rise. A twist confirmed that the ailerons were also fully functional. “OK... magnetos to ‘both’ ... mixture rich ... props to maximum... flaps twenty degrees.” Tennyson remembered the checklist but was accustomed to using his mouse and computer screen; reaching for real knobs and levers was disconcerting.

“What are you doing?” said Clara. “You’re not going to fly in this thing.”

“I was just going to see if starts.” Tennyson reached for the key and gave it a twist. Clara, who had been standing almost in front of the plane, jumped out of the way as the propellor spun into motion.

“Be careful!” she shouted.

“Sorry. I’m supposed to yell ‘clear!’ out the window. Of course, you don’t have to do that in the computer version,” replied Tennyson over the noise of the motor. He reached for the door handle; as the door slammed shut, he got a funny sliding feeling and noticed that the walls of the room were receding at an alarming rate and Clara was getting oversized.

Of course, from Clara’s point of view the airplane had shrunk to the size of an eagle: perhaps a meter in wingspan, with an appropriately miniaturized Tennyson inside. “Ohmigosh, are you OK?” she cried.

Tennyson opened the vent window and stuck his head out: “I’m fine!” he yelled. Then he realized that she couldn’t hear his tiny voice, so he smiled and waved to her. An experimental shove told him that the throttle really worked: the engine revved and the little plane started to roll along the floor. He pressed the right pedal (this particular part being a lot easier in the real cockpit than it was on the simulator, since feet don’t work very well on a computer keyboard) and sure enough the nose spun right. “This is too cool!” he said to himself, and with a sudden wild abandon shoved the throttle all the way in.

The airplane rapidly picked up speed; Tennyson watched the airspeed dial and pulled back on the yoke as the needle passed “50”. The nose popped up and into the air he went. Flaps up, and a quick and badly coordinated left turn, executed with a frighteningly steep bank as Tennyson tried to get the feel of the controls, got him around the toy chest. He pulled back the throttle and settled into a nice standard-rate left turn, spiraling around the room over the bookshelf and under the top bunk. Clara turned on her heel to keep track of him, uncertain about whether to be furious or concerned but getting dizzy with each orbit. After a few circles Tennyson felt confident enough to try some more ambitious maneuvers, executing a steep turn to the left and then climbing up towards the ceiling. A hard bank right put him in position for a bombing run towards the big globe on the nightstand. “Pilot to bombardier, pilot to bombardier -- she’s all yours!” he recited, and then “Gee, I wish Erin was here, he’s much better at this sort of stuff.” Tennyson noticed that just below the flap lever on the left side was a big red handle, prominently labeled ‘bomb release’. He laughed, shrugged his shoulders, and gave it a tug.

A tiny oblong finned package dropped from the bottom of the plane, expanding almost instantly to a nasty steel cylinder about two feet long as it separated from the model plane. The pointed nose hit the floor and went right through it as if it were paper, leaving a bomb-sized hole behind. There was a loud noise and then a scream from below.

“Ooops,” said Tennyson to himself, and decided he’d better land the plane. That was, of course, the hardest part on the simulator, often resulting in a simulated catastrophe. It suddenly hit home that this time he was inside the plane; a blown landing might be more than just embarrassing. While he tried to calmly lose airspeed and set up for a landing, crashing sounds and loud yells came from

downstairs. In the tumult Tennyson couldn't remember whether the flaps should go to 20 or 40 degrees, put them all the way down, forgot to fix the nose-up pitch that resulted, and stalled as his airspeed bled rapidly away. As Clara watched, horrified, the plane slid into a brief spiral before striking the floor wingtip first.

Fortunately, gravity was the same for the plane as anything else: it had simply fallen a couple of feet, and Tennyson was dizzy but unscathed. After a moment's recovery he unlatched his seat belt and, without thinking, opened the door. The airplane instantly expanded back to full size, still stuck off-kilter on one wheel; the propeller caught Clara's shirt as it grew, lifting her to dangle suspended head-height above the ground.

"Get me down!" said Clara. Meanwhile Tennyson saw Cane's face sticking up through the hole in the floor. "What was that for?! You coulda' killed me! Geez, Clara, what are you doing up there? You look silly. But you still coulda' killed me!"

"That was a ghost bomb!" said Clara. "It doesn't do hardly any harm, it just makes a loud noise."

"Umm -- I knew that. I knew that!" replied Cane.

"And stop staring up my blouse!" said Clara. "Get me down!" the last directed to Tennyson, who had scrambled out of the cockpit and was positioning himself so that Clara could stand on his shoulders.

"Why, what's under your blouse?" said Cane.

"Nothing! I mean -- none of your business!" said Clara.

Tennyson refrained from looking up and kept his mouth shut. He suspected it was fortunate Mr. Saturn wasn't around. He held Clara's ankles while she disentangled herself from the propeller, at which point she was able to leap down to the ground, unharmed but disheveled. "I guess maybe we should just put the toys away and not play with them," said Tennyson.

Meanwhile, one floor below in the Secret Room, Brian was looking around at the treasures both real and imitation scattered to the perimeter of the room by the blast of the ghost bomb. "Well, we were almost done," he sighed. All the treasure chests (there were six on the ground and two on the shelves) had been blown open; the contents they had spent the last hour carefully placing in the chests were now strewn everywhere again.

"Told ya we should've put them in our pockets," said Cane. "Now we'll have to put them back again. I'm tired. My nose hurts. I don't like ghost bombs." He had spent much more time trying to get Brian to let him keep some of the jewels they were picking up than actually putting anything away. "You remember Mr. Luigi said we could keep things like jewels or coins if they weren't put away. He said that. I remember."

"That's the sixth time you've reminded me. Where was this one?" Brian was looking at what appeared to be a shield or breastplate, made of a glistening silvery metal like stainless steel but curiously different in color, set with numerous gemstones that flashed and glinted. This was one of the nicer pieces, so he remembered putting it away, but the bomb blast had rather addled his reckoning so he couldn't remember which treasure chest it went in.

"Hey, look!" said Cane. "A whole bunch of coins! These weren't here before; they must have fallen off of the chandelier when the bomb went off. I'm going to keep these; they definitely were not put away." Cane picked up the coins and stuffed them in his pockets; there were perhaps two hundred, so soon his pockets were full. He tried dropping them into his underpants but found walking became very uncomfortable. He was reaching into his pants to get the extra coins out when Clara's face appeared in the hole.

"We're going on to-- what are you doing, Cane? I think you'd better take a bath tonight!"

Cane triumphantly pulled out two glistening gold coins. "There they are!" he said. He handed them up towards Clara: "Look, I found a bunch of coins!"

"Yuck!" gasped Clara. "Where did you get those -- never mind, I don't want to know. Get them away from me!" Her face disappeared from the hole.

Cane shrugged and looked around for something to put the coins in. Lying under a pile of necklaces was a sort of dark felt bag tied around the top with a pretty golden string. Cane grabbed it and shoved the rest of the coins in, tying the string around his belt to hold the bag in place while he went back to looking for more stuff.

By this time Brian had remembered Neville's list and was organizing things into piles again in preparation to allocating them to the proper chests: "Okay, golden eggs go here, silver eggs with jewels go here, necklaces and bracelets on the middle pile, jewel-encrusted weapons in the back; jewels are divided into clear diamonds, blue sapphires, green jewels and aquamarines; then there are gold bricks..."

Cane looked up and snorted. "You just did all that and things just got messed up anyway. Why don't you just shove them into the chests until they're full? That is, if you're still set on putting it all away. Tell ya what, I'll clean up the carpet, maybe I can get a ghost or two while I'm at it." Cane had certainly never touched a vacuum cleaner at home, except on pain of loss of two weeks of television privileges after he broke his sister's hand-blown glass sculpture of a stylized heart. ("I just wanted to know what a broken heart felt like. Turns out it's really sharp.") However, the Poltergust was not your ordinary Hoover; besides, he wanted to show that he could handle it after his awkward training session with Neville. With a shrug he had the heavy thing on his back and one arm through. He reached back to try to get the other strap, which of course ran away from his hand as he twisted to reach it; persisting in this direction he turned several spins, rather like a dog chasing its tail, before he finally lost his balance and bumped into the wall, which acted conveniently to hold the Poltergust in position so he could slide his arm into the strap.

"Okay, what did he say? Let's see, this one is on for the vacuum..." There was a loud roaring noise and a hissing as the powerful motor revved up. Cane slammed the plush pile adaptor down onto the carpet and found that the suction was so powerful he couldn't move the vacuum hose. After several futile attempts to simply shove the vacuum head along the carpet, he tried levering the face of the adaptor off the carpet by taking a step forward. This action succeeded in popping the adaptor up, but unfortunately placed his shoe within suction range as he did so: ZOOOP! He tried to free himself, but with one foot stuck in the slot he was even more awkward than usual, and fell forwards onto the carpet. "Turn it off! turn it off!"

Brian looked over from where he had been carefully placing a golden egg into the bottom corner of chest number two. "You've got the controls, you turn it off."

"Oh, yeah, right." After a struggle to get around the steel tube supporting the adaptor, which was difficult to manipulate given that his foot was stuck at the end of it, he managed to reach around to his waist and press the switch. A momentary flash of terror struck as he did so: he suddenly remembered that there was flame thrower function in the Poltergust. However, by good fortune more than good planning, he hit the correct switch and was able to free his foot.

Cane stopped and reflected. "That didn't work very well." He took the Poltergust off and set it on the floor. A brief inspection disclosed that there were several controls in addition to those Neville had covered; in particular, there was a dial with numbering from 0 to 10 marked 'VACUOUSNESS'. Cane twisted it from '9' down to '2' and turned the switch on again; a merely irritating whining noise resulted, and a test showed that shoes and other body parts could now be inserted into and easily removed from the cleaning slot.

Inspired by success, he continued his perusal of the controls. He discovered a flip-up panel concealing an additional set of buttons under the label 'DEEP CLEAN': they were labeled soap, rinse, steam and dry. Struck by an impulse, he pushed the adaptor against the top of his head (an awkward process given the long steel tube attached to the other end, and a poor fit anyway), and pressed the soap button. A stream of sudsy water was expelled, spilling into his eyes and dripping back down onto his shirt. A bit of wiggling distributed the suds more or less evenly across his now-bulbous white head. A second poke turned the rinse function on, spraying a water mist which Cane found quite pleasant to direct at his nose. He decided to skip the steam function and go directly to dry; warm air blasted out of the outer rim of the adaptor and was sucked back through the middle. Several swipes later his hair consisted

of irregular stripes of soapy suds between regions of wild protruding strands. "This is great! Wow! I wish I could wash my hair like that at home."

Brian carefully laid a necklace of alternating yellow gems and aquamarine plates around a silver egg. "Well, now that your head is clean maybe you can push it along the floor. I thought you were going to clean the carpet?"

"I'm getting there. Lemme see what else is on this thing..."

- - -
SPOOT -- TACK! RUMBLE RUMBLE POOF. The 8-ball fell into the side pocket and the cue ball rolled up against the 12. Inky reached back for the chalk. The chalk was shaped like a sphere with a crescent slice taken out -- a PacMan. Inky shoved his cue stick into the recess in the chalk and ground it much harder than was necessary. The ghost floated to the other side of the table, leaned over, and carefully aligned his stick over the 12: a difficult long shot. "Five in the corner pocket," he rasped, then: SPOOT -- TACK! POOM TICK. The 5 ball glanced off the felt edge and bounced off, missing the pocket and stopping against the 2 ball. "Damn! Stinking crappy stick. Your shot."

The other ghost picked up his cue and leaned over the table to size up his shot. His name was Slim Bankshot. He wasn't one of the ghosts Luigi meant to have around, but he was too clever to be easily vacuumed up. Slim didn't like Inky much, but Inky liked to play pool and was a lot less skilled than he believed himself to be. Slim did like to win.

"Three-ball in the corner," said Slim. SPOOT -- TACK TACK -- RUMBLE. The 3 dropped quietly in; the cue ball drifted to a stop opposite the 11, setting up an easy side pocket shot.

Inky impatiently pulled a hammer and a small box with a hinged lid and a crank out of the cabinet. A just-visible label in gold letters under the crank declared Pac in the Box. He turned the crank and tinny music came out -- Around and round the dynamite pile the Inky chased the PacMan the PacMan thought that he had it won when POP! goes the PacMan. At the appropriate moment the lid popped open and out jumped a small white sphere with a crescent mouth, on the end of a spring. Inky flailed wildly with the hammer, smashing the sphere into a crumbling mess, this all just as Slim attempted his next shot. SPOOT -- TACK -- TACK; the 11 rolled off the pocket edge. "Do you mind?" complained Slim mildly. Inky ignored him and knocked the PacMan dust off onto the already large pile on the floor.

"You can't play pool ain't no problem of mine. Shaddap. Where's dat old guy when you need him?"

Whatsis name, oh yeah Shivers. I wanna drink." Inky chalked his cue again.

"You're a ghost, you can't drink," said Slim.

"Shaddap, who dya think you are anyway? We usedta have parties right down in Cleopactra's tomb -- I tell ya I'd get so pounded I died again! All da booze ya can drink. All da PacMen you can smash. We used ta have contests to see who could chomp a hundred PacMen first. And then they brought out dem Ms. PacMen and we--"

"I don't think I want to know," said Slim. "Are you going to shoot pool or just shoot your mouth off?"

"Yeah, wadda you know? Bank, five in the corner pocket." Inky turned on the radio with the back end of his cue stick.

*There are PacMen I'll dismember
smash, desintegrate,
and burn to dust*

*From their stupid grinning faces
to their balding heads
concealed in rust*

*All these PacMen had their moments
before they met me
and met their end*

*Some are dead and some are waiting
for my deadly blades
to tear and rend...*

The cue stick glanced off the edge of the ball, causing it to spin sideways wide of the five and stop up against the curiously metallic 8 ball. Inky whacked the stick against the side of the pool table, cracking it and nicking the edge of the table. Slim watched impassively. "You want an excuse, you gotta break the cue stick before the shot. For a bad pool player, you're a real jerk. Or maybe you're just a jerk. Get out of the way, it's my shot."

Brian and Cane were walking down the hallway towards the pool room. Cane had the Poltergust strapped to his back and was fiddling with the controls, trying to vacuum up ghosts in the portraits on the walls. Brian was trying to review the task list for the pool room while straightening up after Cane. "Let's see ... this sounds like a real mess." He started reading down the list. "On floor: open suitcase, partly eaten golden cherry, Inky's diary (torn), rotting partially eaten golden apple, broken stopwatch, Ghosts Rule poster (torn), broken PacMan ash tray, used TNT box, 'Mesmeralda -- The Unauthorized Autobiography', and 'Fear and Loathing of PacManity'. Cleaning tools needed: bucket, brush, towels, First Aid kit, wall repair kit, urgent care services, escape vehicle. Hmmm. This sounds difficult. I wonder what's been going on in there?"

"Aw, c'mon," said Cane, still fiddling with the controls. "I'll just wash everything into the corner here with the water blast setting and we can flush it all down the toilet or something like that, you don't really want to pick up all that stuff, do you?" After considerable thought he pressed the red button and twisted the bumpy knob simultaneously, and was rewarded with a powerful stream of water exiting from the carpet cleaning attachment, which within seconds soaked the windowpanes, three portraits, and a newspaper perched on an elegant velvet-covered chair.

"Watch it!" said Brian. Cane turned to face Brian, carrying the water-spewing vacuum adaptor with him. Brian ducked to avoid a premature shower and, giving up on persuasion, reached out to turn the water off himself.

"Oh. Sorry," said Cane. "Here, lemme check this place out while you clean up the wet stuff in the hall." He barged into the pool room door. A high screaming sound greeted him. He saw a large ghost pulling on a long lever, at the opposite end of which a plunger crushed a smiling white ball into a billiard-sized sphere. It was Inky taking out his frustrations on a captured PacMan with the PacMan Punch.

"Whadda you want?" said Inky. He picked up his hammer and took a whack at the little ball that remained of the PacMan, knocking a chip off the side.

"We're, uh, here to clean up the place!" said Cane cheerily. "Don't mind us, we'll just -- uh -- put things away -- sorta -- wow, this place is a mess, isn't it?"

"Away where?" asked Inky, throwing what remained of the PacMan at Cane and narrowly missing his head. The chipped plug bounced off the wall and came to rest in a pile of half-burnt PacMan candles. "Get outta here, we're trying to play pool. No kids allowed. I hate kids."

Cane wasn't quite sure how to respond. Brian entered and started checking junk on the floor off against his list. "Wow, that Neville sure is thorough," he said to himself.

"Yep, Neville comes in every morning and maps all the junk," said Slim, chalking his stick. "Don't do much about it, though."

"Well, that's why we're here," said Brian. "We won't bother you, but we're going to put all this stuff away where it belongs. That's what Mr. Luigi told us to do."

"Shut up and shoot, Slim," said Inky. "That's enough, get outta here before I crunch you like Pacpoop."

Brian tried again. "I guess I wasn't clear. We're just here to clean up, we won't disturb you. If we don't get our job done we won't get any coins and we can't get home."

"What, you givin' me a sob story as if I should care? I clean up your head after I squash it." Inky was not impressed.

Brian frowned. Then he turned to Cane: "Well, he's probably just in a bad mood. Let's get to work -- quietly -- and they'll probably forget about us." Brian picked up his bucket and cleaning rags and started to walk towards the biggest dust pile.

Inky picked up a billiard ball and tossed it at Brian, hitting him in the small of the back. "Are you stupid or deaf or both? I told you to get out, you ignoramus."

"I am not ignorant! I know about you and Mesmerelda and Blinky and -- well, I know a lot more about you than you do about me!"

"Ask me if I care." Inky tossed the billiard rack at Brian's head; Brian ducked. "All right, you're not ignorant, you're just stupid, too stupid to bother us while we're trying to play pool."

Brian turned to Cane. "Well? Vacuum him up. Go ahead. That's what the Poltergust is for."

Cane looked dubious but pressed the vacuum switch (and got it right this time). The motor roared to life. Slim made himself scarce up by the chandelier, but Inky paid no attention to the device. "Whaddya doin? get back down here and take your shot, you jerk."

Cane switched from the carpet cleaning attachment to the ghost buster brush (carelessly throwing the carpet cleaner on the floor, from whence Brian picked it up and stowed it temporarily in his pocket). He somewhat reluctantly approached Inky, who swung the pool cue at him. Cane ducked under it and thrust the vacuum hose forward -- but nothing much happened. Brian took a flashlight out of his pocket and tried to frighten Inky, with no more effect. Brian threw the flashlight at Inky in frustration, but it passed harmlessly through the ghost. Inky floated to the back of the room, mumbling to himself. He pulled a bunch of assorted tiles, cue sticks, books, posters, and other junk and tossed it behind him, exposing a bizarre apparatus about two meters high that looked like a huge head with a steel skirt and a steel-enclosed mouth. He opened a window and slithered inside. The steel pieces -- blades -- started to whirl and spin as the dome-like object lifted into the air. The blades sliced through the edge of the pool table as if it were cheese.

"It's the Blade-o-matic!" said Brian, as the machine headed their way. "Let's get out of here!"

"Wait a minute, I can deal with this," said Cane. He reached back and flipped the vacuum off, and twisted another switch, meaning to turn on the flame thrower. However, in his haste he hit the water spray instead. The stream of water scattered off the whirring blades, sending water everywhere and making the Blade-o-Matic even more frightening if possible. Cane turned to run and slipped on the wet floor; fortunately, the thrust of the water stream propelled him out the door. Brian slammed it shut and they ran down the hall as the blades zipped right through the door and sliced two feet into the neighboring wall before retreating back into the pool room.

"Wow, that guy really doesn't like being neat," said Cane. "I guess we'll do some other room, eh?"

"We're gonna do this room," said Brian. He stared at Cane with an intensity usually reserved for standardized testing week. "Didn't you see it?"

"See what? See him almost slice my head off?"

"The steel ball. The steel ball! It was right there on the table."

"So what. What are you going to do, throw billiard balls at that danged machine? A lot of good that will do."

"It's a steel ball. If one of us gets it he'll be invincible -- for thirty seconds, anyway. He can trash the Blade-o-matic for sure."

"Does that get rid of Inky?"

"No. No, but I know how to do that, too. I need to talk to Neville. And Mr. Saturn."

"Mr. Saturn? What good is he?"

"Don't worry about it. You just stick here for a minute while I arrange some stuff. You're gonna need to distract him so I can sneak in and get the steel ball."

"Distract him? How'm I gonna' do that when I ain't getting within thirty yards of him?! I'm not going in there again, no way, you're crazy!"

"What's the matter, Cane? You aren't going to let a ghost frighten you, are you? I'm the one that's afraid of them. Right?"

"Yeah, right. I thought you were afraid of ghosts."

"You know, I was. I was scared. But now I'm mad at him. I am not ignorant. He's ignorant. I'm going to get him and you're going to help."

"No way. I am not going back in that room."

Brian paused for a moment, with a devious look Cane had never seen before, at least on him. "What was it you liked so much about Alice Finsbacher?"

Cane smiled and replied "She has such nice eyes, she --" Then he went white. "How did you know about that? You aren't going to tell anybody, are you? You aren't going to tell Clara?"

Brian smiled. "It's good to know how to read. But let's just worry about getting rid of Inky, shall we? You get the Poltergust cleaned up and I'll be back in a few minutes."

"You need to distract him for about thirty seconds, that's all. As soon as I get the steel ball you can run out of the room if that's the way you feel about it." Brian and Mr. Saturn stood by the passage that led to the Projection Room, which was behind the Pool Room. Mr. Saturn was balancing a book on his head. Neville was floating nervously back and forth in the background, often half-concealed inside a wall in his anxiety.

"I'm supposed to go back in there and get sliced into pieces so you can read?" said Cane.

"You'd do it for Alice, wouldn't you?" said Brian.

"I'll get you for this, Brian Chang. Just wait 'till I find out your secrets. You'll regret this."

"I'm sure I will, but not as much as you will if you don't get in there and occupy Inky. You need to wait--" Brian looked at the passageway and thought for a moment: "two minutes after I leave, then go in. Okay, Mr. Saturn, let's go."

"Do be careful, Master Brian!" said Neville. "Inky is quite unscrupulous, you know. As well as dressing so tastelessly! You can never trust a ghost without a cravat."

"Thanks, Neville. With your help we'll get him out of here. Go ahead and talk to Mr. Luggs, okay?"

"Yes, quite so." Neville drifted off into the wall, then popped his head out momentarily to say, "Good luck, Master Cane!" and disappeared again.

"Okay, let's roll," said Brian. They ducked down the corridor.

Cane started counting; when he reached 120, he drew a deep breath and strode towards the door. Then he stopped and mumbled to himself: "I could get killed. This is crazy. What do I care if Clara finds out that I like Alice. Who cares if she knows? Who cares if she tells people? Who cares if Tennyson knows? Who cares if -- ohmigosh, what if she tells Alice?" He gulped and charged through the door into the room.

There being not much left of the pool table, Slim had deserted Inky, who was now passing the time blowing up little stuffed PacMan dolls by shoving firecrackers into them. PSSSSSSSTTT --- POW! He chuckled. "Go ahead, grab that TNT. See what good it'll do you, you spherical scum." He lit another fuse.

The door banged open. "Alright," said Cane with more bluster than was strictly necessary. "You puddle of excess ectoplasm. I'm here to take you down." He waved the vacuum hose wildly, forgetting that he had the deep pile attachment with the rotating brushes on. The brushes got caught in the strips that remained of the felt from the top of the pool table, dragging the vacuum hose down onto the broken table where it sat, stuck, with motor whining. Cane tugged in a futile effort to free the vacuum. "You're-- uh -- in trouble as soon as -- uh -- I get this thing free!" He pulled harder.

Inky broke into raucous laughter. "Slim, come back, you've got to see this! It's a rampaging idiot! This is funnier than a flattened PacMan Pancake." Just then the firecracker inside the PacMan doll went off: POW!!

"Geez, what was that?" said Cane; the start given him by the sound finally pulled him free of the felt, so that he ended up flat on his back. Since the vacuum cleaner was strapped thereto, he had some difficulty getting up: he looked like an insect that had been flipped over hopelessly waving its legs around. Had Inky been human he would have been having trouble breathing from laughing so hard; as it was, slicing Cane into pieces was the farthest thing from his mind.

"Hey, shut up!" said Cane. "Stop laughing at me. It's not funny!" This admonition had the opposite of the intended effect, of course. Cane managed to twist onto his side and get up. Brian had just

quietly entered the room through the back door, reminding Cane of his assigned task. "You stupid ghost, if I didn't get to leave after thirty seconds you'd be in trouble!"

Brian realized he'd better not waste any time. He glided catlike over to the remains of the table and began to rummage around in the pile: three-ball, seven, cue ball -- but no steel ball. Where was it? He lifted a piece of the table leg to see what was in the other side of the ball tray, but in the process a billiard ball slid off the leg, making a tiny CLICK as it struck the cue ball.

Inky spun around. "What the he--" he started to say.

Brian jumped in: "You can't use words like that! This is an E-rated game! Kids could be playing!"

Inky was mean but he wasn't that bright; he had to think this remark through to decide if it was an insult or not. Meanwhile Brian frantically searched the room -- there it was! A tiny metallic glint underneath the ruined bookshelf betrayed the steel ball. It was three steps across the room -- no way he could make it if Inky was alert to his intention. Cane!!!

Cane didn't read his thought but managed to help anyway: "Twenty-nine -- thirty! That's it, thirty seconds is up, you're hosed and I'm outta here!" He turned to head out the door. This at least was something Inky could understand. He grabbed his broken pool cue and hurled it at Cane's head, fortunately missing and striking the vacuum instead, making a loud noise and causing Cane to lose his footing. Cane slid on his stomach into the remains of the coffee table, causing a precariously-balanced pile of smashed Pac-in-the-boxes to fall on his head. While Inky relished Cane's discomfiture, Brian zipped over to the bookshelf and grabbed the steel ball. "Okay, get out! I've got it!"

Inky spun back around but by that time it was too late: Brian was a kid-sized hunk of fluidized stainless steel. Cane was too curious to see what would happen to remember he was scared. Inky swirled himself into the Blade-o-Matic and spun up while Brian awkwardly explored movement in his new metal body. Fortunately for Brian, Inky was foolish enough to attack him. Cane's jaw dropped as the whirring steel blades plowed into Brian's gut -- and then he was frantically ducking under the coffee table pieces to avoid the flying fragments of steel as the knife edges shattered on Brian's metallic surface. Brian grabbed the base of the Blade-o-Matic with both hands and squeezed. The stylized face was slowly distorted into a huge O of surprise, and then the metallic shell gave way and the infernal machine popped at the seams and shattered, glass eyeballs flying across the room. Inky extruded his ghostly self out of the broken cockpit and moaned: "What a crock! You scum! You ruined my beautiful machine!" He seemed to have acquired the merest tinge of aquamarine.

The timing of this denouement was indeed fortunate, for just as the fuselage gave way, Brian shimmered, made a popping sound, and turned back into a kid. He jumped backwards, suffering a couple of nasty cuts on the sharp edges as the crumpled ghostcraft fell to the floor. Then to Cane's complete befuddlement, he got up and walked towards Inky.

"Hey, ghost! Sorry about your blade thing, but you know what? Mr. Saturn ran across a story that you might like. Come on, it'll -- um -- cheer you up. Right over here; you can just go through the wall, I bet, ghosts are good at that." Even Cane had the feeling this was not an entirely sincere offer, but Inky was somewhat disconcerted by his unforeseen defeat and allowed himself to be led to the neighboring room.

Cane's curiosity was piqued; he snuck over to the door and peered in. The room held a large flat-screen display, darkened. Mr. Saturn stood -- sat? -- in a corner with a book before him. Inky drifted through the wall. Mr. Saturn smiled and started to read:

"Chapter one: Marley's Ghost."

Inky, who had begun to take on a tinge of mauve, suddenly turned pinkish-white again. "A story about ghosts! I love stories about ghosts. I wonder if he kicks any PacMan butt. Not that PacMen have one. A butt, that is. Maybe they are a butt. Maybe--" Mr. Saturn cleared his throat loudly. Inky stopped and then said "Sorry. Go ahead. Don't mind me."

Mr. Saturn continued: "Marley was dead. There is no doubt whatever about that."

"All right!" interrupted Inky again. "I love it already. Dead! Dead! Dead as a doornail!"

"Yes, I was getting to that," said Mr. Saturn. He continued reading. "The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it. And Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail."

"See! I told ya' so! I knew it!" Mr. Saturn glared at Inky. "Sorry. Go on. Keep reading."

Mr. Saturn turned back to the book. "Mind! I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail."

"Oooh, I love stories about dead stuff. Sorry. I'm shutting up. Go on."

Mr. Saturn returned to reading. Inky grew impatient as the story turned to things that held no interest for him: generosity, Christmas, nephews, fog -- well, fog was cool. He was just about to ask what the heck was going on when things heated up again: "It was not angry or ferocious, but looked at Scrooge as Marley used to look: with ghostly spectacles turned up upon its ghostly forehead."

"Oooh, a ghost with glasses. What a jerk! How can you be dead and you still can't see I don't know."

Mr. Saturn ignored him and continued. Soon he was deep into the ghostly parts: "The bells ceased as they had begun, together. They were succeeded by a clanking noise, deep down below; as if some person were dragging a heavy chain over the casks in the wine-merchant's cellar. Scrooge then remembered to have heard that ghosts in haunted houses were described as dragging chains."

In the corner, Brian and Neville watched intently. "Not too good so far," whispered Brian. "The only blue I see is the book cover."

"Be patient, Master Brian! The story has only begun. Any ghost would be enjoying himself at this point. Be steadfast!"

The story grew darker: "I know him! Marley's Ghost!", recited Mr. Saturn, with a wonderful dramatic twist. Inky was hooked. His eyes were blank with anticipation as he waited to see how the spirit would trash this disgusting human. He floated back and forth across the room impatiently as Mr. Saturn's words wove the tale of the Ghosts of Christmas Past and Present. Inky was silent save for occasional bursts of enthusiasm: "That's the spirit, Spirit! Make him squirm! Make him suffer!"

"This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased." Mr. Saturn paused for a breath.

"Is that it?", said Inky. "I want to know more about Ignorance."

"I thought you had that covered," replied Mr. Saturn. Brian drew his finger silently across his throat; Mr. Saturn said, "Sorry, back to the story. Let's see... 'The Last of the Spirits.'" Fortunately Inky was still enthralled by the power and mystery of the ghosts. He glowed faintly pink in the dark room as the climax of the chapter came and went. Then suddenly the Spirits were gone: "I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a school-boy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to every-body! A happy New Year to all the world! Hallo here! Whoop! Hallo!"

Inky looked puzzled and distraught. "Where's the ghost? I thought this guy was toast! That third spirit was the most. I thought I was bad but next to him I couldn't even boast. That human should be a roast!"

Mr. Saturn determinedly ignored him. Inky grew more distressed as Scrooge's ghost-free happiness grew more emphatic. Brian whispered to Neville: "He is distinctly blue. Now?"

"Oh, come, Master Brian, I should hardly call that more than a faint mauve. Be patient!"

Mr. Saturn ended with a flourish: "He had no further intercourse with Spirits, but lived upon the Total Abstinence Principle, ever afterwards; and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!"

Inky was beside himself with grief. "Where did the ghosts go? What the heck is Abstinence anyway, some horrible anti-ghost weapon? This is terrible." If ghosts could cry he would have wet the room. He glowed the deep blue of the open ocean tossed by a distant storm.

Neville turned to Brian and said, "Now!"

Brian slithered from the room, returning barely a moment later with a huge lumbering ghost four times his size. Under a head of lacquer-flat hair and rapacious mouth was a round napkin tied to his neck. Brian pointed at Inky. Mr. Luggs smiled and zipped rather than floated to his prey. In the blink of an eye Inky's tail and midsection were stuffed into Mr. Luggs' capacious maw. Suddenly Inky screamed incoherently, but it was too late. SCRUMPPH -- SLURRRRP -- GULP.

Mr. Luggs wiped his mouth with his napkin. "Mmmmm. Tastes like chicken."
BURRRRRRRPPPP!! "Scuse me."

Brian took his fingers out of his ears carefully, making sure Mr. Luggs was done belching. Then he sighed heartily and walked up to the corpulent ghost. "Thanks, Mr. Luggs! You were great. Couldn't have done it without you."

"Oh, any time, Baron! I love someone who knows how to provide dinner. Or was this supper? Or maybe early tea? Well, no matter. Call me again if you need something eaten." Mr. Luggs looked inquiringly at Neville. "Hey, Ryan. What about him?"

"Naaw, he isn't even a bit blue," said Brian. "You can go back to your snack table. Thanks again!"

Mr. Luggs floated away over Cane's head. Cane seemed to awaken from a dream. "Hey, that was a cool story. But what happened to Inky?"

"Haven't you ever played PacMan?" said Brian. "What do you have to do to eat a ghost?"

"Uhh -- turn it blue?"

"Of course. We had to turn Inky blue. Mr. Saturn was the one who figured out how."

"But what was he upset about? It's a happy ending. Scrooge changed. That's what the ghosts wanted."

"Gee, Cane. I don't usually think of you this way but -- well -- you're smarter than Inky, I guess. He couldn't figure that out. I guess Neville knew him well enough -- he was sure the scheme would work. I was worried." Brian reached behind him and turned the lights up in the projection room. Cane suddenly noticed what was inside the room.

"Hey! A TV! Wow! Great!"

"Cane, I don't think it's a television set -- just a disk player. You can watch movies, I guess, if it's OK with Mr. Luigi."

"Movies are great. What do they have?" There were several racks of packaged video disks next to the display. Cane discovered that most of them were part of what looked like an instructional series: each one bore a logo at the top left that looked like a big suction cup on a stick, with the text The Plumber's Helper in bright red letters. He read a few of the titles: "A Pain in the Drain...That Sinking Feeling...Toilet Bowling...A Cluttered Gutter Flutters...Shower Power, Bath Wrath...Skewer that Sewer... Gee, I don't know. Isn't there anything that's not about plumbing?"

Brian ignored him and returned to the seriously disheveled pool room, stepping over pieces of the Blade-o-Matic and furniture remnants. Neville was floating in the middle of the room, chatting gaily with two ghosts Brian didn't recognize. Slim had reappeared and was sorting through the mess to see if any of the billiard gear had survived intact. He waved to Brian and seemed unconcerned over the destruction of the pool table.

As Brian watched, another ghost floated in, looking cheerful as she greeted Neville. They saw Brian and immediately drifted towards him.

"Oh, Neville's told us how clever you were!" said the female ghost. She was dressed in a flowing blue-streaked pink gown, so low-cut in the front that Brian felt uncomfortable staring at her. "Inky destroyed, and so easily!" she gushed. "What a clever boy! Thank you, thank you, thank you!" She tried to wrap her arms around him and kiss him on the cheek, but of course her lips passed through his skin, with only a slightly chilly sensation.

Brian shivered and tried to dissuade her from further intimacy. "Uh, thank you, Miss-- uh--"

"Lydia, call me Lydia, darling."

"Thank you, Lydia, but we've really got to get back to cleaning up. We only dealt with Inky because he was in the way."

"Oh, he certainly was!" said Neville, sliding between Lydia and Brian and winking slyly at him. "Now -- let me see -- oh, here we are. Here is the updated cleanup list; as you'll see, I've enumerated every fragment of furniture, each regrettably tasteless item of anti-PacMan memorabilia, and all the carpet remnants as well." He handed what looked like a fairly small slip of paper to Brian, who found that it was actually a very large sheet tightly rolled.

Brian's shoulders sagged as he began to read the new, improved cleanup list for the Pool room. Neville had indeed captured every misplaced fragment and clump of dirt: it was a very long list. "Neville -- do you think any of you ghosts could, uh, give us a hand with this?"

Just then the hallway door swung open. Erin poked his head in and looked around at the still-smoking motor fragments under tents of broken billiard cues. He smiled at Brian and Cane and made a thumbs-up gesture. "Lookin' good! Spectacular! Yeah! Love to help but, you know, we've got our own list. Keep it up, guys!" He ducked back into the corridor, leaving the door swinging back and forth for a moment.

Erin and Nicholas were making their way to the Astral Hall / Observatory, the next room on their list. They had finished the courtyard -- well, to be honest, Nicholas had finished raking up the leaves and trimming the bushes while Erin fancied himself an updated version of Gregor Mendel: "If I cross this juniper bush with that telephone pole, and then breed the double recessive progeny together for three generations, I should obtain -- an electrified giant carnivorous Venusian ManTrap with built-in cable TV! All for the benefit of human kind, of course."

So far Nicholas was doing pretty well about not resorting to violence, although he had considered trimming several of Erin's body parts by accident while pruning the rose bush. He was reviewing the cleaning tools required for the observatory when they came to the third door on the right, which should lead to the Astral Hall. Through a crack in the door the kids could see a strangely colored, ever-changing glow. An intermittent rumbling noise terminated in some sort of muffled curse or shout; faint music could be heard in the background. It was sort of eerie and a bit frightening.

"Geeze, Erin -- what do you think that is?" said Nicholas, coming to a halt before the door.

"It must be -- the Evil Emperor Zurg! His deadly Mind-Consuming Multilight Beam will surely turn us all into Undead Zombies subject to his infernal will! Or make us enjoy broccoli and cauliflower. Or something like that. I'll go first!" Erin took two steps back and then ran full tilt through the door, knocking Nicholas aside on the way. Nicholas fell backwards onto the cleaning bucket, completely missing whatever was revealed as the door swung back closed. There was a crash, a loud BOOM!, and a sudden cry that sounded somewhat like Erin's voice.

Nicholas' first thought was that Erin was messing around as usual -- but then he considered the possibility that Erin was really in trouble. He didn't really want to go through the door, but what would the others say if Erin was hurt and Nicholas walked away? He set his jaw, held the scrub brush in front of him like a sword, and charged through the door.

It took a moment for his eyes to adapt to the dim, multicolored lighting. Erin was sitting opposite the door, rubbing his ears, and pulling a bowling pin out from underneath his butt. Several other pins were strewn around. They were at the end of a long corridor, with three glowing discotheque mirrored balls mounted at intervals on the ceiling rotating to reflect colored lights throughout the room. At the other end they could see some figures, and large round objects on a rack. Music was coming from somewhere at the other end of the hallway. Images of planets and spaceships slid across the walls and ceiling. A large rack descended from above them, sweeping the pins away and narrowly missing Erin.

"Oh," said Nicholas. "Cosmic bowling."

"Merely a cover for Zurg's evil ambitions!" said Erin.

"Zut alors! It is ze children! Are you blessé, injured, mes amis?" It was Bonapa T. He was coming down the corridor-cum-alley, looking concerned.

"No, we're fine, or at least I am," said Nicholas. "You never can tell with Erin. I didn't know Mr. Luigi had a bowling alley inside his mansion!"

"But of course, it is ze fashion here! Ze dinner she is in ze oven, the afternoon it is time for ze nap, and a bit of ze recreation. You must join us, it is wonderful. On fait, excuse me, one uses ze bowling bombs, they explode so nicely, it is very difficult not to make a strike!"

"Gee, doesn't that take some of the challenge out of the game?" asked Nicholas, as he and Erin followed Bonapa T. down the hall towards the rack of balls.

"Pourquoi? You do not like ze strike? Ca ne fait rien, you must have something to eat, it is ze how you say ze tea-time, here is ze table of hors d'oeuvres." He indicated a table set off into a short side-hall, covered with a cornucopia of snacks: pretzel-like things with cheeses and spices, small sausages garnished with shrooms, red and yellow frosted cakes, something that looked like thick potato chips and smelled of garlic.

Nicholas reached out to grab a pretzel. Erin stopped suddenly and knocked the pretzel out of his hand. "Don't go near it! That food is undoubtedly one of Zurg's nefarious schemes!" He sniffed a sugar-dusted crepe suspiciously. "Yep. Drugged to the gills," he said as he stuffed the tasty morsel in his mouth. "No question (gulp) about it." A sausage and a plate of shrooms followed the crepe. "Eat this (munch) and you'll become a mindless (mmm) slave in the (gulp) crevonium factories. Wow, that's good. Could you pass the salt? Who needs a mind anyway?"

"Yeah, I guess yours is always wandering off," said Nicholas.

"Bon, my friend, you gonna' finish your frame? Ellie's waitin', I'm in trouble as it is." Nicholas turned to see a tall, remarkably ordinary-looking older man, wearing a green cap and a red scarf around his neck over soiled coveralls. He was holding a bowling ball (bomb?) in one hand and a glass of wine in the other.

"Oh, excusez-moi, I did not introduce you to my good friend Jacques, he is a wonderful cook with ze vegetables, oh la la! quelle bouillabaisse!"

"Ahh g'wan -- just ordinary Jack is good enough," said Jack, but he looked pleased.

"Mais you are correct, we must finish ze game. Oh, mes amis, you must enjoy! Have a glass of wine, it is La Montagne de la Lune, ze Moon Mountain 1985, a wonderful year, magnifique! Il faut que -- eh, I must roll, I have Jacques to defeat!" Nicholas politely accepted a lovely glass filled with an unpleasant-smelling dark purple liquid and discreetly dumped it into the trash as Bonapa T. turned to set up his shot.

"Pleased to meet you," said Nicholas, meaning Jack. "And thanks again, Bonapa T. I guess we'll see you at dinner. Good luck with your game!"

"I am a servant of Zurg," said Erin in a mechanical voice, as he walked away from the food table leaving a trail of crumbs and wrappings. "I live only to obey." He bumped into the corridor wall, knocking a portrait of Bogmeer the ghost askew. The ghost complained but Nicholas couldn't hear him and Erin didn't care.

Nicholas grabbed Erin by the back of his shirt and said, "Great, I am the Voice of Zurg -- go that way!" directing him through the door that should lead to the Astral Hall. Nicholas just managed to sneak in and close the door behind him to muffle the RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE -- BOOOOM!! of Bonapa T.'s next roll.

Both boys stopped in a sort of awe: it was a very striking room. The floor, walls, and ceiling were covered with a checkerboard pattern. In the center of the room a gorgeous ornate chandelier, covered in what looked like feathers made of fine glass, hung over a brilliant yellow five-pointed star embedded in the floor, each point terminated in a candelabra as high as Nicholas was tall, each candelabra holding three candles thick as his arm. Against the wall were two elaborate dressers, decorated with the five-pointed-star motif in gold leaf. There were two doors, the one they had come in through and another identical door at the opposite end of the room.

Nicholas took out his list and began to review the tasks assigned for the room: "Hmmm... dust chandelier... dust armoires... trim candle wicks, remove excess wax, replace used-up candles-- where do I find more?"

Meanwhile, Erin strode across the room and through the exit door. Or so it seemed, for a moment later he reappeared in the entrance and repeated the exercise. Nicholas, absorbed in evaluating

the necessary tasks and tools and having little hope of useful assistance from Erin, paid little attention at first. However, after several minutes of constant unidirectional passages, Nicholas became conscious of the curious nature of the activity. "How are you doing that?" he wondered aloud, as there seemed to be no delay between Erin exiting the room through one door and re-entering through the other.

Erin seemed not to hear the inquiry, as he was intent on narrating his new adventure: "I immediately realized that we had been deceived: instead of a quiet stroll to the treasure room, we were trapped in the famous E. Quilibrium World of Folded Space! The only way to escape would be to pass through every one of the (slam! creak! slam!) six thousand magical mirrors, precisely on count as everyone knows that one passage too many will cause you to be split into six thousand pieces, each decorating the walls of a (slam! creak! slam!) different identical room. Five thousand nine hundred fifty seven... (slam! creak! slam!) five thousand nine hundred fifty six... (slam! creak! slam!) five thousand nine hundred fifty five..."

Nicholas rolled his eyes and returned to the task list. His work was greatly simplified by the labor-saving Turbo 3600 features, including feather duster emulation, autowax removal with integral focused-flame evaporation, and the WickFlick explosive trimmer attachment. A short search revealed a store of extra candles in the lower desk drawer. After a nearly catastrophic attempt to light the first candle using the flame thrower function, Nicholas decided that the Poltergust was not the best solution to every cleaning problem, and extracting a pack of matches from the cabinet, he lit the remaining candles in a more conventional fashion.

As the last candle sputtered to life, a cry came from behind him. Erin had charged through the exit door again -- and instead of returning to the entrance, found himself in the Observatory. "What did you do that for? I only had five thousand nine hundred and twenty-seven more levels to cross!"

Nicholas was unsympathetic. "You know, we can just leave you behind to stay here so you can do the other five thousand times the conventional way. I'm trying to get our job done."

"Five thousand nine hundred twenty-seven. Oh, never mind."

Nicholas shoved Erin none too gently into the Observatory. The room was dimly lit and the stained wooden paneling made it darker still. There were huge windows on the left side of the room, showing the night sky even though it wasn't yet evening. Against the wall beneath the windows were racks of thick books and a what looked like a model of a solar system, but not the normal 9-planet variety. At the rear of the room the floor narrowed to a bridge of some sort which led into a very dark, very large chamber. Nicholas could dimly see an outline of girders and rods -- a telescope?

On the right side a narrow stairway led down into the gloom. The stairway was of a different style from the paneling on walls and ceiling, and appeared to be a recent addition. There was a sign next to it: "Astrobiology Collections".

Nicholas found it necessary to stand directly beneath one of the very dim ceiling lights to read Neville's list:

Replace star charts in cubbyholes by index numbers
Organize volumes of Proceedings of the Royal Astronomical Society of the Mushroom Kingdom
in chronological order
Set orrery to correct sidereal time...

"Erin, what the heck is an orrery?" asked Nicholas.

Erin was poring over a huge book that had been open under the side table under a dim red desk lamp. He responded without looking up: "A model of the solar system. You know, the kind where you push the Earth around the Sun and the Earth turns and the moon orbits, stuff like that. Whatever. But hey, this is really cool, listen: 'Paragoomba: fifty two degrees declination, eleven hours seven minutes right ascension. The red giant BowserWowser, the brightest star in the local neighborhood at only 11 light years distant, forms its glowing left eye. In legend Paragoomba flew to the rescue of Princess Orange, but lost his way when he flew into a fog bank searching for his missing goggles, and died from the bite of a Home Run Bat. Thus he is found head northwards in the Autumn sky, searching for the Princess whose stars are hidden from him to the south.'"

"What are you talking about?" said Nicholas with only passing interest, as he was busy rolling up the charts laid in some disarray on the map table, and popping them back into the storage rack.

"This book!" replied Erin, flipping back to the frontispiece. "The Amateur Astronomer's Guide to the Night Sky. It's really cool. It lists all the constellations here, and the planets and their orbits, and when to see meteor storms."

"Isn't that meteor showers?" said Nicholas, as he laid out thick journal volumes on the table in order. "March goes there and May goes there." The journals were labeled with almost unreadably small volume numbers and publication dates.

"Apparently here they are STORMS -- you'd better get indoors when one hits! Preferably underground. Let's see -- comets and comets, surviving supernovae in your neighborhood, celestial navigation..."

Nicholas ignored him and continued down the list, reading to himself: "Astrobiology area: locate missing specimen bottles: microphytolysis pikmanii, phagocytomagnic exploveris, ursus taurumicropii... Geeze, how the heck am I going to figure out where these go? I can't even read the names."

"Those are pikmin creatures," said Erin, not looking up. "You can tell. Like ursus is bear, taurus is bull, so that's a bulbear. Easy."

"Yeah, you know so much, you read it!" said Nicholas.

"OK." Erin got up and took the list from Nicholas' hands. Nicholas was mildly shocked: Erin helping? Erin read down the list and thought for a moment. "The first set are Pikmin, like I said. The next group is probably Metroid creatures. Now, why do you suppose someone would steal astrobiology specimens? Could it be -- no, that's absurd -- but wait, maybe not. It's just barely conceivable that these apparently dead, apparently harmless creatures are being revived by a monstrous conspiracy that means to employ LEGIONS OF UNKILLABLE ALIEN ZOMBIES TO CONQUER THE WORLD?!"

Nicholas sighed. Nope, Erin hadn't changed. "OK, fine," said Nicholas. "Let's see if we can discover what the conspirator monsters--"

"Monstrous conspirators!" Erin interjected. "It's different."

"Right. Monstrous conspirators have done with the specimens. I guess the best place to start is in the astrobiology section."

"Brilliant! No one would expect us to look there! Why, Watson," Erin said in an unconvincing British accent, "perhaps I underestimated you."

"Uh -- right. Brilliant is fine. Let's go down the stairs and take a look, OK?"

Nicholas led the way down the stairway. There was no railing and the room was so dark that it was impossible to see where the floor was or indeed whether there was one. It was disconcerting at the least; Nicholas tried not to wonder what would happen if he stepped off the edge. Erin trailed behind, whispering not-very-encouraging speculations to Nicholas: "We must take into account the possibility that the conspirators have discovered means to render themselves invisible, and are at this very moment preparing to hurl us off this narrow rickety staircase into the abyss below. Rest assured that if you are dispatched in this fashion I'll be ready to flee instantly to seek help, or at least consolation."

"Erin, stop whispering! Neville said the whole observatory is deserted except in the winter. There's no one down here-- what was that??" Nicholas stopped suddenly and Erin bumped into him, nearly playing the role of an invisible conspirator. The curious glassy tinkling sound came again. Then there was a sort of liquidy swishing followed by a thump. It was definitely not the sort of sound that one expects in a deserted observatory. Nicholas reached back for the Poltergust hose and whispered to Erin: "Get your flashlight ready. It's probably nothing but if there's anyone to be surprised I want it to be them not us."

Both kids now advanced as silently as they could manage down the creaky stairway. Nicholas took a deep breath, pressing himself against the wall, reached out and carefully pushed the door open with the flame thrower / sofa cleaner. Inside the room was a set of tall shelves with row after row of cylindrical jars, each filled with some sort of specimen, though the details were not visible from a distance. Near the center of the room the jars were in disarray, some empty, some tipped on their sides.

As the door twisted the last few degrees they saw the cause of the mess: a ghost. The ghost was a sort of semi-transparent pink, tall and slim. Across his shoulders and around what one might call his waist were leathery straps holding glistening cylinders that looked somewhat like bullets. He was hunched over one of the shelves doing something with the jars to the accompaniment of those mysterious tinkling and swishing noises. Nicholas remembered something like those straps from an old movie his Dad had watched -- did that mean the ghost had some sort of gun? Maybe this was a little bit too dangerous to be worth a few coins.

Nicholas started to turn back when Erin rushed by him into the room, with the flashlight shining in his right hand and his left holding the constellation book in front of his chest like a shield. "Aha!" he cried. "Jarvis! Of course. Working for Moriarty, no doubt. Well, your wicked scheme is exposed now; you might as well come clean."

The ghost turned around, dropping two jars he had been holding. They shattered on the floor, dripping some sort of foul-smelling preservative. The ghost had wide sad eyes behind bizarre pinkish spectacles that seemed to be made from jars. "Oh, I dropped my jars. Oh, dear. Who is Moriarty?"

"Just ignore him," said Nicholas, stepping past Erin to confront the ghost. Up close, he could see that the objects the ghost carried in his bandoliers were not bullets but just a multitude of jars, of various sizes, shapes, and colors. "You're Jarvis the jar collector, right? What are you doing in here?"

"Well, I -- uh -- there were just so many jars, so many beautiful jars. And they were just sitting here with -- with -- things in them, and no one came to admire them, those beautiful jars just gathering dust, so I thought -- I thought I'd, um, borrow them."

"Just a moment!" interrupted Erin. "If you're the real Jarvis -- why are you wearing those glasses?!"

"Oh, Dr. Mario just gave them to me a couple of months ago. He said I had some sort of problem with my vision -- something ism, I don't remember exactly."

"You mean astigmatism?" said Nicholas, who had been tested for it the previous month.

"No, that wasn't it," replied Jarvis. "Oh, yes, I remember: he said I needed to wear these rose-colored glasses to correct my pessimism."

"Well, anyway, Neville's list says that some specimens are missing from the collection," interrupted Nicholas. He pulled out the list and held it up for Jarvis to see. "Do you know where they are?"

"Well, uh, oh those," said Jarvis evasively. "I, uh, I didn't really steal -- um -- take the specimen things, they were yucky anyway -- I just wanted the jars. I like jars."

"Yeah, I noticed," said Nicholas. Then, thinking aloud, "Well, I guess if we could find some extra jars we could just put the specimens away anyway."

"More jars?" said Jarvis eagerly. "More jars? That would be good."

"What unholy purpose have you already put those stolen jars to?" accused Erin.

"Unholy? Unholy? I just like jars. Of course, maybe I should have sold them. The specimens. The smugglers told me I could sell them the specimens. They promised me coins, lots of coins. But then -- then I would lose the jars. I would lose the beautiful jars. Should I sell them the specimens or get more lovely, lovely jars? I don't know. I don't know what to do."

"Smugglers! Aha! So that was Moriarty's plan. Who was your contact? Of course, how would you know who it really was? Moriarty could look like a goomba or even Bowser himself, and how could you tell? Just another mark of his evil genius at work!"

"Erin, give it a rest!" said Nicholas. "We just want to get the specimens put back on the shelf in order so we can go on to the next room."

"Oh, yes, uh -- put back," said Jarvis, avoiding Nicholas' gaze. "Oh yes, I -- uh -- remember where I put them. Come, come, I'll show you. Neville doesn't, uh, know I'm here, does he?" He started to shepherd the kids towards another door at the back of the room.

"Not yet, but we'll certainly tell him! We can't possibly keep the lab clean and neat if you're going to be messing everything up. Where are we going?"

"Oh, uh, well you see I was going to, uh, pour those ugly fishhead things down the, uh, the drain, but then that would be polluting, wouldn't it? Come, come, through this door. Right here," said Jarvis. The light was dim, making it difficult to read the sign over the door: Astrobiology Environmental Simulation Chamber, and below it a hand-lettered placard: AquaStar. "I put those -- uh - - tauromicroscopes in here, go ahead, I'm sure we can find them."

The room was rather dark, and exuded a damp and somewhat unpleasant smell. Nicholas hesitated at the threshold, causing Erin (who was reading the sign) to bump into him. The ensuing awkward moment gave Jarvis the opportunity to give the kids one small push and:

"Accckkk!--" followed by SPLASH! SPLASH!

Nicholas found himself in water that reached almost up to his nose unless he stood on tiptoes. The water was pleasantly warm but salty. Nicholas spat and turned around in time to see the door slide closed, leaving the room pitch dark. A faint click -snack! told him that they were locked in. "Jarvis!! Open the door (bleah! cough cough!) and let us out!!" Behind him Erin popped up out of the water, coughing and spitting.

Suddenly a glowing pinkish blob extruded itself through the wall -- Jarvis, glowing more brightly red than usual, though whether his appearance reflected his emotional state or just the contrast with the dark background was hard to tell. "Oh, I'm, uh, really sorry about this," he said. "I would really like to let you out, but, well, you might tell Neville. All those beautiful jars. Holding silly monstrosities when they could be mine. Oh, I really can't let that happen. Sorry." He disappeared.

"Jarvis, you get back here! (choke)," screamed Nicholas. "We're going to drown! I'll get you lots of jars if you GET US OUT OF HERE!!"

Erin chimed in behind him. "I should have known it was you, Moriarty -- how could I have been taken in by that pathetic ghost disguise?"

Jarvis popped back through the wall. "Oh, dear. I still don't understand this thing about Moriarty. Does he have jars? Well, I must be going. I'd love to help you, but, uh, well -- you'll get out somehow. Yes, that's it. You'll get out somehow. Goodbye. It's been wonderful to meet you." He started to disappear through the wall and then came back once more. "Did you -- I forgot to ask, you see -- did you by any chance have any jars?"

Nicholas coughed and, standing on his toes, yelled at the top of his voice: "NO!!!"

Jarvis sighed. "Oh, dear. Well, good day." And he disappeared, leaving the room dark again.

Erin tapped Nicholas on the shoulder. "Maybe you should have lied."

"Great. Now you tell me. Well, he's gone. What do we do now?" Nicholas didn't know how to swim and was afraid of deep water, though he didn't want to admit this to Erin; he was already growing tired of standing on his toes in order to keep his mouth clear of the water to breathe. Erin was at home in a pool, but he was accustomed to being able to see where he was going before heading there. He alternated standing and dog paddling while waiting for his eyes to adapt to the murk. Like the observatory itself, it was very hard to tell how big the simulation chamber was. That they were in a confined space was apparent from the echoes of their voices, but some sort of machine, perhaps a pump to circulate the water, was chugging away in the background making it difficult to clearly identify the size of the room from the sounds.

"Well, this is the AquaStar simulator, or so the placard said," replied Erin after a while. "What's on AquaStar? Let's see... I remember ignii -- those are big rocks that tend to fall out of the sky at inconvenient times...cannies are crabs with nasty claws...then there's Acro the killer whale, I suppose he wouldn't fit in an indoor aquarium -- or at least I hope not."

"I hope there's something that floats," said Nicholas under his breath. His calves were starting to ache. He fancied he could just begin to make out some sort of lighter patch in the gloom when suddenly there was an electric-motor hum, followed by a splashing sound. A light -- intolerably bright to their dark-adjusted eyes, though probably feeble in the sunlit day -- appeared to the left. They had to wait a moment before they could look at the source of the brightness. What they saw was as curious as the sounds it made: a stubby round fellow with huge black eyes and a bright red head, using his short arms to navigate a red wooden rowboat shaped more like a crate than a boat, at the prow of which was hung a

curious lantern of the form of a large crystal of glowing quartz. Stenciled on the prow in yellow letters was Waddle Dinghy. The lamp illuminated their surroundings enough to reveal that the simulator was remarkably large: a round body of water with a domed ceiling, the whole of a diameter perhaps half as long as a football field. The light was bright enough to reveal that the walls near them were nearly featureless shiny metal, except for the outline of the door from which they had entered, which had no knob or other opening mechanism that they could see.

Nicholas jumped up and waved his arms. "Hey, give us a hand, ok?" he cried. The creature waved cheerily and plied the oars, bringing his boat up to the boys in a few strokes. Nicholas thankfully grabbed onto the stern and pulled himself partly out of the water. "Hi, thanks! Can you help us get out of here?"

The creature -- Waddle Dee, Nicholas remembered -- looked puzzled and waved its arms.

Erin paddled up to the side of the boat. "What Watson means, is, can you help us to get out of this room and back to the observatory?" He was still using his bad Sherlock Holmes accent. It didn't help.

"I already said that!" said Nicholas. He tried gesturing towards the door but that elicited no useful reaction from the creature. He tried speaking very slowly: "We -- want -- to -- go -- out. Can -- you -- get -- us -- out?" The creature's forehead remained furrowed with well-intentioned puzzlement.

Erin tried: "Können Sie mann ausgang, bitte?"

"What was that?" asked Nicholas.

"Well, I think it's German. I took that with my cartooning class in summer school last year."

"That didn't help," said Nicholas. Waddle Dee held up the end of his mooring rope and wiggled it in some fashion that was supposed to be meaningful, mystifying Nicholas as well. "Try another language."

"Geeze, I can't think of another language, I need to go to the bathroom!" relied Erin.

"Well, just go in the water," said Nicholas.

"That's disgusting!" said Erin. "Good idea."

However, in the interim the stubby creature waved his arms wildly and then sat down and started rowing as if he knew where he were going. Nicholas gathered that he was offering to row them someplace. "Well just hang on!" he said to Erin.

"Gee, do I have to? There's an awful lot of water, it wouldn't hurt anything."

"Not that! I mean hang on to the boat!"

"Oh. OK."

After getting bonked a couple of times with the oar, Erin slid hand over hand to shift his position to the stern of the little craft. "Geeze, this is going to take forever," complained Nicholas. "This thing isn't very fast, is it?"

"I think that's about to be fixed," said Erin, looking up. In the dim light they could see a huge mechanical fixture of some sort on a track, carrying a very large rock to a point just about directly over head. "Looks like an Ignus to me. If it doesn't hit us we'll get a nice push from the wake."

"Great. What if it does hit us?"

"Oh, I find that it's best to always look on the bright side. What's the point of worrying about being crushed, dismembered, and then drowned if it doesn't happen? Besides I think it would probably be worse to be perforated by a blowfish than annihilated by an ignus." Just then the steel claw opened and the stone plummeted towards them. It came so close Nicholas could feel the breeze on the back of his head. The huge splash first sucked them backwards and then sent them surfing down a sizable wave that immersed the kids up to their noses but gave the boat a nice shove towards the other side of the room. Through it all, Waddle Dee just kept on patiently rowing towards a goal only he could see. Once Nicholas managed to cough out the water in his mouth and throat, he turned to Erin and said, "OK, I guess you were right."

Just as the far wall rose out of the gloom, Nicholas felt his toes touch down. The bottom here felt like it was covered with rocks or coral: very rough and uneven. Something crawled over his foot, making him jump and shout. Erin, misinterpreting his gesture, pointed to the wall: "There's a door all

right, only I'm not sure I see how to get up there." Nicholas followed his gaze. The door was visible only as a black emptiness in the dimly shining wall. There was no ledge or ladder, and the bottom of the door was a good bit above the water level, perhaps farther than either of them could reach.

"Say, Waddle Dee, what do we do now?" asked Nicholas.

The little guy waddled over to the stern and pointed at Nicholas. "What? Why me?" said Nicholas, puzzled. Waddle Dee leaned over the side and tapped the Poltergust. Nicholas, still confused, managed to maneuver the vacuum cleaner packet around to his side so he could look at the control panel. In the dim light he could barely see the various placards and warning notices. He pushed the unit over past the edge of the boat where it was directly illuminated by the crystal and looked again. At the very end of the bottom row of controls was a toggle switch he hadn't noticed before: it just said Kirby, with the two possible positions being marked FLOAT and DESCEND.

"I get it!" said Nicholas. "Hey, Erin, take the hose and -- um -- oh yeah, put it in your mouth."

"What? I need to go to the bathroom, I don't need to puke," said Erin.

"Just do it. Here." Nicholas removed the adaptor and poked the metal tube at Erin's mouth.

Erin freed one hand and rather dubiously tasted the end.

"Yecch!" exclaimed Erin. "That tastes terrible! I'm not putting that in my mouth. You do it!"

"Erin, I can't put the hose in my mouth and press the button -- my arm doesn't reach. Come on. Waddle Dee is waiting."

Erin reluctantly complied. Nicholas pushed the toggle switch up; with a sudden whoosh Erin was pumped up just like a kid-sized balloon, with the water squeezed out of his clothes like a sponge. He floated up a couple of feet off the water and Nicholas gave him a shove with the end of the vacuum actuator to push him into the dark opening. None too soon: with a giant buuuuurrrpp! Erin deflated to his normal self and fell soggily to the floor.

Nicholas let go of the Waddle Dinghy and sloshed towards the wall. "Hey, Erin, give me a hand up!" he said.

Erin opened his eyes and moaned. "I feel terrible. What'd you do that for? Ohhhh. We could've just climbed up." He closed his eyes again and laid his head on the floor.

"Don't be ridiculous, what would you climb -- on. Oh." Having actually reached the wall, Nicholas could see the footholds carved into the hard rock wall of the pool that had been invisible from a distance in the dim light. It was awkward to climb with the Poltergust on his back but since the worst that would happen if he fell was another dunking, he managed to scramble up to the door and climb over Erin's still motionless form into the dark room. He turned around and waved to Waddle Dee: "Thanks for your help!" but the little guy was already paddling away on some private errand.

As the Dinghy receded into the distance things got really dark again. "Geez, did you bring the flashlight?" Nicholas said to Erin. Erin just groaned in reply. Nicholas started to feel his way into the mysterious room; in the process, his hand must have tripped a switch somewhere, causing a door to slide across the entrance and light fixtures in the ceiling to switch on. The boys were blinded by the sudden brilliance and for a moment could only blink in pain.

When Nicholas was able to see again, he saw that Waddle Dee had been more attentive to their conversation than he had thought: they were in a restroom. Before him were a sink and several glass shelves, upon which were perched a bottle of what looked like lotion soap and some shaving gear, as well as a number of plastic bottles labeled Pure Aqua in bright gold letters and below that the only bottled water imported from Aqua Star, all before a large mirror mounted on the wall. Little blue hand towels with an elegant "L" embroidered in the middle in gold-colored thread were hung on hooks on the right. To his left a sliding door gave entrance into the bathroom proper, containing a tub, bath towels on racks, and a toilet. A very modern-looking telephone handset was mounted on the wall near the sliding door, next to what looked like a computer keyboard and display. Next to the toilet was a small stand on which rested a copy of the Toadtown Times. He kicked Erin and said, "Hey, you can go now."

Erin must have been recovering: he turned onto his side and took a look. "Oh, well, thanks, but I -- uh -- well I already, oh, you know."

"Fine, never mind," replied Nicholas. "Hey, look at that!" He pointed at the newspaper. "It's about us!" He indicated a small article tucked in the bottom corner of the front page: Children Missing: Foul Play Feared. Nicholas read aloud: "Six human children, recently guests of Princess Peach herself, are feared lost from a Fourside hotel. Sources report that the children were trapped during an attack by the Starmen. Fuss T, Minister of Castle Affairs, told this reporter, 'It is a terrible tragedy, and of course we all feel just awful as we assisted them to find their way to Fourside. How were we to know?' Tacey T., Head Chef, said 'They were all charming and courageous, and very thoughtful and courteous for their age, except of course for Cane who was primarily hungry.' Anyone with information as to their whereabouts is requested to contact Hedley Medley T. at 1-433-896-5577 extension 3141."

"Wow. Maybe we should call to let them know where we are." Nicholas reached over to the phone, but it rang loudly before his hand could touch it.

"I'll get it!" said Erin, grabbing the handset. "Hello."

The voice on the other side sounded like what a banana slug feels like. "Is this -- Waddle Dee? No? Well, could you take a message for him?"

"Uh -- sure, ok. What?"

"Just say that this is King Dedede, reminding him that he is supposed to be guarding my castle not gallivanting around studying the mating habits of pedo bugs. Tell him that people are breaking into my castle and stealing things because of his absence. Tell him to GET HIS ROUND WADDLING BEHIND BACK HERE BEFORE I LOSE MY TEMPER AND DO SOMETHING HE'LL REGRET. Did you get all that?"

"Dedede mating with bugs, stolen temper, regrets. Got it." CLICK.

"Who was that?" asked Nicholas.

"It was for Waddle Dee. I guess we could leave a message if we had anything to write with. Let me look." Erin started to open the drawers under the counter top. In the first drawer he found a stopwatch that didn't work, a coin case, some keys, a little compact containing a tiny mirror and some shiny powder with a soft pad, a cylinder labeled Konker's Foaming Fur Gel, two pill bottles taped to prescriptions signed by Dr. Mario, a small scissors, a PokeBall, some cloth bandages, and a pair of eyeglasses with one lens broken. "Gee, I wonder what's in the Pokeball? What would happen if we released a Dragonite in here? This is cool." Erin popped the Pokeball in his pocket and opened the next drawer, finding seven or eight of the little plastic cups that store contact lenses (all opened, one with a very dry lens in it), two dirty coffee mugs, and a number of tubes of toothpaste, all partly used: mint chip, bay leaf, cumin, ketchup, cilantro and cheese, and cream of shroom. "Still no pencil," he muttered. He opened the pair of cabinet doors beneath the sink, revealing a bottle of Professor Ein's Exploding Drain Cleaner ('just add water and run' and below that 'NOT for blocked toilets' and below that 'use at your own risk'), several rolls of toilet paper (hopefully non-explosive), and a number of broken shells of various unfamiliar sea creatures, but no writing implements.

"Geez, Erin, we're supposed to be cleaning u -- what is that?" Nicholas was looking at what he had thought was the mirror -- but instead of seeing himself reflected, he could swear he was looking at the foyer. As he stared at the image, it changed almost imperceptibly until he suddenly noticed that now the ballroom was depicted, as viewed from the back wall. "This is really weird."

"What's weird?" said Erin, putting down the Bowser Brainy Bowl Brush with Insulting Sound Track. "I want to see! I want to see!"

"That," said Nicholas, indicating the mirror that wasn't.

Erin stared at the wall for a few moments. The image had now shifted to reveal the study: the kids could see that Neville was parked in his favorite chair, reading *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Suddenly Erin's bad Sherlock accent was back: "The more outre and grotesque an incident is the more carefully it deserves to be examined, Watson!"

Nicholas noticed that there was writing etched into the mirror surface near the top edge, faintly visible in the bright light. He started to read: "Og toer isedu -- what the heck does that mean?"

"Watson, you must use your brain as well as your eyes," chided Erin. He picked up an empty bottle of King Boo Koopashell Wax and employed the curved bottom as a magnifier. "This mirror shows us where we can go."

"What? How do you figure that? I don't get it."

"Elementary, Watson! Are you not familiar with the children's novels starring the famous Harry Potter? Og toer isedu oy ereh wtaht tube calp ru oyton woh si. 'I show not your place but that where you desire to go.' Backwards writing. The most primitive of ciphers, I should say."

"Oh," said Nicholas, still a bit puzzled. "What does that do for us?"

"Why, Watson, like any mirror in Luigi's mansion, one must merely scan the image to be transported. Just as I thought! See, at the bottom it says 'Em Nacs'. Scan me. We just need a GameBoy Horror."

"OK," replied Nicholas. "Where are we going to get one of those?"

"Perhaps we can find a substitute." Erin grabbed Nicholas and turned him around rather abruptly. "We've already discovered that this Poltergust of yours has divers hidden talents; it seems only plausible that -- yes! A scan function. Simple deduction."

By this time Nicholas was becoming a bit irritated -- Erin was maddening enough in normal circumstances, but to have him also be right several times in a row was really too much. "Look, I can handle this, Erin. You just stand next to me so we'll both get transferred. I'll get us back to the observatory so we can capture that worthless Jarvis. This time I'll be ready with the vacuum! Let's see what the sequence is..." Nicholas put his hand on the scan button and watched as the images slowly faded into each other: "Gallery -- dining room -- cellar --billiard room, oh boy! what a mess! -- safari room..."

Meanwhile, Erin was trying to read the smaller print etched into the edge of the mirror. "Curious. Very obscure. Perhaps if I rubbed some soap into the ridges to improve the visibility of the characters..." An apparently normal bar of soap sat in a shallow bowl next to the hot water knob. Erin reached over to grab it, but it slipped out of his hand. He looked more closely and saw that the soap also had a label imprinted on the side: Cranky Kong Brand Slippery Soap. "I shall not be so easily deterred. Grasp the nettle firmly and it shall become a stick with which to beat thine enemy, Watson. Let us apply that homily." He put his hand around the bar of soap and squeezed firmly.

It was really very slippery soap. The bar flew out of Erin's hand, bounced off the light fixture on the ceiling, flushed the toilet, knocked the phone off hook, splatted from the mirror surface and whacked Nicholas on the elbow, causing his hand to engage the SCAN button.

"ERIN!!" shouted Nicholas, but it was too late. Before Erin could invent a Holmesian remark appropriate to the situation, the image in the mirror began to spin in the most nauseating fashion, while purple-blue dots pocked the room around the kids, merging into stripes as the room itself began to whirl erratically. Nicholas suddenly felt a certain sympathy for portraificationized Cane as his stomach attempted to extrude itself through his nose. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe.

His head was still spinning when he opened his eyes again, but the room had settled down. It was much darker than the bathroom had been, and smelled of mildew and worse things. The floor was made of stone with a sort of lichen growing in many of the corners, and the ceiling was perforated by numerous large cast-iron pipes dropping to a maze of valves and joints. It took Nicholas a few minutes to recover his senses and realize where they were. "Erin! This is the pipe room! We're all the way at the bottom of the mansion. We're never going to catch Jarvis now. In fact, I don't even remember how to get out of here."

Erin seemed a bit nonplussed by the disorienting method of travel. In his left hand he held the bar of slippery soap. After a moment he sighed and tried to pick up his spirits: "Well, at least we're dry here." He clapped his hands together for emphasis. This was a mistake. The slippery soap flew out of his grasp, banging off a blue pipe, a red pipe, a striped small pipe, and a large drain sump line, in each case by amazingly bad luck striking a relief valve or drain stopcock: in seconds four vigorous sprays of water were cascading all around the kids.

"Great," complained Nicholas. "Erin, stay where you are and whatever you do, don't pick up that soap!"

Just then a familiar semi-transparent head and shoulders slid out of the brick wall at Nicholas' left. "Master Nicholas, I'm so chagrined! I didn't realize you'd proceed with such alacrity; I expected you in the pipe room tomorrow afternoon at the earliest. Here you are, the updated list including the four valve closures and water damage." The ghost handed Nicholas another ream of manila-colored paper; the ink began to run almost immediately in the misty spray filling the air. Before the kids could react, Neville disappeared back into the bricks.

"Neville! Neville! Get back here and get us out!" called Nicholas, but it was too late.

Nicholas took a deep breath to calm down and then looked around the room. His eyes locked onto a dull greenish object that looked just like his dad's toolchest at home, resting on a short workbench in the back corner of the room away from the fountains. "Come on, all we need to do is find a pipe wrench!" The water was already about ankle-deep and they splashed as they slogged over.

The tool chest was made of sheet metal and had a keyhole, in which fortunately a key was resting, and a small nameplate just above the key. In the dim light Nicholas had to lean close to read the plate: MARIO AND LUIGI. LUIGI was partly scratched out as if by a screwdriver or other dull tool. Nicholas gave the key a twist and pushed the cover up: it creaked from long disuse. In the upper compartment rested a hammer, a curious sling-shot-like object, and a lightbulb. The hammer glistened even in the dim light: from the heft as Nicholas lifted the hammer out of the box, it was apparent that the tool was fabricated of solid gold. There was a note attached with a string: Good weight but too soft, its a no good the claw, this hammer she's junk. M. "Yow, this is a Golden Hammer, Erin! Anybody from Harvest Moon would just about kill to get one of these." Remembering Jack, he stuck the hammer in his belt, hoping the weight wouldn't pull his pants down.

By this time Erin had joined Nicholas. Resting on the bench next to the toolchest was a metal disk about twice the diameter of a dinner plate. Erin lifted it into such light as there was: on the burnished purple surface were three circles and a triangle. "This is the Medallion of Shadow! I wonder what Mario was doing with this. Oh, wait, there's a note: 'Ugly but never know when you gonna' need a manhole cover, save. M.' These are really powerful! I wonder how I can carry it." The medallion was amazingly light for its size but awkward to hold. Nicholas was busy opening the tool drawers, still looking for a pipe wrench, so Erin took advantage of his distraction and hooked the medallion onto the back of the Poltergust. This turned out to be a bad idea as just at that moment Nicholas leaned down to look into the bottom drawer, causing the bottom edge of the medallion to deliver a nasty blow to Erin's chin, knocking him backwards into the now shin-deep water.

Nicholas pulled a wooden box shaped like a truncated pyramid from the lower drawer. The note on this item said What kinda clock ainta got no face no hands ain't no good. -M. "Look at this, Erin!" said Nicholas. Erin, flat on his back in the water, didn't respond. "I think it's a Metronome." The box had a flat metal shaft protruding from a slot near the base, with a weight that could slide up and down on the shaft. Nicholas tapped the shaft and it started to swing rhythmically left to right: CLICK! CLACK! CLICK! CLACK! With each timestamp sound a different equally hazardous event resulted: first a blast of cold air shot out, momentarily freezing the spray from the blue pipe outlet; then a small curved leaf flew out of a slot, banging off the drain pipe and clanging on the sump before plinking into the water, and finally a small round object shot straight up and exploded loudly. This last caused the large gray supply pipe in the center of the room to open up, spewing far more water than the other pipes put together. "Ooops," said Nicholas, stopping the little arm before they could find out what the next click would do.

Things were getting serious: the water was up to Nicholas' knees and rising rapidly. The left hand middle row drawer had a pair of pipe wrenches in it. Nicholas threw one to Erin and waded into the mess. Nicholas had spent a week playing with a fluid experiment kit he received for his eighth birthday (it had since fallen into disuse and ended up in the bottom of the Lego box) so the idea of shutoff valves was not unfamiliar. Fortunately the pipes were clearly labeled with arrows showing the direction of water flow and indicators for the supply shutoff. Unfortunately, by now three of the relief valves were already

under water. Nicholas took a deep breath and plunged in; the water was cold but clear. It was awkward adjusting the wrench under water; precious seconds were wasted before he had the blue pipe (which turned out to be marked 'Second Floor East Wing Supply') shut off. By the time three of the pipes were closed the water flow had slowed noticeably, making it easier to deal with the last two. The valve on the big gray supply line was beyond Nicholas' unaided strength, as well as directly in the line of the water spray. Erin's reluctance to help was finally overcome by a promise to play Watson to Erin's Holmes for the whole of The Sign of Four (Nicholas was confident Erin would forget about the promise before he actually had to come through), and together the kids got the last line closed. By this time the water was waist deep and distressingly cold.

"What do we do now?" asked Erin. Being freezing cold and completely soaked appeared to render him rather more attentive than usual.

"Well, I doubt if the pipe room is water-tight," replied Nicholas. "If we just wait a bit the water should drain out and then we'll be able to move around and find an exit."

Erin, exploiting expertise gained in his science fair project from last year ('Does Water Drain Faster Than Maple Syrup' with free samples of the test liquids provided to booth visitors) stood straight up and placed his index finger at the surface of the water, just above his navel, and counted aloud to 100. The fluid still bisected his fingertip. "According to my research, your doubts are doubtful. Next idea?"

"Well, let's look around. Maybe there's a drain somewhere we can unblock." The kids started sloshing with difficulty through the now-still water, grabbing pipes to help their progress. Erin started singing I've been workin' in the pipe room all the live long day! I've been workin' in the pipe room since Luigi is away! until Nicholas threatened to shove the Golden Hammer down his throat. At the back of the room they found their passage blocked by a door whose edge was sealed with a rubber strip, with inset windows allowing them to see that the hallway beyond was quite dry. In the middle of the hall a curious reddish square object about a foot on a side lying on the floor. Nicholas noticed that, in addition to an uncharacteristically spartan light fixture, and a shaft of some sort leading upwards, there were several unusual objects on the ceiling: a shoe, a broom, and a number of multicolored marbles. "What was that you were saying before, Erin?" he asked. "Like -- the stranger something is the more you should understand it?"

"What are you talking about?" replied Erin. "Let's just open the door, see, there's a drain at the end of the corridor, and the door opens out so all we have to do is turn the knob."

"Wait a minute, what about that stuff on the ceiling?"

"A good scientist has to focus on the fundamentals! Water flows down hill, don't worry about it." Erin sloshed to the door knob and gave it a turn.

Just then Nicholas realized: "Downhill--it's a bounce pad!! A gravity reverser!! Close the door!!" Unfortunately the great pressure of the water made this impossible. The door flew open, and the sudden outrush of water carried Erin and Nicholas with it. As the water struck the red block it flew upwards, making a bizarre vertical fountain onto the ceiling. The inverted flow pooled onto the surface until it found the shaft, through which it plunged upwards. Nicholas had just enough time to absorb what was happening before he saw Erin fly upwards with the rushing stream; he followed moments afterwards. Nicholas tried to grab the edge of the shaft and escape the stream, but the water flow was too powerful and he was carried along. He could see there was a light at the end of the tunnel, perhaps a sky light opening to the roof, temporarily stopping the flow. The shaft rapidly filled, forming a surface which Nicholas struck soon after Erin. They floated in the torrent for just long enough that Nicholas began to hope the shaft would fill, allowing them to escape along the ceiling, but then a loud POP could be heard through the shaft as the skylight gave way under the huge hydraulic pressure. Once again Erin and Nicholas were dragged on a wild downward upward ride through the shaft, ending as they and the water flew through the skylight and were carried high into the air before the effect wore off and they went plummeting back down onto the tile roof.

In the gallery, Tennyson and Clara were helping Vincent van Ghore organize his canvasses. Clara, hearing an unusual splashing sound, glanced up at the sky light. "Look at that, Tennyson. There's a bunch of water on the roof. I wonder what that's from."

Tennyson looked up from a starscape showing a shuttle approaching the Ark spacestation. "Hey, that's Erin! Hi, Erin!" Erin tried to arrest his downward progress but the plunging stream carried him bumping along. He saw Clara through the plastic window and waved as he slid out of view. Nicholas followed a moment later. "I wonder what they're doing up there," said Tennyson. "Looks fun. I thought they were supposed to be working."

Meanwhile on the roof the gushing water had found its way to the edge of the building, mostly plunging right past the gutter and downwards. Erin managed to grab onto the gutter, and found himself hanging with his feet dangling inside the resulting waterfall. Realizing that Nicholas would be in the same spot shortly, he slid hand-to-hand to the left out of the water and screamed "Grab on!"

Nicholas, warned, managed to latch himself in place as well. Within a minute the two kids found themselves dangling from the edge of the roof, watching the water stream plummet three stories to the lawn below.

"So what you meant was that Sherlock Holmes quote, right?" asked Erin. It was difficult to talk with his shoulders hunched up. "I guess I should have figured that out right away. Sorry."

"Well, never mind," said Nicholas, feeling unexpectedly calm in the face of impending catastrophe. "I don't know about you but I can't hold myself up here for much longer. Any ideas?"

"Yeah, there's a window right here by my foot. I think I can push it open and then we could both swing in."

"Can you see what's inside?"

"Not really, but it's probably better than what's down below."

"Yep. Sounds good to me, let's give it a try."

Erin managed to find the edge of the window with his foot and pushed to the right. Fortunately, there was no window screen in the way. The pane slid easily. "Okay, now you should be able to push the rest of the way," said Erin. Nicholas grunted and kicked around until he found the rim. A couple of shoves, each dangerously stretching the strength of his fingers, and the way was clear.

"Right, now we swing back and forth and then let go heading into the window," said Nicholas. His fingers were not feeling up to swinging but he ignored their complaints. "One ... two ... three!!"

The two boys let go as their momentum carried them towards the open window. The room inside was shadowed and dark to their sun-blinded eyes: Nicholas flew through the air wondering what was below when he landed with a PLOP.

As his eyes cleared, Nicholas found himself in a huge vat of viscous liquid. Their landing had splashed the stuff all over the kids and the surroundings. Nicholas opened his mouth to ask if Erin was all right and some dripped in: it was delicious! "What the heck is this?" he exclaimed.

"Blackberry, I think," replied Erin. "Hmmm. My favorite." He picked up a handful of the liquid and sipped.

The door swung open. Bonapa T. stood frozen with shock as he absorbed the bizarre scene. "O la la! What have you done with my pie filling tank, you crazy kids? C'est une catastrophe!"

"Hi, Bonapa, this is great!" said Erin, slurping up another mouthful.

Clara came running down the corridor behind the Toad. "Are you guys ok?" She stopped short. "Ohmigosh. You are a mess! I guess you really need to take a bath now."

"Why?" asked Erin. "We just took one."

Chapter 9: Victual Reality

Nicholas pressed the whale's tail and was rewarded with a satisfying spray of air and mist from the blowhole. The bath tub was huge and round, deep enough to stand up in the middle and with a bench around the rim to sit on. A bubbler on the rim provided a continual stream of suds. Nicholas had spent some minutes experimenting with the agitator machine, arriving at a curious but entertaining mode in which a pair of waves oriented along a diameter continually rotated around the tub, slowly removing the scum of pie filling left behind on the wall by Erin's previous sojourn in the bath. Nicholas had finished scrubbing the persistent stuff out of his hair and was taking his time getting out. It turned out that there were three guest bathrooms, each with similarly elegant appointments, so even with Clara appropriating one for her private use sufficient cleaning capacity remained for the boys.

Mr. Saturn slid open the door and waddled into the room. Floating behind him were a pair of clean black woolen pants, white underwear with Seamy Textiles Ltd. written on the elastic band, and a white shirt with dark purple lapels, courtesy of the ever-thoughtful if ineffectual Neville. Mr. Saturn wiggled his nose and the clothing obediently laid itself out on the ample countertop next to the sink. "I should have thought you would have had enough of immersion by this point, Nicholas. Neville was by again wondering pointedly when we are going to be down for supper. Not that I'm nagging. I'll leave that for Clara."

"We? I thought you didn't like formal dinner stuff?" Nicholas spent a moment giving the whale a push so it could surf on the radial waves as they washed by.

"That's just at Peach's place," replied Mr. Saturn, hopping onto the counter and polishing his nose on the mirror. "Luigi and I get along, at least well enough to make me welcome in the dining hall, though on reflection I doubt that Luigi will be present at dinner. I went to one of his pitch meetings some time ago; once you let him start talking about his idea of the month, it's very hard to get him to stop. He'll be at it until midnight at least. Did you ever stop to consider the interesting problem of shaping the depth of the bath along a radius to allow azimuthal propagating modes?"

"No, even if I knew what you were talking about," replied Nicholas. He was just about to test the floating construction blocks when the door slid open again and Clara stuck her head in. She wore a simple but charming white gown, modestly arranged in front but with a low-cut back, with a long skirt swirling around her ankles. "Are you still in the bathtub? Come on, Nicholas, everybody's waiting for you!"

"Geeze, Clara, do you mind?!" said Nicholas, stepping off the bench and immersing himself up to his neck. "You've got your own bathroom, this is for the boys!" He tried to splash some water in her direction but got Mr. Saturn instead.

Clara wrinkled her nose and, grabbing two towels from the rack, tossed one to Mr. Saturn and threw the other towards the pedestal next to the tub. "Let's go, lazy!"

"I'm not getting out of the bath tub with you standing there!" said Nicholas. Clara rolled her eyes and spun on the heel of a very elegant new shoe to exit. It was probably just as well that Clara wasn't old enough to wonder about the well-stocked closet she had found waiting for her in her room. Nicholas returned to his building project, but a moment later was distracted by the sudden appearance of a fist-sized hole in the wall next to the tub. With a squeaky cry, a tiny whiskered face poked out of the opening, and then disappeared again. Just as Nicholas was about to investigate more closely, out flew a tiny surfboard-shaped object upon which was perched a creature resembling an upright mouse. The board landed just before the onrushing wave at the tub rim, and Nicholas watched in fascination as the tiny surfer skillfully latched onto the face and skimmed back and forth around the edge of the bath. From the hole he could hear faint music:

*If every mousehole had a bathtub
with waves that curl just right*

*And every mousehole had a soap board
all waxed and polished bright
Then every mouse would be surfen'
instead of stealin' rice
And everyone would have a tube ride
and we'd be surfen' mice.*

"All right, I guess it's time to get out!" said Nicholas, laughing. Mr. Saturn jumped down to the tub and turned up the wave machine, so that the spinning swell started to foam and curve. High-pitched whoops could be heard as Nicholas carefully stepped out onto the platform and grabbed the towel Clara had deposited there, turning to splashes as the mouse wiped out in the curl and struggled up through the soapy foam.

"Erin, could you get me some juice?" asked Clara. This was the third time she had asked. She waved her hand in front of Erin's face and said "Earth to Erin, Earth to Erin. Juice?"

"Oh, yeah, right." Erin reached to his right to grab the carafe of purple fruit juice, but instead of filling Clara's glass, he picked up his own and began to pour the liquid into the already-full container, resulting in a purple flood soaking his borrowed pair of dress slacks. Erin took no notice, as he was busy staring at Princess Zelda. The Princess was sitting across the table, a lovely sight even to less infatuated eyes than Erin's. Her long hair was arranged in intricate braids over her bare shoulders; she wore a glistening magenta gown with violet trim, a golden necklace strung with pearls, and a diamond-studded tiara. She was smiling at Clara rather than Erin, but he wasn't in a mood to make fine distinctions.

Clara reached over his lap to straighten the now half-empty carafe. "Erin, get a grip!" she said, but she smiled and gently tugged his shoulder.

"What? Oh," said Erin, looking down. "Oh, boy. Uh ... oh, no. Neville?"

However, it was Shivers the butler who passed through the table towards Erin. "Tarnation! Perfectly good juice gone ta' waste! Ya dang live ones ain't got no 'ppreciation fur what ya got, why we ghosts can't even drink if'n we wanted to and you just pour the dang stuff right down on yer pants." Zelda laughed politely, while Erin turned red enough to illuminate the dinner table unaided by the candles. Shivers tossed a gravy-stained towel in Erin's lap, muttering: "Things 's different back when I 's alive. Weren't no cause to waste purfictly good juice, not nohow..."

Bonapa T. ignored Erin's contretemps and lifted Tails' dinner tray from the top shelf of a wheeled cart. The tray held a huge steel bowl which seemed to be filled with sand. Nicholas leaned over to Neville, who was floating next to him ineffectually attempting to supervise the proceedings, and asked "What the heck is Tails eating?"

"Oh, yes, I believe it is berries -- berry juice -- no, ahem, berry flavored? Let me think."

Tails floated up off his chair over the bowl, and asked "Okay already? I'm starved!"

"Un moment, s'il vous plait!" replied Bonapa. "Just let me get under ze shelter here, and zen you can, how you say, dig in?"

"Shelter?" said Nicholas. He noticed that Impa, Zelda's assistant, had unfolded a large umbrella and was holding it protectively over her mistress, and Jack and Ellie had risen from the table and were standing by the wall. "What is going on?"

Bonapa, hiding underneath the serving table, cried out, "Allez! OK, Tails my friend!" At this signal Tails attacked the bowl vigorously, tossing fine white sand everywhere as he revealed something that looked vaguely like a plucked chicken that had been immersed beneath the silica. Tails ripped off a leg and began to carefully brush the sand and grit away.

"Oh, of course," said Neville. "Buried! Not berried. B-u-r-i-e-d. Dear, dear, how foolish of me to have forgotten."

"Sure, thanks," said Nicholas, who was covered in fine grit on every exposed surface. Impa shook the umbrella carefully, ensuring that no contamination made its way to the Princess, and stored it

gently away. At the piano Melody continued playing, unperturbed (Raindrops keep Fallin' on my Head). No one was listening. They never did.

"What was that about?" asked Cane, who continued shoving fried shroom chips into his mouth despite the dirt.

"Foxes like to bury their food," replied Brian, meticulously dusting his plate.

Clara turned back to Zelda to continue their conversation, not incidentally providing Erin with an opportunity to retreat gracefully from the dining table for a quick change of clothing, though the adherence of the fine white dust to the wet spot had actually made the damage less visible. "The VIP suite? I don't remember seeing that on Neville's list. Maybe it was written out? Very Important Person suite?"

"Oh, no, no, my dear: the Very Important Princess suite." Zelda flashed her prettier-than-you'll-ever-be smile. "Reserved for important princesses. I should certainly never sink to imposing upon you children to tidy up the suite; I have my own cleaning staff for that, under the supervision of my dear devoted Impa." The impeccably-dressed matron standing always to Zelda's right bowed stiffly, inclining exactly fifteen degrees from the vertical, and returned to inspecting the entrees received from Shivers before presenting them to the Princess for approval. She didn't smile.

"Are you often a guest here?" asked Clara.

"Hardly. I am here for certain highly privileged discussions with Professor E. Gadd. For reasons which I must say I find mysterious, the Professor prefers to do much of his work here. He and Luigi are compatriots of old, a consequence perhaps of their physical resemblance, as intellectually they seem to have little in common. I do find travel to these remote worlds difficult, but of course a ruler's obligations do not end at the throne room."

"I thought the Professor was out," said Clara. "We talked to Tails and he said the Professor was off traveling somewhere. Oh, at Ark. He was at Ark. Working on reality. That sounds silly, doesn't it?"

Zelda looked thoughtful. Impa looked disapproving but that was her usual demeanor. Zelda chose her words with care: "Well, one can't just go around believing everything one hears from Tails, can one?" Tails, hanging inverted a few feet over his plate, was dipping a chicken leg in a bowl of sauce thoughtfully filtered of sand by Shivers. Only the subtle movement of one huge furry ear betrayed his interest in the exchange. Zelda continued. "The Professor is at once an inventor of great ingenuity and a scientist of vast depth, with interests as wide as his knowledge. Of course, sometimes this causes him to overlook such mundane issues as his agreed-upon presence at a given time and place. Perhaps we should say his view of time is more multivalued than ours."

"Or perhaps you should say he's absent-minded," interjected Mr. Saturn. He was mounted on a kid's booster seat on top of the dining room chair, licking a curious concoction that looked somewhat like oatmeal frozen into a popsicle.

Zelda glared at him. "I should hardly think you of all creatures would find it appropriate to level criticism at the Professor on this subject. As I recall, you are -- let me see -- four years three months and twenty-one days overdue for your audience with the Assistant Minister to Rauru at Hyrule. Perhaps you've been busy working on your book. What was it to be called again? 'A Nose by Any Other Name'? 'Saturnalia'? In any case, twenty-two months past deadline, aren't we? And I suppose we shouldn't discuss the status of your library borrowings." Brian kept his head down, hoping to avoid notice from the combatants on either side.

Mr. Saturn met her eyes undismayed, chuckling. "I fail to see the connection, Your Highness. My behavior is a simple consequence of intentional irresponsibility. I haven't forgotten, I just don't care. The Professor cares about everything, but his passion is so intense that only one thing at a time can occupy his mind. Once his enthusiasm of the moment is passed, he will remember he's supposed to meet you and be suitably apologetic. But he won't change any more than I will."

"Ya' know, ya' hi'ness, 'da shrimp is right," said Tails, licking his nose. "Jus' last week da professor was sayin' how he was gonna be busy wid' you here an' all so he couldn't be helpin' me recalibrate the plasma diagnostic system after I got it pulled apart. But 'den da' next day he's got 'dis

emergency message an' he's off." The fox ripped another wing off the dead bird. "Course he was also sayin' how delicate this is all gonna' be, ya' know, maybe he doesn't mind bein' called away, eh?"

Nicholas, seated at the end of the table, had just finished cleaning most of the particles of sand from his tableware so that he could sample Bonapa's culinary artistry. It was difficult to follow the conversation directed towards Zelda at the middle of the long dining room table, so he turned to Jack and Ellie, who were seated to his right. Jack was dressed in a cleaner and less wrinkled version of his bowling attire.

"So how was your day, Nicholas, after bowling?" asked Jack. "Your friend didn't seem too helpful with your work, now, though he was mighty entertaining, I have to say."

"Well, Mister -- gee, I don't usually call grownups by their first names."

"Oh, never you mind, Jack is just fine," Jack reassured him.

"Well -- Jack -- actually we didn't get as far as I thought we would, and it wasn't really Erin's fault. You see, we ran into -- what was his name? -- Jarvis. A ghost that collects jars. He tricked us into the Aquastar pool, and then we escaped into the bathroom but Erin jogged my arm while I was working the mirror and we ended up in the pipe room and got caught in an inverted flood to the roof."

"My oh my!" exclaimed Ellie. She wore a simple frock hand-embroidered with floral patterns. Age had converted the beauty of her youth into the warmth of her smile; she reminded Nicholas of his mother (when she wasn't mad at him). "You certainly went through a lot of trouble for the sake of cleaning. I wish my Betsy was so determined. She isn't much for tidying up."

"Thanks, Mrs. -- uh, Ellie -- but we're just doing this so we can get some money to hire Starfox to get us to Ark," replied Nicholas. "We were just trying to clean up the Observatory. I didn't mean to go flooding the pipe room or anything, it just happened that way. But we did get some really neat stuff -- you see, we found Mario and Luigi's old tool chest, that was where I got the pipe wrench and I would've had everything fixed up if Erin hadn't opened the door." Nicholas realized how incoherent this must all sound, though Jack and Ellie were listening with the same intense politeness his parents would display when he regaled them with stories of his video game escapades. "Oh, yeah, I forgot! One of the things we found in the chest is a Golden Hammer! Maybe you'd like it?" He pulled the glistening tool from an inner pocket of the borrowed dinner jacket.

Jack's eyes went wide though his expression was otherwise unmoved. Ellie put her hands to her cheeks and sighed in amazement. "Son, you don't just go around givin' out things like that," said Jack. "That's uncommon kind of you to folks you hardly even know, though seein' as this was out of Luigi's tool chest perhaps you ought to ask him before you go handing it around?"

Nicholas looked crestfallen. "Oh, yeah, I should've thought of that. I guess I'll have to wait until he gets back."

Ellie put her hand on his wrist. "What a sweet thought, dear! It was so considerate of you to even think of us, when you have your own financial worries, as you said. Such an offer speaks of a generous heart in one so young."

"Ellie's right, she usually is," said Jack. "Son, such a kind thought deserves it's own reward no matter what happens to the hammer. Now, you said you were gettin' on towards Ark, I believe?" Nicholas nodded. Jack looked around to ensure the other guests were occupied and leaned towards Nicholas, beckoning him forward so that with Ellie the three heads formed a coterie shielded from observation. "It's not the sort of thing to be bandying about, but some of our folk might be found in that neck o' the woods, as it were. Jus' minding their own business gettin' on about their farming, you know, but quiet-like you might say. Everyone knows that space station was designed for folks to live on permanent-like, with a bunch of them hydroponic-type farms and plenty of the regular kind, and after that big to-do a few years back, well, it was a shame to have all that good rich farmland go to waste. Course, wasn't clear by then if anyone -- owned it, seemed a lot simpler just not to ask. You get my drift, son?"

Nicholas, though still mildly mystified, nodded. Jack continued: "If'n you happen' by that way, you just ask for Mary Ellen, she's an old friend; you just tell her Jack and Ellie sent you. That'll get you whatever they can provide."

Nicholas nodded again. "Mary Ellen," he repeated. "Tell her Jack send us, right?"

Ellie was looking around the table to ensure that their conversation went unnoticed. She said loudly, "Now don't you go tellin' anyone about that, who would eat my pies if everyone knew the secret?" she said, inserting her spoon into the meat pie on her plate while kicking Nicholas gently under the table. "If my husband wasn't such a fine cook on his own I'd 've had his hide long ago for lettin' my family recipes out that way."

Nicholas got the point and made a zipping gesture: "Yes, ma'am, my lips are sealed all right."

Tails let himself appear to be occupied with Cane, while keeping one ear cocked towards the political side of the table. "So ya' know I got 'da Portraificationizeh all fixed up, don't squash da portraits no more, an' the compression pelletizer is now just one stroke, no more smashin' n' bashin' like what happened to ya', ya' wanna try it again?"

"What?" said Cane, spitting soupe a l'oignon out on his plate. "No way! I'm not going near that thing! That was like puking up your nose and then shoving your foot down your throat backwards while having your eyeballs turned inside out, just so you can be stuck in a piece of paper with a scratchy coat you can't take off! You're crazy! You gonna' eat that chicken wing or what?"

"Fine, fine, be dat way," replied Tails, whacking Cane's hand away from the barbecued meat. "Okay, how 'bout you help me get one a 'dem ghosts ta try it out? Got any ideas? Pass 'da salt."

"Here, or is that pepper?" Cane licked the end of the shaker: "Yep, salt, here you go. Hey, what about like, telling one of the ghosts they won a sweepstakes and the prize is in your lab and then just zipping them in when they walk in the room? Or better yet, tell them the prize is in our room and then just sucking them up into a Poltergust when they come to collect it?"

Tails wiped the salt shaker on his fur and then spread the crystals with abandon over his meal. "Yeah, 'dem ghosts are suckers for that sorta stuff, they ain't too bright mosta da time." He chewed on some blades of grass thoughtfully provided by Bonapa T. "Which ghost you wanna' hit up first?"

Cane was busy snarfing up another slice of sausage and shroom pizza. "Whaddo I know? (chomp chomp) Let's ask Neville who's the stupidest one."

"Nah, 'dat might make him think we're up ta somethin', he don't like me much anyway."

"Hey, I think I can handle this," said Cane, shoving a fried crab cake into his mouth. "If I don't find a really stupid ghost to fall for this trick tomorrow (gulp)-- I'll eat my hat!"

"You ain' gotta hat, but I betcha you're right, you'd eat it if ya had one," said Tails.

"You know that Nicholas and Erin were floating in that, right?" said Tennyson, indicating the slice of berry pie on Mr. Saturn's plate.

"Don't worry, they took a bath first," said Mr. Saturn. "Besides, I'm not going to eat it." Tennyson's mom would have said that Mr. Saturn was playing with his food, though he regarded it as demonstrating a concept. "You can eat meat, and eat berry pies, all your life and never conceive of combining the two." He wiggled his nose and the slice of berry pie popped open; the filling slurped away and chunks of roast beast launched themselves on parabolic trajectories from the serving bowl, landing with tiny splashes on the bottom crust, replacing the fruit. "Innovation is dangerous, uncertain, unexpected, and indispensable. It leads to change. Change is always feared by those who find themselves on top of the pile as it is", he said, staring pointedly at the Princess, "because it is likely to be change for the worse, at least to them."

Zelda returned his glare. "Even those without fear can still love their hallowed traditions. Envy is not a basis for policy."

"So, Princess Zelda," said Tennyson, trying to direct attention away from Mr. Saturn, "if you don't mind me asking -- what were you going to discuss with Professor E. Gadd?"

Zelda's glance in reply reminded Tennyson of his mother sizing up a steak at the grocery store. "I had hardly expected an inquisition at dinner; truthfully, I hadn't planned on dinner, though the Professor's tardiness is well-known and so perhaps it is my fault after all." She seemed to come to a decision and changed her tactics. "I'm sorry, the introductions were so brief -- you are?"

"Oh, my name is Tennyson, Your Highness."

"Well, Tennyson, do you have your own room at the cas-- at wherever you live?"

"Yes, ma'am -- I mean, Your Highness."

"How would you feel if you had everything just the way you liked it and came back one day to find everything changed?"

"Oh, that happens every couple of months, any time my dad gets up the energy to clean up the house. He's always organizing stuff so you can't find anything. Puts it all down in a file in his computer, but nobody else can figure out how to read the file so we just have to dig everything out again as soon as he goes on a business trip."

"Exactly. Now imagine the same sort of disruption on a larger scale, throughout your world, changing your life in unpredictable ways. We in Hyrule, and others allied with us, have lived with this scourge for too long. We are resolved to end it, using whatever means are at our disposal. We are no longer willing to listen to the starry-eyed idealists who counsel restraint and caution." She paused with a chuckle. "Starry eyed! Oh, my, I had not meant to joke." Her expression grew stern again. "I am not joking. We shall take measures to ensure the continuation of our beloved kingdom and our way of life."

Just then Erin came back in the room, sat down in his chair, and then jumped up again, whacking the table and spilling juice all over his pants again: "Oh, man, I left it in my room!"

"What are you talking about?" said Clara.

"The Shadow Medallion! Oh, geeze, I was going to show it to the Princess and now I forgot!"

"Excuse me, young man," interjected Zelda. "Did you say you had the Shadow Medallion?"

"Yeah, yeah, we found it in the pipe room! Right, Nicholas?"

Nicholas politely finished chewing his roll and then replied. "You mean that man hole cover thing?"

Zelda's face darkened with anger until she looked rather like Impa always did. "The Shadow Medallion a man hole cover? How dare you!"

"It wasn't me, it was Mario. At least it looked like his writing. Anyway, yeah, it was with the tool kit in the pipe room. Erin stuck it on my vacuum cleaner and we had it when we fell in the pie filling. Did you pick it up?" the last being addressed to Erin.

"Yeah, I left it in the room!" said Erin in distress.

"Oh, never you mind, I shall provide it directly," said Neville, disappearing into the ceiling. In the background Melody played I'll Be Seeing You. Soon they did: Neville popped out into the room easily enough, though whatever he was carrying seemed to have gotten stuck inside the wall.

Erin rose out of his seat in anticipation, rambling nervously to Zelda: "You'll see, it's really cool, I'm sure it's the real medallion, Your Highness." Neville gave a final huge effort, arms stretching out to twice his length, and then with a sudden POP! there appeared -- a large glass jar containing a bizarre and fairly repulsive, very dead creature with two red eyes on pods surrounding a circular mouth covered with purple teeth. Neville handed the jar to Erin: "There you are, Master Erin! The perfect gift to impress a Princess!"

"That's not it!" cried Erin. "That's a -- a -- what was that?"

"Sinoglyphygyus obnoxious," said Mr. Saturn. "A large-mouthed parasitic eel from the Metroid worlds."

"Yeah, right," said Erin, nervously. He was unsure of what to do with the jar and fiddling unhappily with the lid. "I picked that up in the Observatory while we were arguing with Jarvis. It was going to be evidence, I mean I was Sherlock, you see, and -- and--"

"Excuse me, young man," interjected Zelda, "but you were talking about the Shadow Medallion, were you not? I'm afraid I have no interest in astrobiology."

Erin grew more agitated, twisting the jar in dismay, which caused the lid to pop off. The eel then slid out of the jar in a flood of foul-smelling preservative solution and landed on Erin's plate. Nicholas wasn't sure but had the strong impression that the sinowhateveritis was still moving on its own. He didn't really want to know.

Shivers stepped forward, passing through Tails on the way ("Cut 'dat out! Ya' know I hate dat!") "Tarnation, whatcha doin' handin' off anything important to that nincompoop Neville," he

complained as he picked up the eel, dripping preservative everywhere. "What the heck does this medall yun thing look lak anyway? I'll git it fur ya, you just let ol' Shivers handle things!"

"Oh, it's flat like a coin, but about so big," said Erin gesturing with his hands, "and black with a sort of triangle and some circles on it." Zelda looked upset again but thought better of commenting on Erin's ignorance. Erin tried to remember the proper names and descriptions but somehow his brain was stuck. It was easy to see that he was not impressing Zelda. Meanwhile Shivers had disappeared through the ceiling and Melody was playing If You Could Read My Mind.

By the time the song was over they could hear Shivers mumbling to himself down the hallway. "Durn empty-headed ignorami, how'm I gonna git the dessert out when I'm a' chasin' fur dumb kids what can't fahnd anythin' I don' know, this'd just burn me up if'n I wasn't so afear'd o' fire..." By now everyone at the table had turned towards the door in anticipation; the disappointment was therefore all the more embarrassing for Erin when Shivers came round the corner and handed Erin the cover from one of the guest bathroom toilet seats: it was round and (approximately) flat, and decorated with an abstract pattern composed of triangles and circles (among other geometric figures) etched into the ceramic, but it wasn't the Shadow Medallion. "Oh, gosh, I'll just go get it myself," said Erin. Zelda was no longer paying much attention.

Mr. Saturn said "Sit tight, son, I owe you at least this one," to Erin. Melody launched into Someone to Watch Over Me. Mr. Saturn wiggled his nose and then floated up to the ceiling above the chandelier, where he did some manipulation no one else could clearly see. A trap door popped out and the Shadow Medallion floated gently down to rest on the table next to the Princess' plate. She picked the disk up carefully -- one might even say reverently -- and handed it to Impa. The older woman carefully inspected the surface, turned it to various angles in the light, sniffed several places, and licked two spots on the bottom, mumbling some sort of incantation. She nodded in approval and made a hand signal. Another older lady, unnoticed heretofore by the kids, stepped out of the corner of the room and handed a sort of leather cover to Impa, who slid the Medallion safely inside and then tied the whole thing to her wrist. "By your leave, My Lady?" said Impa in a gravelly baritone. The Princess nodded and Impa made her way to the door, presumably to place the precious object in safer keeping.

"So it was Mario. After all his representations to the contrary, too!" mumbled Zelda, apparently to herself. "That man is incorrigible! How could I have let him deceive me yet again--" She seemed suddenly to remember the guests. "My manners have escaped me, no doubt a consequence of Impa's absence. Young man," she said, turning to Erin, "Young man, you have returned to us an heirloom of our house, as well as a token of power. I did you a disservice in my heart, discrediting you unjustly. How can I make amends?"

Becoming the focus of Zelda's attention had caused Erin's brain to go blank again. He mumbled something unintelligible and looked rather like a kindergartener trying to explain what he was doing in the halls during class time. After some consideration Zelda reached back behind her head and undid the clasp holding her glistening necklace. She beckoned Erin to stand, and leaning across the table, fastened the necklace around him, delivering in the process a chaste kiss on his cheek. Erin turned glowing red from a combination of embarrassment and confusion, a condition only worsened when he looked down and saw that in inclining towards the Princess he had put both his hands wrist-deep into the berry pie. "Seems like I've been here before," he mumbled.

Just then Neville bustled into the dining room carrying a telephone handset with the wire dangling behind him. He placed it on the table next to the Princess and pulled on the cord, which had wrapped around a leg of the soup tray, precipitating two bowls of consommé onto the floor with a crash. "Oh, dear, where is my list?" muttered Neville to himself, and started to walk through the far wall towards the study, stopping halfway. "By Jove! I've forgotten again," he said with another attempted slap to his head. He reappeared from the wall and returned to the task of finding a phone jack to plug the handset in, passing through the table holding the cord (which knocked over two wine glasses and a gravy boat before Shivers, trailing behind, could pick it up out of harm's way) and then dropping down and crawling through Clara's legs on his way to the other wall. "Oh, dear, who spilt all this soup? I must mark it down on my list!"

"Zut alors!" said Bonapa, who had recovered a towel from the kitchen and was trying to repair the mess. "Plug in ze telephone and go away! To ze devil with your precious list!"

"Telephone, oh, yes, of course," replied Neville. It took several tries with the plug in the incorrect orientation, with Neville repeatedly trying to put on his reading glasses before remembering that he was a ghost and didn't need them, but finally the cord was seated. He floated back to the table and pressed the SPEAKER button, then disappeared towards the study without a word of explanation.

"Tell 'em you don't need another credit card!" shouted Cane in the general direction of Zelda. He turned back to Tails: "That's what my dad always says when people call at dinner. Then he hangs up. Doesn't even ask who it is! He's always hanging up on my friends that way. I'm gonna' be just like him when I grow up!"

"Right, kid, a chip off da' ol' block if I evah saw one," said Tails.

"Credit card? I don't need no credit card, I gotta coins!" said the voice on the phone. It was obviously Luigi, though his speech was uneven and somewhat slurred. "Isa dat you Princessa Zelda, I was gonna call you to see how you wasa doin', it'sa so sorry I'm a late to my meeting, we're workin' so hard, you know." In the background the kids could hear laughter and the tinkling of glasses.

Zelda made a visible effort to restrain herself from whatever she was tempted to say and replied diplomatically: "Why, Luigi, we are doing very well. One of your young guests has discovered the Shadow Medallion here in the mansion, apparently mistaken for a manhole cover, and returned it to us; I hope you don't mind?" the last phrase being delivered in a tone of voice that clearly showed that no amount of minding on Luigi's part would cause her to part with the Medallion again.

"Da kids dey gave you a manhole cover, whatsa dey thinkin? Well its only a kids you know, they'ra real nicea kids, how's thata Clara my little sweetie?" Cane opened his mouth to comment, but Clara, too quick for him, tossed a large olive right in ("Three points!" laughed Nicholas, "and with the left hand!").

"I believe Clara is doing very well also," said Zelda, nodding approvingly at her marksmanship. "Let me take this opportunity to thank you again for your cooperation, and to assure you that my staff is doing their utmost to reach the Professor, so that we can complete our mission promptly and have no further need to impose upon your hospitality."

"It'sa no problem, you stay asa long asa ya likea, itsa so lonely ina the mansion when nobody'sa there."

Brian, who was seated on Zelda's right, adjacent to the phone, could hear two voices in the background: "He's completely plastered!" said one. "Yeah, this is a roll! Let's get him to eat more flowers!" There was a slight scraping noise and more laughter.

"Can't ya see I'ma talking on the phone," said Luigi's voice again. "Whatsa you -- oh, you got me a salad, you know I likea the salad after the meal, itsa so nice." The amplified sounds of slurping and chewing could be heard-- apparently Luigi was holding the handset near his mouth while consuming whatever he had received. "Bonapa Tee," he said between slurps, "you gotta learna disa recipe, witha da yellow lettuce witha da red in the middle, itsa so tasty!" Brian could hear guffaws and snorts interspersed with Luigi's munching.

Zelda's patience was wearing thin. "Was there anything else you needed to talk about? We are also in the middle of dinner here at the mansion, another remarkable repast for which we humbly thank your amazing cook and kitchen staff." Bonapa T., rising from his knees carrying the empty soup bowls, blushed and bowed.

"What'sa for you calling me up a you're not even finished with dinner, eh?" said Luigi.

"I believe it was you who initiated this conversation," replied Zelda.

"Initablated? Whatsa you talking about?" Just then the phone emitted a pair of beeping sounds, and another light went on next to one of the buttons.

"Pardon me, Luigi, but we seem to have another call coming in," said Zelda. Then to herself: "Now how do I switch this blasted thing?"

"Oh, allow me, Your Highness!" said Neville, who had returned from the study carrying his parchment and a dip pen. He placed the ink bottle on the table next to Tennyson and floated through the potato plate to the phone. "Just press here, like so, very simple indeed, would you like to see it again?"

"Yes, thank you, Neville, and no, that was quite clear," said Zelda.

From the phone came a quite different, more nasal voice: "Hello? Is that Neville? Can you get me the Princess?"

"It's da Professor!" said Tails, popping up into the air and hovering upside down towards the phone, his fur shedding bits of chicken and sand over the other diners.

"Hello, Professor, I'm here," said Zelda. "It's indeed a pleasure to hear from you at last. I hope everything is going well." Nicholas mouthed E Gadd? to Brian, who nodded silently.

"Yeah, great, we were just putting some final touches on the physical rendering engine; we achieved greather than five nine's validation yesterday with a test environment. We are essentially ready to initiate the first test protocols, except that there are still some concerns about allowing free-running daemons, especially during memory defragmentation periods."

"Yes, yes, thank you, Professor," said Zelda, "but as you recall my curiosity doesn't extend to that level of detail. Were you going to be back here at the Mansion soon?"

The voice on the other end sighed audibly. "It's really hard to leave right now -- you know we don't have any usable data links back to here, I really can't supervise the work without being present. I thought you were the one who wanted to get these initial protocols completed? It's very delicate, you know: we need to employ a pseudorandom sequence approach so that our perturbations are perfectly orthogonal to normality-- that means the results are unambiguously detectable to our instruments while remaining intrinsically invisible to the inhabitants. We don't want to make any mistakes, you know. Who knows what would happen if the real world were to figure out what we're up to?"

"Professor! Please. I am at the dinner table with our guests!" Zelda was visibly distraught. Neville, misinterpreting her distress, pressed a button on the phone as she continued: "When were you going to get back here in person to the Mansion so we can talk?"

"Oh, wherea did ya go, it'sa so nice you wanna talka to me, you always ignoreda me before, don't think I didn't notice you likea Mario better, so whatsa new everybody does?"

Luigi sounded if anything worse than before. There was a sound of slurping and swallowing; Brian could hear the same voices in the background: "Hey, let's give him another black shrimp cocktail! That was a crack-up!" "Naw, I'm outta cockroaches -- wait a minute, there's one!"

"That is hardly the case, Luigi," improvised Zelda, recovering quickly. "I must say that it sounds as if you should consider having a large glass of water and then getting some sleep. Perhaps you've had enough entertainment for one night."

"I'ma not so sleepy, my friends gonna get some more to eat, (slurrrp) then we go toa club twenty-four, oh wasa that club sixty five? Whatsa dat twenty three minus fifty six, maybe it's club forty three, no itsa minus, how you gonna have fun at a club datsa so negative, whatsa so negative, I'ma not so sure, I'ma gonna take a rest to figure it outta..." There was a thunk and the sound of snoring, with raucous laughter in the background. Zelda addressed Neville: "Can we please return to the conversation with the Professor?"

"Oh, certainly, he's ever so much more coherent if perhaps less colorful--" said Neville.

"Without the commentary, if you please."

"Quite so, quite so," said Neville, knocking the ink bottle into the fondue pan as he reached for the phone and pressed the call waiting button. "There we are." Tennyson withdrew a cube of bread now black on one side and cheesy on the other and contemplated whether to find out what ghost ink tastes like.

They had apparently entered the middle of a conversation between Professor Gadd and an unknown third party. "--can't go on hiding this forever. The results are perfectly conclusive; we can be much more aggressive than the Eine limit without attracting any attention at all."

"I told you that was unauthorized work!" This was the Professor's voice again. "The methodology is inferior, we had no peer review on the experimental design, it doesn't prove anything." Zelda was obviously torn between a desire to interrupt for security's sake, and an intense curiosity about

the topic under discussion. "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence! It's not just dangerous, it's contrary to our instructions. What would happen if the Committee knew we had made uncontrolled changes?"

The Princess could no longer contain herself. "Professor! After all the lectures you've given the Committee! I am aghast! So you've been making changes all along and not letting on? I must say this puts your status as a neutral arbiter in doubt, to say the least. I demand that you return here immediately, and be assured I shall arrange for a meeting of the Committee at the soonest practicable time."

"Calm down, Your Highness, calm down, no need to get excited. One of our staff did -- perform some experimentation without approval. Very dangerous and completely inconclusive. We have--disciplined the individual involved. It is the considered opinion of the Principal Investigators that the protocols agreed to within the Committee should be adhered to and that data obtained outside this framework is to be discarded from further consideration. I don't think you need concern yourself any more with this matter." There was the sound of a large object dropping and a sort of booming. The Professor's voice became urgent: "I'm sorry, Your Highness, I have to -- um, I have to go right now, I'll get to the mansion as soon as I can, goodbye!" click

The table burst into simultaneous talk, stored up during the polite silence imposed by the phone conversations: "What was that about?" asked Tennyson. "Changing what world?" puzzled Nicholas. "I told you we couldn't trust that man," said Impa. "Durn crackpot, I always said he was," mumbled Jack to Ellie. "Dat's da Professor, he ain't too swift on da political side," sighed Tails. "Gee, Neville, I hope Luigi's ok," said Clara. "Hey, Tennyson -- you gonna eat that bread cube or what?" said Cane.

At that moment, Shivers appeared from the kitchen pushing a large cart upon which were a number of plates each carrying an identical round, deliciously dark brown tort, each with a curiously-folded brown object at the top. "Shut yer yaps, a fella cain't even hear himself think!" said Shivers irritably. Impa looked at him as if he were a spider and probably would have sliced his head off had she not remembered that he was already dead. "Gol' dern it, lessee now, this one in the corner is fur Billie, er, Ellie, then Jack, now the next un's fur that durn highfalutin' Princess... Ryan, Uranus, Neptune -- now wait a gol' durned minute, hmmm..." Shivers continued to mutter to himself as he walked around the table carefully selecting one plate for each guest.

Bonapa T. was standing behind Clara watching Shivers to make sure the right dessert reached each guest. Clara turned to him and whispered, "What's going on? They all look exactly alike," referring to the cakes.

"Oh, la la! Ce n'est pas vrai! Zese are the famous fortune cookies of ze Madame Clairvoya, each is very carefully prepared for one and only one fortune, ze particular one for each of you! Of course, to ze untutored eye ze cakes zey look ze same, but it is not so! I have prepared them each one for ze taste, un grand travail. Maintenant, bon appetit from Bonapa T.!"

Cane, not waiting for explanations or clean silverware, was already smeared with frosting. Tails, who was obviously familiar with the routine, carefully popped the cookie out of the chocolate confection and broke it open. Instead of the slip of flimsy paper Clara had expected, a tiny figure grew from the broken cookie, floating at eye level before the inverted fox. Clara couldn't see it very well from her end of the table, but it looked like a tiny human figure dressed in a melange of brightly colored textiles. It moved, seeming to look up at Tails, and a tiny voice could be heard: "All that is gold does not glisten, not every dog is a fox; you would do better to listen to the ghosts that you stick in a box." Then there was a little pop! and the figure disappeared.

Tails gobbled up the cookie halves and, hanging inverted over the cake, took a stripe of frosting off with his long tongue. "Mmmm. She's always politickin' for da ghosts, dat's cause she's a spiritly sort o' gal, as well as bein' a ghost anyway, ya know. Don't mean nuthin. She ain't never yet given me a real fortune but the cookies 'r always pretty good, so it's OK."

"Cool!" said Nicholas. "Can I go next?" As no one contradicted him, he popped his cookie in half, and was rewarded with another tiny, colorfully-attired ghostling. The miniscule figure regarded him for a moment and then said: "When destruction threatens all, don't forget the party ball! There's no need to cry or grieve if you know just when to leave." pop!

Nicholas looked puzzled. Tails nudged him with a frosting-smeared paw: "Don't worry about it, kid, she hardly ever makes any sense anyway. Da cake is fantastic! Chow down!"

Cane had to dig his fortune cookie out from the mess he'd already made of the cake; the little Clairvoya ghost that arose was smeared with chocolate, and stopped to lick some off her headscarf, then launched into her speech: "A faster brain would pierce the ruse of your desire for faster shoes." pop! Cane stared at his feet as he licked up the last of the torte.

Erin went next: "Lucky in love is love best lost when eternal exile is the cost." pop! Cane snickered (mouth still full of chocolate); Zelda smiled courteously but looked relieved.

Clara took her turn: "Wisdom is best when hard-learned, improvement of self is so when earned; with temptation you needn't bother, there's no easy way to please your father." pop! She blushed and tried to pretend to be interested in the cake. Tennyson cracked open his cookie to direct the group's attention away from her, not without some trepidation: "Songs and friendship given freely last long after the last note fades; the last song sung will be remembered even when the last debt's paid." He looked at Nicholas with hands open in puzzlement. Tails laughed: "Told 'ya she's makin' it up!"

And finally Brian, as Mr. Saturn ate his cookie whole without giving Madame Clairvoya an opportunity to express an opinion on his fate: "Don't follow the stars unless you want to stay here; their spirits seem kind but they'll make you pay here. Keeping your head when others are maddened, you'll get them all home, safe but saddened."

The Princess seemed disinclined to indulge in dessert; she sampled a forkful of frosting as a courtesy to Bonapa T., and then rose and bowed to each of the guests. "It has been a great pleasure to make your acquaintance, children, but I have many responsibilities still to attend to and must take my leave."

Clara rose from her chair. "Your Highness, could I -- talk to you for a minute on the way?"

Zelda smiled and nodded, then swept out of the room followed by Impa, with Clara struggling to keep up. Nicholas turned to Neville and asked, "I guess Mr. Luigi won't be back tonight?"

Cane laughed. "Weren't you listening? He's more plastered than the cafeteria walls! We'll be lucky if he's back tomorrow."

"I am afraid I am in accord with Master Cane on this matter," added Neville. "The Master will most likely return tomorrow morning, perhaps less cheerfully than is his wont in other circumstances."

"Well, I guess we'd better get to bed, then," said Nicholas. "We're going to need some rest if tomorrow is anything like today was!"

"Why?" said Erin, looking as if he had just noticed where he was.

"Well, according to the list our team still has eight rooms to clean up, and that's only because we got so much help from the ghosts," said Brian. "I'm pretty tired. Aren't you?"

"Oh, yeah, the list," replied Erin. "What happened with that? Did we clean up anything?"

"We didn't clean up anything, I did," said Nicholas. "And Brian is right, I'm going to sleep."

"I wouldn't worry too much about it," said Mr. Saturn, waddling towards the door. "By tomorrow Luigi will have some completely new scheme in his head and will have forgotten all about cleaning the mansion. I'm going to read; the I Ching seems apropos. Coming, Erin?"

"Somehow I suspect you actually know what's going on," said Erin, following him out the door.

"Well," replied Mr. Saturn, "I imagine that Madame Clairvoya is considering changing her name to Cassandra after tonight; who am I to move in on her turf?"

Nicholas was sitting on the bed contemplating the Party Ball, but looking at it didn't help resolve any of his questions. He was sharing one of the guest rooms with Cane and Brian; there were three curtained four-poster beds and a separate dresser and desk for each of the kids. He yawned and stowed the Party ball back in his backpack, and stretched his legs under the covers with great relief. "Brian, you asleep?"

"That's kind of a dumb question. If I was I wouldn't hear you, would I?"

"Sorry. Did you get what that stuff Professor E. Gadd was talking about meant? I was totally lost. Are they inventing demons? What are they changing?"

"The one thing I'm certain about is that we weren't supposed to hear any of that! Zelda was caught off guard. She didn't mean to discuss it in front of us. Beyond that I'm pretty lost. I've heard my mom and dad talking about demons once but they were discussing computer stuff, so maybe that's some sort of software thing and not a monster. I have no idea what sudo noise is or ogogonality but it sounds pretty technical."

"Yeah, maybe it's nothing important but the Princess seemed pretty riled up. Well, I'm tired, see you tomorrow."

Cane was sitting on the bed fidgeting. Finally he spoke: "This is crazy! How can you guys go to sleep? There's no TV! No video games to play! NO T.V.!"

"I thought you were going to check out the projection room?" said Brian.

"Naw, I tried that already. You were right, it's just those plumbing videos, they're really boring. Who wants to know how to close a shutoff valve?" Nicholas smiled but held his tongue. "I want to watch TV! I want to go back to Fourside! At least they had good channels there."

"You're the one who's crazy!" said Nicholas. "The Pro Trucker's Channel is not worth getting blown up for!"

"Oh, man, you had to remind me. Now I'll NEVER know whether he got the last parking place or not. There's got to be a TV in this stupid mansion somewhere, and I'm going to find it, or my name isn't Africanus!"

"Afri what? You never told us that," said Nicholas. Brian said nothing but smirked into his pillow.

"Ooops. Did I say that? Never mind, I'm off. I'll let you know what great shows you missed tomorrow," Cane said as he slammed the door shut behind him.

"Don't open any doors you don't know!" yelled Nicholas after him, but he doubted that Cane heard.

"I guess I won't count on any help from him tomorrow," said Brian. "But then I got through today, it's all right."

"You're not mad at me for pairing you with him, are you?" said Nicholas. "Not that Erin is much better. I couldn't put them together, they'd never get anything done."

"Of course not, what else could you do?" replied Brian. "We'll get it done somehow. We have so far." He paused. "You know, Nicholas, if you think about what we've gotten through in the last couple of days, it's pretty amazing. You know me, I've always been – well, I'm a chicken. I'm usually scared of just about everything. But that Inky made me so mad! It was wierd: I was just too mad to be frightened of him. I should've been; that blade thing was really dangerous! But we won, we fooled him and we won. And now – it's different. I kindof feel like we're going to get through everything. Like somehow we're going to get home despite it all. Between you and Clara and Tennyson and Mr. Saturn, someone always finds the answer. Well, I must sound pretty stupid. Anyway, don't worry about it. Good night."

Nicholas thought for a moment. "I hope you're right. I hope you're right and Madame Clairvoya isn't. I think. Oh, never mind, good night."

"What were you discussing with the Princess?" asked Tennyson. He and Clara had smaller, adjoining rooms next to the Master Bedroom. They had left the connecting door open so they could talk. "If it's not private, that is."

"No, I guess not. I asked if it was ok – I mean, I told her about how we're trying to get to Ark to see if it would get us home, and seeing as how upset she was about the professor and everything, was that all right?"

"Go on. What did she say?"

"It was kind of strange. She knelt down, like she didn't want to look down on me, and said something like 'Child, perhaps you shouldn't have trusted me with that knowledge.'"

"Was that all?"

"No, then, um, like 'A ruler must make difficult decisions. Sometimes people are hurt as a result. Often those that you have nothing against, even those you like.'" Clara paused. "'Even those you love.' I remember her very distinctly; her eyes looked distant when she said that. Like she was thinking of something else. Remembering something. Then she asked me if I was ready to live the rest of my life here."

"You mean that we might never get home?"

"I think that's what she meant."

"What did you say?"

"I started to say that I was ready for anything, but she was looking right into my eyes – I felt like she was looking inside me, like I shouldn't pretend with her. So I told her how much I would miss my Dad." Clara laughed nervously. "I guess I started to cry a little. She asked about Mom, you see, and..."

"You don't have to tell me this, Clara."

"No, it's ok. Then she hugged me and told me that if it turned out we couldn't get home – well, she said she would be proud to – have me as her daughter. Tennyson, I don't know what to do. We're just kids. How could we win if the grown ups are against us? This is crazy. What if we don't ever get home?" She was crying and trying unsuccessfully to conceal the fact.

Tennyson had come to sit on her bed. He took her hand and smiled. "Of course we'll get home. Just look at all the people – well, whatever – that have helped us. Winnie and Dr. Mario, and Princess Peach, and Tayce T. and Tails. And Hedley, and even Fox. We don't have to do this alone. Besides, how could we fail when we have someone as brave as you?"

Clara pressed his hand against her tear-streaked cheek. "Thank you." She drew a deep calming breath and put his hand back on the covers. "Good night, Tennyson. Sweet dreams."

Tennyson laughed. "Sweet dreams to you too. Night."

"So what do you think? Does she like me?" asked Erin.

Mr. Saturn waddled over to the left-hand bookshelf. "Erin, I'm afraid it's time for a character-building experience. Here." He wiggled his nose and a moderate-sized volume slid out of the shelf and onto the table.

Erin read the title out loud: "'The Big Book of Zelda's Love Life'. Oh. So I guess I'm...uh...not the first guy to be – interested in her?"

"Hint, kid -- you're in chapter three."

"Oh, all right. Let's see... table of contents...Chapter one: Official Suitors... Chapter two: Affairs and Relationships... Chapter three: Crushes, Obsessions, and Stalkers: pages sixty-two to one hundred twenty-three." Erin began to flip through the listings. The Chapter One entries had a large photo and biography of the individuals, along with a blow-by-blow account of their Zelda-related adventures, the whole often occupying several pages. Erin skimmed several entries and then put the book down abruptly: "Wait a minute. What have these guys got that I haven't got?"

"Where should I start? Accomplishments. Athleticism. Charm. Etiquette. Good looks. Haberdashery. Height. Judgment. Maturity. Money. Muscle mass. Political connections. Reputation. Romantic -- ahem -- experience. Savoir faire. Social graces. Shall I go on?"

"No, I get the point. What else is in here?" Chapter two blokes received a one-page writeup with a postage-stamp photo, leaving one paragraph each for the lowly chapter three entries. Erin read one: "Kirby had never been known for social skills, and his pursuit of Zelda was entirely consistent with his reputation. He showed up one evening uninvited at Hyrule Castle trailed by a huge gift-wrapped box carried by Waddledee. As he arrived at 6:07 PM, the bridge was up; in order to cross the moat, Kirby decided to inhale the water temporarily, leaving the crocodiles high and dry, and the fish flopping. When he spat the water back out after crossing, he eroded the foundations of the bridge; repairs cost the kingdom over a million ruppees. One can also imagine the sort of halitosis that would result from filling

your mouth with a few thousand gallons of fetid swamp water, hardly conducive to romance. He then barged into the ball room, where a formal dinner was in progress, and Waddledee plunked the gift box in front of Zelda's throne, squashing several large plates of expensive shellfish and causing one leg of the table to collapse, spilling onion soup on several of the guests. There followed a brief and for the most part incomprehensible speech to his erstwhile beloved, after which the box popped its top and sides to reveal a huge platter of over five hundred McDonoghue's octopus burgers. During transport the buns had separated from the patties and toppings spread over everything, resulting in an unappetizing mixture of bread, ketchup, and seafood. Needless to say, the Princess was unimpressed, but Kirby, far from being distraught at his rejection, calmly sat down at the broken table and in one breath inhaled the majority of the burgers (as well as the table cloth, several napkins, and two candlesticks), packing the rest back into the box to take back to his friends. The Princess was not broken-hearted when he left."

Erin stopped for breath. "Well, looks like someone is even worse than me."

"Never said there wasn't," said Mr. Saturn. "Keep looking."

Erin found himself listed on page 122. "Wow, there're already four guys, a girl, and a Penguin listed after me!"

"There's usually a burst of entries after her talk-show appearances air on the Hyrule Public Affairs Network," said Mr. Saturn. "I think they had a tape running last night."

Erin sighed. "You know, Holmes was always a bachelor anyway."

"I'm not sure that's the right role model, Erin. He was also addicted to morphine. Any other inspiring platonic lives?"

"Gee, let's see. Queen Elizabeth the first?"

"I don't think you'll get much peer group support for that. Besides, wrong gender. Erin, it's probably time to remind you that you're only ten years old. It's a bit early to resign yourself to a lifetime of technical journals and romance novels. Let's just try to get to where we don't spill liquids on our clothes during dinner."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. You know what, Mr. Saturn? I think I like imagining better than I like reality."

"Erin, some folks just get on with the world they find, some try to change the world they live in, and some withdraw from the world altogether," said Mr. Saturn thoughtfully.

Just then Cane barged into the study, looking frustrated. "Is there a TV in here?"

"Nope," said Mr. Saturn. "None in the mansion far as I know."

"Oh, man. I need a snack!" Cane left as abruptly as he entered.

"You forgot the ones who just want to know what's for breakfast," said Erin. "Maybe life is simpler if you don't stretch your dreams too far."

"We are of such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded by a sleep," quoted Mr. Saturn.

Erin yawned. "I don't know if it's time to round out our lives but sleep is a thought. I'm off to the gallery. Night."

Chapter 10: X Marks the Yacht

"D-d-d-o-o-o y-y-y-o-o-u-u s-s-s-e-e-e a-a k-k-k-e-e-ey?" shouted Brian. It was hard to talk because the bobsled was shaking so much. Brian's arms were clutched around Clara's waist, and he was leaning to the left because Clara was. She was having a much more difficult time than she had anticipated driving the two-person craft: it seemed like the sled was going a lot faster than when she did bobsled runs in Mario Party. Clara knew that Brian was asking a question but avoiding a catastrophic wipeout required her full attention: she screamed "RIGHT!" and shifted as far as the little compartment allowed. Brian awkwardly followed suit.

The track curved gently left while sloping down sharply: the already speedy craft accelerated to a velocity that was actively alarming. Clara tried to remember where the brake was but couldn't take her eyes off the track long enough to look. The path pulled suddenly right, taxing her novice steering skills. The bobsled's outside runner rose within a finger's width of the top of the chute before she could get turned back towards the bottom, just in time for the track to drop precipitously: the spring-less sled flew several feet into the air, landing with a bone-jarring crash back onto the center of the run. It was the sort of thing that would be exhilarating if one wasn't so busy trying to survive the experience.

Another drop practically knocked the breath out of both kids; Clara was at the limit of her endurance negotiating a series of rapid S-curves before the track terminated in a long straightaway leading to the finish line. The track rose gently past the finish line, gradually slowing their sled to a stop next to what was obviously the exit platform. A Penguin wearing a tuxedo ('isn't that redundant?' thought Brian) and a red carnation was waiting to help them out. Clara released her seat belt and realized that she was dripping with sweat despite the freezing winds they had ridden through on the way down. She struggled out onto the platform and gave Brian a hand out; both kids lay on their backs, exhausted, on the frigid stone platform. The Penguin gave the sled a shove with its foot, pushing it onto the sled collection rail at the base of the run; after that the mechanism took over and drove the sled into the return tunnel off to the right of the platform.

"Wow. That was one heck of a ride," said Clara.

"It sure was a lot faster than I expected. You did a really great job driving," replied Brian.

"Thanks, I guess. At least we made it down. I didn't think it would be so fast either. It would have been fun if I hadn't been petrified the whole time."

"So -- did you see a key anywhere?" asked Brian again. "I couldn't see anything, we were going so fast. How are we going to find it if he dropped it here?"

"You know, if he dropped it on the bobsled run, it would have slid to the bottom of the run!" replied Clara. "We should just look around here in the snow." She struggled to an upright position, painfully discovering that some of her hair had already frozen onto the stone. The kids awkwardly shuffled around on the slippery path and began to inspect the snow at the edges of the sled run, while the Penguin ineffectually tried to direct them towards the little "EXIT" path off to the right. In the distance they could hear the rattling screech of the next sled coming down the hill.

Both kids got down on their knees in the snow and began to toss it aside. Brian shuffled sideways, eyes down looking for the key, making his way around a big sign that detailed safety rules for the bobsled run, when suddenly a clump of snow struck him on the side of the head.

"Hey! Clara, watch it!" he said, but then he realized that she was off to his left, and the snow had struck his right side. He looked up to see another Penguin, less nattily dressed than the ride attendant, kicking snow aside with its stubby feet.

"Oh, what are you up to? Are you looking for something?" said Brian to the Penguin.

The Penguin stopped digging and plopped down on its behind in the snow. It spoke very deliberately: "I'm looking -- looking -- for a -- fish. Raw fish. Heavens, it's tasty, and expeditious!" He exhaled slowly and looked sad. "But this fish was our token in the Filet Relay. I lost it and let the team down. Gladys will be heartbroken."

"The what relay?" asked Brian. "What team? I'm sorry, I'm confused."

The Penguin took a deep whistling breath and spoke: "Maybe I should tell you the whole story. It's been a quiet week in Lake Snowbegone, my home town. On Tuesday afternoon, the Relay Committee met for coffee and shaved ice cakes at Our Penguin of Perpetual Impossibility. Mr. Flipperson, the pastor, proposed that the racers would do better if red snapper was substituted for the yellowfin tuna. Yellowfin tuna is a Lake Snowbegone tradition, you see, dating back to the settlement of the town by Norwegian bachelor penguins. Mr Flipperson had been thinking about a change for several months. He was afraid to tell his wife about it because everyone knew that --"

At this point Clara interrupted the tale. "Look, I found a fish -- is that what you're looking for?" She held up a tiny hard-frozen piscine shape: it reminded Brian of the salt herring his mother sometimes ate.

The Penguin sighed again. "Yes, well, that's not the fish I was looking for. Nope. But I guess it would be - fine. Just fine." He removed a large somewhat corroded key from a pocket in his belt. "I did manage to find -- well, it isn't much use, of course, since you don't have a door here, but--"

"All right! A key!" exclaimed Brian. "Thanks! We'll take it!"

"That doesn't look like the one Luigi was talking about," said Clara dubiously.

The Penguin's wings sagged still lower. "Yes, well -- we aren't supposed to be -- happy -- we're Eudyptulians." He looked so sad that Clara handed him the fish, and reluctantly took the key in return.

"But that's not the one you lost?" asked Brian, puzzled.

"Well, no. It's not."

"We could help you look for that one," said Clara. "Where did you lose it exactly?"

"Oh, over there in the snowdrift by the pylon," said the Penguin, pointing to a steel column, located about 100 yards downhill from the end of the bobsled run, which supported the sky ride cables. The structure rested next to a steep slope, and snow was piled in thick drifts around it.

"You dropped it over there?" asked Brian, puzzled. "Why are you looking for it way over here?"

"Why. Oh. Well, there's less snow here."

Nicholas and Tennyson were waiting in line behind two psyducks. "Hey, what about this one," said Nicholas. "Why did the GameCube chicken cross the road? Because he was playing Animal Crossing! Get it?"

Tennyson wasn't paying attention, as he was trying to see what was happening in the contest area. The line snaked back and forth through a sort of hedge maze, so only at odd moments as the kids shuffled forward could they actually see the platform. It was a big slab of gray stone raised two big steps above the grass, about as big as Nicholas' family room at home but shaped like a hexagon. Two white endposts, each about waist height, defined the jumping area; the fire sprites waited half on each post while one or two contestants stepped forward from the head of the line, and then threaded through the air to form the glowing hot jump rope. Dangling overhead from a pair of cables was a brilliantly aquamarine ribbon from which depended a golden key. The object of the game was to stay in the jumping circle as the fiery rope circled faster and faster. If the jumpers were quick enough to avoid being burnt as the speeding rope grew longer with each pass, eventually it would grow high enough to burn through the ribbon, releasing the key; the alert jumpers had to catch the key and escape from the circle in order to retain the golden prize. No one had yet come particularly close to winning a key.

The ducks in front of them were huge and rather chubby; they were obviously having difficulty just climbing the steps in the line and didn't seem likely to have much chance to win. Their conversation, such as it was, was also irritatingly monotonous, consisting of "sigh sigh" repeated in a depressed monotone. More worrying were a pair of armored figures that reminded Nicholas of the warrior woman

they had met at Peach's castle, Samus Aran, two groups ahead of the kids in the line. Their helmets were on and it was impossible to tell if they were men or women, but the armor looked quite fire-resistant.

"I wish we'd gotten some popcorn or something," said Nicholas. "I'm hungry."

"Geez, Nicholas, I watched you eat eight pancakes at breakfast," replied Tennyson. "You're gonna' turn into Cane."

"It was seven and they were smaller than the ones my Mom makes," said Nicholas. "OK, try this: Jack and Jill are dead on the floor in a puddle of water. The room has a door but no windows and the door is closed. How did they die?"

"Geez, Nicholas, that's easy. They're goldfish and someone spilled the bowl. I wish Clara was here; she's much better at jump rope than I am." The psyducks waddled forward, allowing the kids to proceed around the last wall of leaves and spotted white flowers. There were about 10 more jumpers to go before Nicholas and Tennyson got their chance.

"Denise told you! I've got another one: a man is found dead inside a car. He's been shot in the head, but the windows are closed and the doors are closed and there's no hole in the glass. How was he shot?"

"Convertible. Duh." Tennyson was leaning over to see around the psyduck in front of him.

"This looks bad. Those guys are gonna win for sure." The next pair up were two rather elfin-looking fellows dressed in mottled green leather tunics with soft pointed caps and brown leather boots. Above each of their caps a tiny glowing spot could just be distinguished, flitting rapidly back and forth but never moving more than an arm's length away. They moved with practiced grace and teamwork, seeming to glide rather than climb up the stairs to the platform.

"Well, maybe we can just buy the key from them afterwards," suggested Nicholas. "We don't have to win, we just need the key. Luigi gave us a bunch of coins, after all."

"Hmm, ok, I guess we can try that if we need to." The two diminutive fellows easily avoided the fiery strand as they bounced lightly on their booted feet, caps flopping up and down in a contrapuntal rhythm. As the rope grew faster the crowd grew attentive; one obnoxious koopa paratroopa started shouting, "burn 'em! burn 'em" but the rest of the line seemed more supportive.

"Whoah!" said Nicholas. The rope had just split in two, moving in opposite directions, both almost as fast as the eye could follow. The leather-clad feet of the jumpers moved blurringly fast as they hopped over and ducked under the doubly dangerous strings. The fire was within a finger's width of the key at the top of the ropes' travel and things were looking bad for the kids, when suddenly the tips of the jumpers' floppy caps both simultaneously burst into flame. [use the Fairies somehow] Distracted by the flames, their perfect rhythm thrown off, the pair suffered several nasty burns on the ankles in quick succession and finally gave up, diving out onto the soft pads at either side of the jump area.

"How the heck are we going to win?" asked Tennyson. "That looks really tough! Even Clara wouldn't have a chance."

"OK, why didn't the chicken cross the road?" asked Nicholas. "Because he was CHICKEN! Get it?"

"Geez, Nicholas, you're the one who's always telling us to be serious. How are we going to get the key?" The Metroid pair was up now, but turned out to be no threat: their armor made them awkward, and once the rope gained speed they were unable to keep up. Their armor spread the heat effectively, preventing their legs from being burnt but raising the inside temperature so much they were soon compelled to jump out of the circle and toss off their helmets, revealing two young girls with short-cropped red hair and freckles. The girls fanned themselves and poured water from a canteen over their heads as they stepped down the exit stair. Meanwhile the psyducks turned out to be a lot more threatening than they looked: they were teleporting away each time the ropes neared their feet and doing very well, until the larger one mistimed its appearance and suffered a nasty encounter with the rope, knocking his partner out of place as well.

"Keep your cool, I've got an idea. Where's that whatchamacallit, that shroom you took from Cane this morning?"

Tennyson removed a slab of spongy white material, wrapped in paper, from his pocket.. "Here it is, what about it?"

"We'll just eat it when we get inside," said Nicholas. "Here, I made a paper airplane this morning, we'll just fly around. I timed the ropes while we've been waiting: it'll take about 45 seconds to get the key, just enough time for us to expand again."

"You're kidding, right? We'll be one inch tall! We could get stepped on. If we hit the rope we won't just get a burn, we'll burn up!"

"Relax, I've got it all worked out," replied Nicholas. "It's wind currents or something like that. The rope has to blow the air away from where it moves so the air will just push us away from the fire. My dad told me once."

"Wait a minute! How are we going to get on the airplane? When we're big, we can't fit, and when we're small we can't get the plane in the air."

"Oh, yeah," said Nicholas thoughtfully. "Gee, I didn't think of that. OK, you go first and I'll put the plane where you can get it, then I'll shrink and you fly down and get me." Tennyson started to protest again, but by that time the kids were at the front of the line. Nicholas grabbed a chunk of shroom and charged into the circle; Tennyson followed reluctantly. There was a high-pitched whirring hissing sound as the fire sprites extended themselves to form the rope; from close up the kids could feel the heat on their skin where it faced the burning strand. The rope turned around and they jumped in unison, easily avoiding the rope for the first two or three passes. The pace started to pick up and Nicholas said "Now!" Tennyson looked dubious but shoved the pasty substance in his mouth and chewed.

The change was abrupt. The world receded away in all directions at an alarming rate. The noises of the contest seemed to sink away into an unhearable bass. Tennyson's eyes seemed to have become terribly nearsighted: everything in the distance was blurry and ill-defined. Only the stone floor upon which he stood seemed distinct: he could see the faces of the individual crystallites that made up the polished surface, and felt as if he would see the little lines of atoms if he knelt down close enough. The fiery rope, visible only as a vague glowing blur, seemed to drift in a sea of molasses, providing ample time for the Nicholas blur to lean down and place the airplane where Tennyson could reach it, a process that seemed to be taking place about as fast as one of Mr. Classen's lectures on grammar. "Geez, Nicholas, come on!" thought Tennyson, "I could learn how to diagram and sentence and forget it and learn it again three more times before you get down here! Gee, was that an imperfect tense or an indicative? Let's see--" But it wasn't quite that bad: the paper drifted into his field of view, growing definite as it neared, about the time the rope started its downward arc.

Tennyson sprinted the impossibly long distance to where Nicholas held the folded craft bobbing above the stone, dodging bits of uneaten cracker and pollen grains. He leapt and missed, ran back and leapt again, snagged the edge of a punched hole and clambered on top. Then he wondered why he had been in such a hurry: Nicholas took forever to lift the toy craft back up and toss it ever so slowly into the air. The plane floated so lethargically that Tennyson found he had ample time to accustom himself to maneuvering the little craft, shifting his weight to direct it in a steep left turn to avoid Nicholas' knee as he j-u-m-p-e-d lackadaisically over the hot jump rope.

Tennyson found that he could even stall the little plane and easily recover before control was lost; he was so fascinated trying to induce a spin that he didn't notice Nicholas' huge form shrinking down, and almost forgot that he was supposed to rescue his friend. Then he realized that Nicholas had disappeared completely from his impaired vision: he had no idea where the other boy had gone. He put the plane into a steep dive and then skimmed the ground just off the jump surface in a series of shallow s-turns, searching through a fog that reminded him of the way you could never see far enough in the old N64 version of Rogue Squadron. He was vaguely aware that the hot rope was coming down towards him from the distance: he wasn't sure what would happen when it got close to the flammable airplane and didn't want to find out.

Things were beginning to look a bit grim when the tiny figure of shrunken Nicholas appeared from behind a huge discarded candy wrapper and ran towards the rescue craft. Tennyson tried to shout to Nicholas, but found that the breaking-waves-at-the-seashore noise that filled his ears made it almost

impossible to hear himself speak, to say nothing of any reply. He started to slide backwards to bring the nose of the tiny plane up as Nicholas grabbed onto the tail fin to pull himself on. The sudden addition of weight in the rear induced a pitch up that Tennyson couldn't correct; the plane zoomed almost vertically upwards as the deadly rope drew near. Nicholas was dangling from the folded tail fin by one hand as they executed an inverted loop with simultaneous half-roll, avoiding close contact with the rope but nearly spilling both micro-boys into the air. Fortunately, at this scale the paper surface was very rough and afforded solid hand-holds. As the plane rolled level once again Nicholas scrambled towards the center of gravity and Tennyson was able to regain stability.

The ambient noise made it necessary to communicate by gesture, but fortunately the ponderous slowness of the curious giant world the boys inhabited made it easy for them to adjust rapidly to circumstances. On the next loop of the rope they were able to verify Nicholas' original idea: they could exploit the powerful convection currents from the heated rope to gain altitude, rising on the columns of hot air as if they were flying over a mountain range in the desert. They rose to nearly the top of the imaginary ellipsoid defined by the drifting ropes and then abandoned their source of lift, executing a lazy spiral to the left and sinking slowly through the indistinct scene around them. With a gesture of his arm Tennyson drew Nicholas' attention to the splitting up of the blurry red glow into two: the ropes had become dual and increased in speed to something that almost looked normal. They bumped along the edge of a turbulent vortex shed by the rope, easily feeling their way onto the best rising air column for another trip to the top. Their world became a sort of slow-motion ballet (but a lot less boring, thought Tennyson) as they felt their way through the up- and down-drafts. After what seemed a very long while, they found themselves zooming up again when out of the distance above Tennyson saw a yellowish gleam sinking into his field of view: the key! He began to slide forwards to pitch down the nose when with shocking abruptness his miniature dreamworld contracted away: he pitched backwards off the plane expanding almost instantly to full size just as he landed hard on his backside on the stone. Nicholas returned to normal size a moment thereafter; the key flopped into his outstretched hand as he landed OOOMPH! right on top of Tennyson.

Amidst the sudden assault of the crowd noise, Nicholas could hear Tennyson shout "Get off me!" He rolled hard to the right clutching the key and just missed the flying right-hand strand; Tennyson was less fortunate as the two ropes met at the bottom on either side, though as the fire sprites turned their heat down in recognition of Nicholas' successful exit with the key, the ropes burnt through his pants on either side but did more damage to his pride than his skin.

As Tennyson stood, trying to hold his pants together, his ears were assaulted with the mostly enthusiastic cries from those still waiting in line. Nicholas held the key up in his right hand and pushed Tennyson's arm up with his left, in a victory gesture to the crowd which unfortunately caused Tennyson's pants leg to slip halfway to his knee. Even the psyducks, who had only managed to waddle a few steps past the exit, turned and recited "sigh -- sigh" in what was presumably applause. The staff were already hanging a replacement key, this one rather larger and silvery.

"Well, I have to admit you were right about that shroom," said Tennyson as the boys made their way down the exit stairs. "Though I thought we were cooked a couple times. I guess Luigi will be happy."

"Yep, we have the key to the situation in hand," replied Nicholas, poking Tennyson in the back with the golden one. "Speaking of that: why is it difficult to open a piano?"

"What? I don't know. Why?"

"Because all the keys are inside! Get it? Inside!"

"I'm laughing all the way to the gate," said Tennyson.

Erin was lost. This is not to say that he was looking very hard for the Order Up minigame he was supposed to be checking out, or that he didn't know generally where he was. He was wandering somewhere in the middle of an endlessly-fascinating and very large hedge maze, with minor surprises at every inexplicable turn.

"I told you to turn left at the last fork," said Erin to himself, passing under a bridge of grapevines to the rightmost of three passageways. "Left! If you would listen to me we would have reached the Heart of the Jaguar hours ago! Now Jones will be there first." Then in a lower voice with a bad Hispanic accent: "The senior he is so wise. He knows where to go in the midst of the Labyrinth. He knows where the secret chamber of the Olmec kings lies. Perhaps he can explain how he got us lost in the first place, no?" The first voice: "I should have known as soon as I saw that Mickey Mouse watch. You double-crossing tarantula -- Jones paid you off, didn't he? Fsst - crack! Ah, the senior should be careful of guns, they can be very dangerous. Fsst- crack! So, the senior, he knows much about the books, perhaps, but he does not know the whip, yes? Fsst - crack! The learning process is painful, no? You vile betrayer! Ah, senior, that is Don Vile Betrayer to you."

The blue and gold flowers gave way to yellow spotted blossoms as he came around another bend in the living wall and walked down a long passageway exposed to the sun. Water misters were distributed along the bottom of the walkways that passed over the maze, lending a clammy humidity to the heat. "Ha ha ha ha! All the priests teach the children how important is the heart of gold, and now the true heart of gold -- the Heart of the Jaguar -- it is mine! Not to mention the rubies and the emeralds. Fsst -- crack! Jones! But -- you're dead!" A new voice: "Not quite yet: you know how careful I am. Kerpow! That piece belongs in a museum and I mean to see it there!" Suddenly there was a loud rumbling noise. Hey, this is great, thought Erin. I usually have to imagine this sort of thing. "Look, Dr. Jones -- the giant stones are perfectly round and they'll still be perfectly round after they crush you like a roach! Aaah!! run!!! Aha, the passageway is now clear!" In fact, it was: a large orange figure had gone flashing past Erin, trampling the thick plants of the hedge like daffodils, leaving behind an almost perfectly straight path blasting right through the twists and turns of the labyrinth. The going was a bit rougher than the soft dirt floor of the maze proper but much more direct; Erin followed to where the passage punched through the thick outer bushes onto the Midway.

There he found two very attractive and apparently identical young ladies dressed in black leather, each mounted on an elaborate motorcycle, involved in a heated argument with a large orange dinosaur. Erin recognized the saurian as a ceratopsian of some sort, with a prominent nose horn and neck ridge.

"You adopt skins to change your appearance," the ceratopsian was saying. "You color your skin and hair artificially."

"Why, I'm a natural blonde!" said both girls in unison.

"I find that difficult to credit, as every other Officer Jenny in existence is a bluenette."

"What the heck is a bluenette?" said the girls, again as one.

"The obvious extrapolation of brunette to your absurd natural hair color," replied the dinosaur.

"Don't try to change the subject. You indulge in deception in every aspect of your outer appearance. Why is deceptive speech any different?"

"That's not the same!" replied the girls. "Besides, it's not what you said, it's what you did. You trampled the plants and damaged the Muddlin' Maze attraction; a maze with a straight exit isn't much fun."

"I fail to see the connection. The goal of the maze, as posted at the entrance, is to find one's way out in less than five minutes. I did. I wish to collect my prize. Who are you to interfere?"

"I thought the straight exit was perfect," interjected Erin. "Fit right into my story. Course you don't look like a giant stone sphere but that's ok."

"Giant stone sphere my beak!" replied the dinosaur. "What business is this of yours anyway? Don't I have enough hideous bipeds to deal with already?"

"Oh, come on, he's kinda cute," said the girls. "I saw Nurse Joy last week wearing green pants with a turquoise blouse with orange polka-dots -- now that was hideous!" Erin noticed that his face was suddenly warm. He put his hands in his pockets and started fiddling nervously with the contents. He pulled out the Pokeball he had found in the bathroom the previous day and stared at it in order to avoid making eye contact with the girls.

"Oooh, are you a Pokemon trainer?" they said.

"No, uh, not really," replied Erin. "I just happened to, uh, pick this up." He reached out to hand the ball to the Jenny on his right, but as he was too embarrassed to look at her, the ball dropped to the ground instead. There was a loud buzzing sound, and out popped an adorable little winged creature with deep blue eyes.

"Oh, my, a Celebi!" said the girls. "Beeee... beee" said the Celebi as it hovered over the dinosaur and then flew back along his track to the damaged hedge. "Beeee...beee" it said sadly, settling down on the crushed leaves. The little fellow began to glow a deep green, and the leaves on the ground rustled as if disturbed by a nonexistent wind; then suddenly the broken branches of the neighboring bushes wiggled and began to grow as if they were in a time-lapse video. In a minute or so the whole hedge had regrown, with the Celebi riding on top of the rising leaves. "Beee! beee!" he said, disappearing into the hedge maze.

"Well -- uh -- I guess that solves that problem," said Erin.

"You are so clever!" said the two Jennies, dismounting from their motorcycles. Erin started to back away nervously as the girls approached. The dinosaur harrumphed!, tossing its nose horn up in the air, and stalked off towards the non-trampling exit to the hedge maze.

"I wish Brock was as smart as you are," said the girls, "and such good hair too!" running their fingers through Erin's locks.

"Umm, I guess I need a -- a haircut," said Erin. He had enough of pretty girls yesterday to last for a while.

"You just have to come with us to the Officer Jenny convention next month!" they continued, ignoring his protests while each shoving a small card in one of his pockets. "It's on Freedom, I'm sure you'll just love it. All those other Jennies will be so impressed when I show up with a brilliant trainer like you!"

The two girls looked at each other in a less than friendly fashion. "With you?" they said in unison. "He's coming with me!"

"I really -- uh -- oh, I have to go find Border Cup, I mean, uh, Mordor Pup -- no, Out of Order--" He was still backing up, getting more embarrassed and making less sense, when suddenly the ground moved. He had stepped on a turntable which, spinning him in a dizzying circle, took him thankfully out of range of the overly affectionate Officers and onto a metal platform next to a most curious contraption. Above him towered a tall pole, striped, with a narrower bright red rod running up its length. Depending from the pole at irregular heights and angles were smaller horizontal arms, from which hung an assortment of items: Erin recognized a land mine, a balance board, and a turbo nozzle amongst others.

While Erin puzzled, the Celebi, not satisfied with restoring the foliage damaged by Trixie the dinosaur, had been adding rows of bushes wherever its aesthetic sense demanded. This resulted in a number of puzzled maze navigators, finding themselves trapped behind apparently mature growth where they were certain passages had existed moments ago. The eventual cries of anger and distress emanating from these participants elicited little assistance from their fellow explorers, but report of this development quickly made the rounds of the park, considerably enhancing the reputation of the Muddlin' Maze, which had heretofore been regarded as a very tame entertainment.

"Come on, buddy, two coins to play, let's go, dere's folks waitin'," said a diminutive blue Yoshie. He was standing in a booth next to the platform with his hand out. There weren't any folks waiting as far as Erin could tell, but he pulled two coins from the stash they'd gotten that morning from Luigi out of his pocket and handed them to the Yoshie. In return he received a huge, bright red mallet with a yellow wood-like handle. He stared at the tool for a moment, puzzled. "Geez, ya hit da plunger there, makes the bonger go up! Ain'tcha never heard o' Hammer Slammer before?"

Another glance made everything clear enough: the contestant used the mallet to whack a lever that struck a large blue ring -- the bonger -- mounted around the red vertical rod. It seemed likely that the object was to get the bonger to stop close to one of the arms -- perhaps the contestant received the item hanging from the arm. Erin wondered whether that was good or not: if you got a bombette, for example, how did you ensure it wouldn't blow up? Nevertheless, it seemed silly to miss the chance to play; Erin

hauled the mallet back over his head, grunted "I'm going to kill you last!" in his best Arnold Schwarzenegger imitation, and swung as hard as he could at the plunger.

It turned out this wasn't terribly hard by Hammer Slammer standards. The bonger slid along the rod barely a quarter of the way up the pole, slowing to a stop near a purple arm with some sort of furry thing hanging from it. A bright green light, accompanied by a bong!, went off next to the plunger, apparently signaling some sort of win. The lumpy object dropped from the arm and plunged to the ground a short distance from Erin.

"Way to go, bud, ya got lucky!" said the Yoshie. "Come on, pick it up, people are waitin'. Bowser suit on ya' first try, your better den I thought!"

The Bowser suit turned out to be fairly easy to slip on, though it was rather hot and significantly too big for Erin. He walked down the Minigame Midway, feeling more secure in his disguised anonymity as well as more threatening with a set of spikes along his back. Crowds of humans, sapient animals, and monsters of every description mingled more-or-less happily along the broad midways. Barkers of every size and shape pitched their contests, games, or attractions to the potential suckers:

"Your chance to Whiz on Wizpig! Diddy Kong Racing! Four race courses for only two coins! You can't get a better deal than that!"

"Bombjy jumping for speed and accuracy! Blow 'em to the XBox! Only eleven coins for an hour of destruction!"

"Hey, hey, if you're T-rated we can show ya' a good time! You know what I mean, hey hey hey!"

"Get cha Bandstand Tickets, right heah! Only three coins!"

Some of the attractions had slot machine entryways, selecting the actual game or contest the participants would receive at random: Erin watched a pair of Yoshies get a game of Sushi Racing (they were apparently thrilled), and a Sand Golem win a try at Puzzle League (which he didn't appear at all pleased about). Behind the drink stand was a modest alcove set off by bushes, which Erin at first thought was a fairy tale display in the style of the Pinnocchio boat ride at Disneyland; leaning over the hedge for a closer inspection, he discovered that little groups of Pikmin were waddling from place to place, apparently participating in competitions in bridge-building, bug smashing, and a scavenger hunt.

After discovering that the Bowser suit was equipped with slits allowing him to access his pants pockets, he was able to buy a powerberry pie at one of the stands. As he puzzled over how to eat it without removing his costume head, a driving game caught his eye. The game resembled crash cars, except that each car carried a large colorful balloon on the back, and the object of each player seemed to be to puncture other player's balloons with the long stick mounted on the front of their car. There was a big sign at the entrance, much higher than Erin could reach; the top said IF YOU'RE TALLER THAN THIS DINOSAUR, but the bottom had been broken off. He wandered under the sign into the line behind a pair of female Boos who were arguing about which magical ocarina tune began with a minor seventh. He was still puzzling over his powerberry pie when the light illuminating it seemed to grow suddenly brighter.

Erin looked back over his shoulder: floating about head high just behind him was a glowing yellow pointed figure. It had some sort of eyes and perhaps a mouth, though it was so bright that details were difficult to make out even from behind the bowser suit lenses. A Star Kid, Erin remembered.

The creature drifted closer to Erin and spoke in a high, childish voice: "Folks are getting really big on megamushrooms this year, eh?"

This struck Erin as a curious remark: the purpose of a megamushroom, after all, was to turn a player giant. He tried to think of a polite reply, but then remembered he was wearing a Bowser suit, so that politeness would be quite out of character. "Let 'em eat mushrooms, let 'em eat cake, they won't rival me, make no mistake!" he said in the lowest growl he could manage.

The Star Kid drifted closer, and seemed to check the surroundings. Then it said quietly near his ear: "It's about time you showed up! You were supposed to meet me two hours ago."

"About time indeed! Where have you been?" snapped Erin in return. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he knew the sort of thing Bowser would say under the circumstances. "If you can't follow simple instructions it isn't my fault."

"My instructions were precise and to the point! Don't try to pin the blame on our side. We can find other allies, you know."

Allies? The conversation was becoming more intriguing than the pie. "Hmmmph. Second-rate amateurs. You can't do without me." Erin was intensely curious to find the creature's name but afraid that asking would expose his charade.

The Star Kid seemed to reflect for a moment. "I don't like you any more than you like me, but we both have a common interest. Let's put these petty grievances aside, shall we?"

"Fine, get on with it. Have you made up your mind?" Erin had no idea what the little glowering guy was supposed to decide but it seemed a good approach: aggressive and mysterious at the same time.

"We have." The Star moved so close to Erin that he could feel the heat even through the thick suit. His voice dropped to a whisper. "We will be ready on the 11th. That's twenty-seven days from today. We can't wait any longer; we hear they are already making changes that could render us irrelevant. We have active support at the highest levels in Hyrule. We are negotiating with the Nook Guild for additional funding. Giovanni has promised troops. We have connections in high places at Freedom. We know that Mario himself is at worst neutral. We will win with your forces or without them -- but it will much easier if we have your support."

"Wonderful speeches," grumbled Erin. "Big names dropped on the ground. What's in it for me?"

"One hundred fifty thousand coins. A million bells in gold. Outright rule of all the Toads, Penguins, Koopas and Goombas. The Mushroom Kingdom."

"I can have that on my own. Not enough," said Erin. He waved dismissively, smearing his leaking pie on his snout, and sneered as the line moved up several spots. "I want Kirby's concessions. I want the Metroid League subservient to me. I want two million bells and a Platinum Pocket Monstercard with low introductory interest rate on transferred balances and automatic overdraft protection."

"You overreach yourself, arrogant fool," the Star Kid said, blazing in blue-white anger.

"All right, forget the introductory rate," said Erin.

"That's better." The Kid faded to mere halogen lamp brightness. "Perhaps we can come to an arrangement. We need four divisions of battle-hardened assault forces, and at least six squadrons of A-wings or equivalent."

By this time Erin and the Star Kid were at the head of the line. A Toad in the blue-and-yellow MiniGames blazer and a cowboy hat on his mushroom head, with a laser pointer in one hand, was directing people into the little bumper-car vehicles. "How y'all doin' this fine mornin'?" he said to Erin.

"Better than you'll ever be," Erin growled. He was on a roll and not about to drop out of character.

"Glad t' hear it, that one over yonder by the fox 's yers," the Toad said, placing a brilliant red spot on one of the cards. "Make sure ye' got the seat belt nice 'n taight, now, 'n if'n anybody dun falls offa their car ye' cain't run 'em over but once, no goin' back 'n forth on top of 'em, y'all have a good time!" and he turned his attention to the Star Kid.

A loud klaxon and a blaring siren signaled the start of the balloon busting derby. It was very easy to locate the car with the Star Kid -- in fact, he was hard not to notice. It occurred to Erin that perhaps a Star Kid made a poor secret agent, as he revved his car up and dodged between a purple car in the shape of a Snorlaxx driven by a very large squirrel, and a snazzy striped racer guided by a very buxom young lady with two pistols strapped to her belt. He managed to position his car behind and slightly to the right of that driven by the Star Kid to give the appearance of participation in the game while the two continued their negotiations.

"There you are at last," said the Star Kid. "Do you remember the requirements? When can you have the troops ready?"

"Of course I remember. I don't see what you need six squadrons for," replied Erin derisively. "Do you think my forces are all shy guys? Two squadrons should be enough if you don't waste them with incompetent leadership."

"Two squadrons against the automated defenses of Ark? Preposterous. Besides, the plan has been worked out in the most exacting detail. The mobile attack will proceed along the axis of the old Eclipse cannon; the six squadrons will then break off and skim the basal surface of the station, using cover available from the transport plumbing to close on and destroy the gun emplacements at the hexagonally distributed entry points at the station base so that the assault forces can transfer."

Ark is it, eh? thought Erin. "You are obviously inadequately acquainted with the power of modern ships. It is true that six squadrons is a mere pittance, a fraction of my resources, but I don't wish them lost for nothing." Erin frantically searched his sketchy memories of playing Sonic Adventure 2 while weaving between two careening red sports-car vehicles driven by a couple of teenagers adorned with nose, ear, eye, cheek, chin, ear, and neck rings. "What possible use could there be in taking all six access ports when the main and secret passages are the only approaches to the core? Any other strategy would commit my troops against unknown defenses."

"Unknown my carbon cycle! We have obtained complete and detailed plans of all the key functional areas of the station through our agents."

"And you call me arrogant! What insolence! Complete plans of Ark. Next you'll be telling me Mario is working uncredited to bring back Earthbound."

"How dare you question my word?" The Star Kid by this time was behind Erin's car and was so mad he accelerated trying to pop Erin's balloon. Erin pulled a hard right turn and the two were immersed in a dog fight, each trying to get behind the other as they continued their dispute.

"Let's see these purported plans," Erin said, twisting his car and slamming the brakes on as he avoided a speeding '57 Chevy driven by a PacMan. He noticed that the klaxon was going off again but put it out of his mind.

"Inconceivable! No one but the key Star Spirits are permitted to review them."

"It is the work of years to nurture the heartless brutality of my guard. I'll not put my troops in harm's way on the word of some bundle of light beams. You want divisions, I want details."

"I'll need a signed treaty and a non-disclosure agreement," the Star Kid hissed.

"You'll get them -- once you've convinced me you know as much as you glow."

"How do I know you won't take our plans straight to Peach?"

"Peach? You are ignorant blunderers. Peach will only see these plans when she is once again in my custody and then only for her further humiliation."

"All right, what guarantee do we have that you won't attack on your own and take the station for yourself?"

"What use have I for that broken-down obsolete piece of space junk? Why, the cannon doesn't even work any more, or so I've heard. I've better things to do than blow up security robots."

"You know as well as I that that station is the most valuable object in the game worlds. He who controls Ark controls the future. Don't play the fool with me!"

"Enough of this prattle. We are equal partners, are we not? Let us examine the plans together. Perhaps you're right; a simultaneous attack might be best after all."

"That's better." The Star Kid made a curious gesture and two small plastic disks appeared on the dashboard of Erin's car. He stuffed them into his pocket. "Now, your part of the deal. The treaty, signed by your master personally, as we were promised."

The two had been so wrapped up in their negotiations that they hadn't noticed that the race had been over for some minutes. The Toad in the Texas hat was gesturing to them emphatically: "Ah'm shore pleased that y'all love mah race so much but folks're waitin' their turn!" he shouted. Erin and the Star Kid stopped: they were all alone in the middle of the track, the other players having dutifully pulled their cards to the exit stripe and departed.

Erin still hadn't the slightest idea how to weasel out of producing a treaty whose nature he was completely ignorant of, but he was saved from his quandary by a sudden BOOM! BOOM! He looked

up to see a huge figure, twenty times taller than a grownup, walking towards them, smashing more of the park's fixtures and decorations with each monster stride. The gargantuan wore a gigantic blue MiniGame Park blazer (which was still too small to cover his immense belly) and baggy blue pants, with a radio the size of a portable bathroom on his belt.

"Now see what y'all did, Security dun showed up!" said the Toad. "That's the second tahn this week! Ah'm gonna get mah pay docked on accounta you fellas!"

The huge Genie leaned down to look at them. "You punks gotta problem?" he boomed. A window on the snack shack outside the ride popped in half. "When the ride is over you gotta get off!"

"See what you've done with your obstructive behavior!" hissed Erin. "We needed to avoid attracting attention!"

"It's a bit late for that!" replied the Star Kid.

"All right, lemme see your tickets," the Genie blasted. He tried to take one more step to get closer to the two recalcitrant contestants, but caught his heel in the fence, dragging a long strip of the reinforced-concrete structure into the air. The sudden weight caused him to lose his balance (a frightening thought in itself), and he had to awkwardly stomp down in the middle of the track to recover, narrowly missing Erin and cracking the asphalt pathway in several places. The rebound projected the Star Kid, car and all, up into the air and out of sight. The Genie looked puzzled. "Oh oh. I gotta stop doin' that. Better go get 'im." He looked down at Erin / Bowser. "You wait right here until I get back, okay?"

Bowser nodded and yelled up "Sure, big fella! No problem!" The Genie turned ponderously around at stomped slowly away.

As soon as the Genie was out of sight, Erin waved a quick thanks to the Toad at the controls and ducked under the fence. He found a spot behind a hedge out of sight of the pathways. After a brief struggle, he unzipped the suit and stepped out. He left the Bowser suit lying on its side on a bench with a park map he'd found on the ground shading its head, and several large plastic MINIGAME PARK bags, stuffed with cardboard and trash to give the impression of a shopping spree, on the ground nearby. Stashing the little disks in his pocket, he headed off to the rendezvous point. "Wow, Nicholas will be impressed with this!" he said to himself.

You had to go through the Greedy Goomba Gal Gift Shop to get to the locker room, which was also where the racks of warp tubes were. Nicholas, Clara, Brian, and Tennyson were waiting by the green-and-white cylinder that should take them back to the yacht; Nicholas and Brian were carrying large plastic bags with a bright red GGGG logo and Clara and Tennyson were playing some sort of tennis with plastic rackets and a flying bomb (you lose if it blows up on your side).

"It's about time you showed up!" said Nicholas as Erin appeared out of the gift shop. "We were about to start looking for you. Did you get the key?"

"The what?" said Erin. "Oh, yeah, the key. No, I forgot about that, but listen –"

"You forgot? Did you even find Order Up?" asked Clara.

"No, no, I didn't have time, but I got the most amazing—"

"Erin, we must've gone over this ten times this morning!" interrupted Nicholas. "Didn't you remember?"

"Yes, I remembered but then I found this Bowser suit and – hey, Tennyson, what happened to your pants?" Erin had just noticed that Tennyson's pant legs were being held together by strips of yellow tape with TACKY TAPE printed repeatedly across them in purple lettering.

"Oh, hot jump rope problem," replied Tennyson. "It's fixed, sort of. What were you doing with a Bowser suit?"

"We were supposed to be looking for keys!" said Clara without allowing Erin to answer.

"Honestly, Erin, can't you keep your mind on anything for long enough to actually do anything? We would have been better off with Cane."

"Why don't you let him tell us what happened?" said Brian. Nobody listened.

"Completely hopeless," said Nicholas. "Never mind, let's get back to the yacht. It's 5 coins each, one person at a time."

"Oh, we have to pay to get back?" asked Tennyson. "That's kind of crummy, isn't it." He searched in his pocket. "I hope I have enough coins left."

"The tennis stuff wasn't that expensive," said Clara.

"Well, I've got lots of coins if you need them," said Nicholas.

While the others were arranging their return, Brian walked over to Erin. "So what happened?"

"Well, I found this Bowser suit, and then while I was waiting in line for the crash cars game some Star Kid came up and I guess he thought I was an agent of Bowser. I managed to fool him and while we were in the contest I found out that there's some sort of group of folks that are planning to attack Ark, and that they're trying to get Bowser to help them. I managed to get him to give me some disks that are supposed to be plans for Ark and then I got away." He pulled the disks out of his pocket and showed them to Brian. "They're attacking in something like twenty-five or twenty-seven days, I forgot exactly, but if we can't get to Ark soon maybe there won't be any Ark to get to."

"Wow, you found all that out in one contest?" asked Brian.

"Oh, and standing in line," replied Erin.

Nicholas was just about to deposit his coins in the slot next to the warp tube. Brian called out: "Look, we got plans to Ark!" holding up the two disks.

Nicholas stopped. "You got what? Plans to Ark! That's fantastic, Brian. Great job! Wow. Well, let's get back and then you can tell us how you did it." He started counting coins while Tennyson and Clara patted Brian on the back. Brian turned to Erin and shrugged his shoulders.

"How come they don't listen to me?" asked Erin.

"It's just like that," replied Brian. "Happens all the time."

The warp tube dumped Erin out onto a very soft leather-upholstered recliner. The other four were gathering up their back packs from the cabinet where they had stowed their stuff when they left for the Minigame Park. Nicholas stuffed his plastic shopping bag into the pack and zipped it closed again.

They were inside Luigi's flying yacht, Nomario, though the only clue to that fact visible from here was the round window above the writing desk. "Well, anyway, we got two keys, maybe one of them is the right one," Nicholas was saying. "I sure am hungry. Let's get back to the mansion and see if there's anything around for lunch! Where is Mr. Luigi?"

"So Brian," said Tennyson, "how did you get plans for Ark?" as the kids pushed open the door and piled out into the corridor.

"Yeah, I want to know, too!" said Clara. "When did you do that? Did you find them in the snow?" Nicholas was already climbing up the very steep ladder to the deck.

"No, no," began Brian, "you see, I didn't find them, it was—" but he was interrupted by Nicholas' voice from the top of the ladder: "HOLY COW!"

"What? What is it? What's wrong?" asked Tennyson, just behind him. Clara had already whipped her Superscope out of the backpack and moved to cover Tennyson's back. Brian pushed Erin back to keep him out of the line of fire.

Nicholas' head poked back into the hatchway. "Oh, no, no, it's okay, you can come up. I was just surprised, that's all. Come on, it's beautiful!"

The kids scrambled up the ladder to join Nicholas, Clara still wearing her Smash Brothers eyes. "Holy Cow is right," said Tennyson.

The hatch opened onto the starboard gangway near the main stays. The deck was flush to the edge with only a waist-high wire guard rail strung along the tops of plastic posts. They were looking out onto a seemingly unending expanse of perfectly blue ocean beneath a cloudless azure sky. The yacht was obviously floating a great distance above the sea, though it was hard to estimate just how high they were. A cool breeze tossed Clara's hair and made Erin's jacket flap. There was no other indication of motion, but they could hear a subdued growl coming from aft, where lay the four huge engines that drove the yacht.

"Wow," said Brian. "Who's driving?"

The sun reflecting off the glass of the upper cabin prevented them from seeing who (if anyone) was at the helm. "I guess we're not getting lunch at the mansion just yet," said Clara.

Just then they heard a curious squawking sound. Awwwk! Awwwk!

"What the heck is that?" wondered Nicholas aloud. And then again: "Awwwk! Awwwk! Walk the plank, walk the plank! Awwwk! Polly wanna cracker! Walk the plank!"

The sound was coming from around the cabin, from the port side of the boat. Clara waved the others back and, Superscope at the ready, slid silently forward, pressing her left side against the wall of the cabin. After a brief hesitation, Tennyson quietly pulled his Home Run Bat from his pack and followed her. The others shrugged and fell in line behind them; Nicholas took up the rear, beam sword in hand but with the blade still retracted for safety.

A curious sight met their eyes as they came cautiously around the foremast. Perched on the starboard railing was a huge, obviously robotic, brilliantly green and yellow parrot. "Awwwk!" it screamed again. "Polly wanna cracker! Walk the plank" Next to the parrot stood a bright green dinosaur-esque creature -- a Yoshie -- dressed in a brilliant yellow safety vest with a big red "L" on the back. The parrot was staring at a gap in the railing, from which depended a long white painted board, cantilevered two or three meters from the side of the yacht. At the end of the plank stood Luigi, dressed in his usual brightly colored coveralls but wearing a blue captain's cap.

"Oh, I'ma so glad to see you, Clara sweetie, and a Nicholasa, itsa good you finished, it'sa almost lunch time." And with that he stepped off the edge into nothing.

"Awwwk! Walk the plank! Walk the plank! ! Polly want better lines!" screamed the ersatz parrot. Dibble dabble, said the Yoshie, leaning over the railing.

"Mr. Luigi!" screamed Clara. She dropped her Superscope and ran to the guard rail. The ocean surface was dizzyingly far below. Luigi was already a speck far from the ship. She could hear his scream, though she realized he sounded rather exhilarated for someone facing imminent death. Maybe that's the way people are in the Game Worlds, she thought. Then she noticed something puzzling: the tiny spec seemed to have stopped falling -- in fact, it was most definitely growing larger. Luigi was heading back towards the ship almost as fast as he'd dropped. There was no question now that he was whooping in excitement rather than fear. He slowed as he got close to the yacht, reaching a stop about 10 meters below them and slightly aft. He seemed to hang upside down in the air for a moment, waving to the kids (who were all leaning over the rail by now to see, albeit cautiously in Brian's case), and then plummeted back down again. The sky-blue bungee cord attached to his waist was now apparent. Clara laughed nervously. Tennyson slapped her on the back in relieved high spirits, then hurriedly grabbed her as the unexpected impact caused Clara to teeter nervously over the rail. Clara did not have a bungee cord.

After several more decreasingly high bounces, Luigi came more or less to rest, dangling perhaps 50 meters below the bottom of the yacht, slowly spinning in the air. Clara leaned over and yelled as loudly as she could manage (which was very: her father had often told her to save it for her future career in the theater): "Mister Luigi! Are you okay?"

Luigi leaned back and waved. "Of coursea," he shouted. "Clara, coulda you a pull me back uppa to the decka?"

Clara looked at the bungee cord. It was simply fastened to a cleat on the gunwale, with no provision for reeling it back in. "Didn't you think about that before you jumped?" Clara shouted.

"Why? I wasn't a down here before I jumpeda."

Fortunately, Erin's mother was an avid sailor and had dragged the family on more than one salt-soaked expedition onto San Francisco Bay. On Nicholas' request, he took the lead, and despite his off-key renditions of Gilbert & Sullivan tunes

*(A British tar is a soaring soul
As free as a mountain bird
His energetic fist should be ready to resist
A dictatorial word!)*

the kids were able to get the cord fastened to a second cleat, so that they could free the end to place a capstan and laboriously crank Luigi back up to the deck, taking turns when their hands got sore. The parrot flew awkwardly into the air and settled onto Erin's shoulder to provide encouragement: "Awwwk! Put your backs into it, you gutter rats! Heave!"

"That is what I usually do on a sailboat," said Brian, pausing for a rest. "It's certainly a lot smoother up here." A few more turns and Luigi's waggling feet appeared over the bulwark. Brian stopped cranking so Luigi could hook the rail with his toe and awkwardly drag himself back aboard.

"Thanks so mucha," Luigi said, unclamping the cord from his safety belt. "Whatta ride! Thisa bungee stuff, itsa something, yes? You wanto try?" he said, holding the bungee out to Nicholas.

"That's, uh, okay, thank you," said Nicholas. "But we did find some keys like you asked us. Two out of three, anyway."

"Oh, yeah, that's right," said Tennyson, pulling the golden object from his back pocket. "I got this one from Hot Jump Rope, and Brian and Clara found one at the Bobsled, just like you said." Clara held the other key up. "But Erin forgot to go to Order Up, so maybe if it isn't one of these we can go back there," finished Nicholas.

"Key? Whatta key?" Luigi looked puzzled. "Oh, thata key! Oh, I found it thisa morning, I guess it was a littlebit after you a lefta." He pulled an ornate golden key from a pocket of his overalls. "See, I had it all along! I'ma sorry, I guess I shoulda told you, but itsa okay, you can keepa the keys too. Hey, kidsa, you wanna somethin to eat, maybe?"

"Wow, that would be great!" said Nicholas. "Thanks!"

"Come on, we go to the galley, that'sa what they call it ona the yacht, I'ma starvin'".

The whole expedition had begun earlier that morning. Nicholas had been assembling the kids to organize the second day's cleaning activities when Luigi had bounded into the room, showing no signs of the previous night's dissipations. "You kidsa do sucha nice job, that'sa fantastic, Inky's all gonea, the ghosts they gonna be so happy!"

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Luigi," Nicholas had replied. "We're just getting ready for today."

"Oh, you don't needa cleanup today, you done enougha, I gotta newa job, you gotta finda my keya." It turned out he had seemingly misplaced the starting key for his flying yacht, while entertaining his guests the previous day. The yacht was normally stored in a huge hangar behind the mansion when not in use; included in its extensive recreational facilities was a warp tube direct to the MiniGame Park. (Mr. Saturn could have told the kids that a warp tube to a mobile terminus was a very expensive luxury indeed, but he was discussing uses of color with van Gore.) Luigi had listed the three activities he remembered indulging in for them to check for the lost key, and the kids had agreed to split up, search for three hours, and be back in time for lunch. Cane had taken the opportunity to beg off, to pursue his own research within the mansion. So Luigi had led the five remaining kids to off to the yacht. It was an impressive structure, with its four huge jet engines arranged in a giant X at the back of the glistening black hull. The bridge was perched on top of a tall superstructure set slightly aft, with the foredeck bare except except for a towering mainmast, presumably decorative, its stays bearing a series of triangular multicolored flags emblazoned with the script "L" of the mansion. They'd naturally assumed that without the starting key, the yacht was stuck where it was parked, and that they'd return to the mansion when they were done.

Now the kids were following single file up the steep staircase to the galley. Brian and Clara found themselves at the back of the line, just before the silent Yoshie, who was carrying what appeared to be a bathrobe and a bottle of Aquastar Pure, bottled at the Source. Clara said quietly, "I can't believe this. He sent us on a wild goose chase! All that trouble and he didn't even lose the key."

"Well, we found two keys that weren't his," replied Brian. "Maybe they're good for something. And we got plans for Ark. That might be useful. Oh, yeah, and somebody is going to attack, we've only got a few weeks to get there or maybe we'll be too late. That's pretty important, too. Sometimes what you didn't intend to do is better than what you planned."

"Yeah, you never did finish, how did you manage that, that was amazing, Brian!" asked Clara.

"Well, you see it wasn't really me—" Brian started to say, but by now they had stepped into the corridor, where their ears were suddenly assaulted by an extremely loud clang clang! Clang clang! Clang clang!

"Sixa bells, that'sa time for lunch, or maybe it'sa the phone call, well anyway let'sa get something to eata," said Luigi. Two other Yoshies were waiting in the galley to serve lunch as the kids piled in and found seats at the long, polished hardwood table. Unfortunately, just as the one wearing the yellow apron leaned over to offer a tray of appetizers to Nicholas, the second Yoshie's tongue popped out an absurdly long distance and stole a muffin from the first one's tray. The first Yoshie turned angrily, screaming something that sounded like dibble dobbble!! while spilling miniature quiches on the floor. In a moment the kids were dodging as giant chameleon-like tongues zipped back and forth. A third Yoshie holding a large metal bowl, apparently the cook, charged into the room and joined the dispute: after a brief verbal exchange, the cook hurled a huge slightly yellowish egg at the instigator, covering his head with yellow glop. An attempted retaliation struck Clara full in the face as she turned to warn Tennyson. Within moments flying eggs, tossed salads, zapping tongues, and Superscope blasts filled the room. Erin cheerfully joined in the mess, throwing souffles he found on a shelf by the kitchen door in the air without much thought for where they would land. Nicholas took his beam sword from his backback and attempted a visually impressive but generally ineffective imitation of a Jedi knight: slicing a flying egg in the middle merely meant that the two halves were already dripping when they struck their target. Brian did much better by hiding under the dining table. Luigi ran back and forth ineffectually telling everyone to calm down while intermittently sampling the airborne comestibles.

Things were looking hopelessly chaotic when Shivers the ghost appeared through the restroom door. "Tarnation! Ain't I supposed to be restin' in peace what fur bein' daid? Only one way to clean up this disaster, I ain't a gonna pick it all up, fur dang sure." He reached through the glass door of the fire hose and grabbed the nozzle with ease, though to his distress the glass broke when he tried to pull the hose out. One spin of the valve and a blast of icy seawater flew wildly through the room as Shivers attempted to wash all the mess towards the drain at the right (starboard) corner. Clara instinctively snapped off a blast when hit by the stream, but quickly realized that a Superscope has little effect on a ghost and joined Brian under the table. Within a few moments calm, dampness, and continued hunger prevailed in the galley. The last, at least, was addressable if you were willing to overlook the very soggy and very salty state of the remaining supplies, which everyone except Tennyson was hungry enough to do. This mildly contented state persisted until Shivers, who had squeezed most of the mushy remains of the food down the drain pipe, loudly proclaimed, "Land sakes, I furgot I's supposed to be steerin', better git back afore we dun run raht into a mountain er somethin'!" The kids all ran out onto the mid-deck, fearing imminent collision, but finding to their relief that only a tiny cloud on the horizon broke the unrelieved perfect blue of the sea below them.

After lunch, Tennyson persuaded Clara to join him for a session of parasailing behind the yacht. Nicholas and Brian played a sort of Puzzle League on a shuffleboard court on the foredeck: one player pushed the square pieces towards the pile, while the other shot displacement spells with a small willow wand in an attempt to get three or more adjacent pieces of the same color. Luigi played the role of enthusiastic camp counselor, finding it necessary to help Clara into her flying harness. Erin joined Shivers on the bridge, where he appropriated the parrot as a stage prop, and decided to be Captain Hook. Shivers tolerated his nautically irrelevant instructions until Erin started singing

A Pirate's Life is a Wonderful Life
a sailin' over the sea
a something something for buccaneers [even Erin didn't always remember lyrics]
oh! the life of a pirate's for me!

very loudly: At that point, Shivers exiled him to the lower levels, though it wasn't clear if this was due to the moral opprobrium of celebrating a life of theft and murder, or Erin's habit of singing in a new key every measure.

Erin had found a hatch in the poop deck and he and the parrot descended the steep ladder. They found themselves in a corridor opposite the open door to an elegantly-appointed stateroom. At the far end of the corridor another ladder led down.

"Fancy that, Captain Flint," said Erin to the Parrot. "The Captain's cabin left unguarded. Yet surely we must leave him to his own devices, and search out the treasure map before that blackguard Long John Silver finds it!" Erin was the courageous Jim Hawkins, though he had never gotten around to reading Stevenson's original version and only knew the story through the old Disney movie his Dad made the family watch a couple of times. "It must be concealed in the depths of the hold. Come on, let us make our move before the dastardly mutineers are ready. Be on your guard, Flint!"

"Awwwk! Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight! Can I be Hawkins? Awwwk!!"

"Don't be a fool, Flint! You'd be discovered and your throat slit quicker than you can say Bob's your uncle!"

"Awwwk! Anachronisms don't count! Awwk!"

"Quiet!" hissed Erin. "Do you think mutineers have any respect for historical accuracy? We must find where the pirates have hidden Prince Trelawney. Or was that Squire Blarney? Or Father Mulcahey? No matter, he's a fool and thus surely the hero of the story; he will have secreted the map -- ooh, yuck, that's one disgusting mental image."

"E-rated! E-rated! No yuck! awwwk!"

By this time they had descended another level. They found themselves in a large storage room, in which boxes of foods and supplies were stacked in some disarray. Erin tried hiding in a half-empty carton of AppleLike Snacks (All the crunch and none of the fiber!) but to his disappointment no mutineers turned up to discuss their secret plans at his hiding place. After about two minutes of waiting, he climbed back out of the carton, which tipped over backwards, dumping Erin unceremoniously onto a pile of toilet paper rolls. He tried to stand up and banged his head rather painfully on a shelf sticking out of the wall. Standing up more cautiously away from the obstacle, he turned to see a transparent enclosure, inside of which was mounted a parchment document showing what looked like a map of an island, with a distinct red X. A small metal hammer was stored in a clamp on the right side, and above it in block letters was stenciled:

IN CASE OF TREASURE HUNT
BREAK GLASS.

Erin took the advice, careful to shatter the worst of the shards before reaching in to grab the treasure map. He turned to inform Captain Flint about his triumph, but to his surprise found that the parrot was manipulating the controls of a small fork lift truck with its feet, using the metal prongs to smash big holes in a pile of boxes marked Cages R Us.

"Come on, Captain Flint," said Erin. "We have the map!"

The parrot made no move to respond. "My name is Rashomon, not Flint," replied the Parrot in a very un-parrotlike growl. "I only came with you because it is difficult to walk with these absurd feet and I don't like flying. It makes me nauseous. You are a spoilt, self-indulgent juvenile, just like all the others. You have done too much finding today. I am sick of you. We are sick of you. Go away."

"We? Who is we? Are you one of the mutineers? I'll slice your hawser! I'm not afraid of you--"

The parrot cut him short, turning the fork lift around and heading it towards Erin. The electric motor whined loudly. "Enough of this peurile fantasy world you inhabit. We know it already. We live in it. Perhaps not for much longer." He jiggled a lever and the forks rose to about level with Erin's throat.

"Betrayal, eh? You'll regret this, Israel Hands!" It seemed a lot safer at this point to remain in character. Erin backed away from the oncoming truck, searching his belt for a pistol or a cutlass, when all at once his feet planted on nothing and he toppled backwards. His head bonked into a sort of rough cloth as he fell: it was a waste chute, he realized. He bounced back and forth within the floppy cylinder, braking his velocity with his elbows and knees, and then popped out into the air and wham! landed on a

broken wood-and-cloth deck chair. "You'll have to do better than that, Israel!" he yelled back up into the chute.

Erin found himself in a large poorly-lit room, on top of a pile of assorted junk: a rusted water jet pack lay on top of a hand cannon with the breech burst, next to a torn blue sail. Chipped cups and broken saucers balanced precariously on top of a race car missing its front wheels, which in turn sat on top of the pieces of a partly dismantled space craft. "Why, this place stinks like a bilge!" exclaimed Erin, and it did because, of course, it was. Erin tried to get up in order to get away from the chute, in case the ersatz parrot tried to push more junk on top of him, but it was difficult to see what he was standing on in the poor light and he ended up on his belly.

He heard flapping above him and turned to see the parrot, a little flashlight grasped in one claw, pop out of the chute. The bird hovered uncertainly for a moment, spinning the light around on the wall, and mumbling unhappily to itself: "Uoohh. I feel terrible. Where is that panel?" Then: "Aha! There we are. You've played enough parts for one day, I think." The parrot flapped towards a dimly lit panel where several buttons glowed dull red. Erin struggled to his knees and reached into his pocket to pull out his Pokeball, until he remembered that he'd already used the contents.

The parrot struggled to find a way to perch on the panel edge that would allow its beak to reach the buttons. Erin decided it might be a good time to try being out of character and yelled as loud as he could manage: "Help! Anybody! Cage rage! Mad parrot! Balmy bird!" A sudden clatter of shoes on metal deckways answered. The door flew open as the parrot locked his claws on the shutoff breaker handle and reached up. Tennyson found the light switch and flipped it on just as the parrot pounced on the button. Clara, instantly absorbing the situation, snapped a Superscope blast that knocked the parrot into the air, but it was too late. The whole pile of junk started to slide downwards like an avalanche as two huge doors below it opened wide. Tennyson whipped off his belt and threw himself flat at the edge of the pile, tossing the buckle towards Erin. Erin grasped for the belt but dropped the map, and hesitated for a moment too long before deciding which was more important. Clara hit the parrot with four quick blasts, making it wander drunkenly in the air towards her, and then flipped the Superscope smartly around and smashed the robotic avian with the stock, knocking it to the floor where it lay complaining about the condition of its head. Erin slid out of sight into the maw of the descending junk, his cries if any buried in the creaking crashing racket.

In a few seconds most of the junk had cleared away. Tennyson grabbed the edge of the doorway and pulled his head over the lip, but instead of the sickening drop to a bunch of floating debris that he expected, there was Erin, partly covered with empty drink cans but otherwise apparently unharmed, sitting perhaps 10 meters below the ship on top of a torn balloon casing. The junk had come down on a bare brownish rock-strewn plateau, and distinctly visible beneath the scattered covering of refuse was a huge white X.

"Are you okay?" Tennyson called.

"Fine. Did you get the parrot?"

"Clara did."

"Good. Throw it down here."

"What? Why?"

"It doesn't like flying."

"So?"

"Well, last time the parrot got sick and the yacht puked," said Erin. He looked back and Tennyson followed his gaze: in the distance an imposing, obviously volcanic cone rose above the misted rain-forested slopes. "I don't want to see what happens next time."

Chapter 11: Danse Macabre

"Yes, we're back at the home of those Ectoplasmic Ignorami, the Dumb Departed, the Simple-minded Shades, where the lights are always left on but nobody is ever home -- it's the Stupid Ghost Show! And heeere's our host, Herman -- Africanus -- WIZOSKI!!!" The crowd was cheering wildly. Cane could feel himself moving oh-so-slowly as if through a room of transparent jello. The cameras were on top of giant versions of his sister's dollies -- camera two was on Barbie's back and camera three on the top of Madeline's head -- and as they moved in for tight closeups the dolls' eyes rolled backwards. Cane waved the microphone to the crowd:

"Our contestants tonight -- Neville the study ghost!" said Cane. In the dream Cane could simultaneously see the audience and the monitor shot of Neville perched behind a little podium waving to the audience. "Frank the bulldog," (ruff! ruff!) "and -- the Twins!"

"I'm not a twin, he's a twin! I'm the original," said Henry (or was it Orville? Cane couldn't remember). "He's the twin! I'm the first one!" said Orville (or Henry).

"And now, contestants -- what is the first letter in the name of the main character in Sonic! Your choices are: a -- 'S', b-- 'S', c -- 'S' or -- are you ready? -- d --'S'! (BEEEP!) Yes, Neville!"

"I should say the choice is T -- that is b -- or was that q which denotes zed, or rather p which is an umlaut -- by itself or with a u? I don't remember--"

"Five thousand stupid points to Neville for being unable to choose a valid choice and TEN THOUSAND STUPID POINTS to the Twins for not answering at all!" Bark bark ruff! Wild cheers from the crowd, who curiously enough were composed of kids from Mrs. Mavison's second-grade class. Right in front was Ingrid Pottle, the girl Cane had absolutely hated because she was always putting her chewing gum on the bottom of his desk and leaning on him like he was a lamp post; curiously, she wore a low-cut blouse quite unlike her normal school clothes, and somehow bore a remarkable resemblance to Princess Zelda.

Cane: "Let's have a round of applause for our contestants -- and don't ask why because they wouldn't remember anyway! Next question: what is the most common color on Mario's hat?" The Twins had turned into talking howler monkeys; they hooted at each other and climbed the light supports while Cane called on Frank the bulldog, who was now dressed in a three-piece suit with bright red tie.

"In order to properly address this question," said Frank, paws tucked into his suddenly blue suspenders, "we must first examine the issue of how color is perceived, and in particular the differences between color perception in humans and in dogs. Color vision in humans depends on three distinct color receptors in the retina, with differing spectral response curves; it is therefore the relative excitation of these receptor types which allows the perception of color, and as a consequence human color vision is not a one-to-one mapping of the received spectrum but rather a considerable condensation of the high-dimensional spectral function space into the three-dimensional space of response ratios plus absolute brightness..."

At this point dream Cane pulled a ray gun from his belt and POOOWIISHTTTIIZZZP! Frank was reduced to a pile of smoking cinders. Cane shouted to the audience: "Frank LOSES FIFTY THOUSAND STUPID POINTS for that display of pompous intellectual eptitude. TEN THOUSAND STUPID POINTS to the audience for putting up with him. FIFTY THOUSAND STUPID POINTS TO ME for putting up with the audience. FIFTY BILLION STUPID POINTS to Neville for NOTHING IN PARTICULAR!!!" Wild cheers. "The final question: WHERE DO YOU LIVE? The answers are: a -- Luigi's Mansion; two -- Luigi's Munchkins; third -- Linguini with clams -- fourth, the Firth!"

BEEP! "The Twins!" Cane pointed the microphone at the two boys who had become Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

"It's -- it's -- but we don't live anywhere -- we're dead!"

"You got the correct answer to our trick question!" screamed Cane. "You LOSE FIFTY QUADRILLION BILLION MILLION STUPID POINTS! And now a word from our sponsor, Tails Picture and Portrait shop, where grim grinning ghosts come out to socialize..."

"WAKE UP!"

"Oh, sorry, that's two words!"

"WAKE UP! WAKE UP!" Cane's eyes groggily dragged themselves partially open. Tails was hovering above him holding a large jug of water.

"I'm up, I'm up," said Cane, doing nothing else to demonstrate the fact. "Five more minutes, mom, just five more minutes. But I'm not Orville..."

SPLASH! "Yow! what'd'ya wanna' do that for?" Now Cane was demonstrably awake.

"Guess for a predator I ain't always dat patient," said Fox over his shoulder as he put the jug back on the dresser. "There's more where that came from. You owe me a ghost, don't'cha? That or a hat for dinner. C'mon, your friends left two hours ago."

"Left? Left! Left where!" Cane dried his face on the pillowcase and tossed it behind the bed. "Just like Tennyson to kick a guy when he's sitting on him. Or something like that. Walked off without even trying! Just up and left me for dead."

"Seems ta me Tennyson was da one talkin' the girl -- Clara, right? -- out of bangin' you on da head wid a golden hammer fur ta git ya up. Waste of a good hammer, I say. Anyway keep ya' shirt on -- even if it is wet -- dey just went with Luigi, he's out on da yacht, dey'll be back late aftanoon I guess. You gonna get me a ghost or what?"

Cane's brain was reactivating albeit slowly. "Yeah, yeah, I remember now. No sweat. Course I gotta' get something to eat first. Right after breakfast. Yeah. One doofus retard dork-headed ghost comin' up, you'll see. Nobody's smarter about stupidity than me!"

It took some time for Cane to remember how to get to the study; books were not the sort of thing that stuck in his mind. He barged in to find Neville in his usual spot on the recliner with a female ghost -- Melody? -- leaning over his shoulder. Neville was reciting from a thin red volume filled with his neat handwriting: "...where Alph the sacred river ran, through caverns measureless to man, down to the sundering sea."

"Sundering?" asked Melody. "That's not right. Wasn't it... um ... thundering?"

"Down to the thundering sea? Hmmm. I shouldn't think so. Doesn't sound inebriated at all. Perhaps -- umm -- floundering?"

"Down to the floundering sea?" complained Melody. "You're kidding, right? Might as well be foundering, or blundering!"

"Oh, that does sound euphonious," replied Neville. "'Down to the blundering sea!' I must go down to the sea again, the waves are lovely, dark and deep, but I have glowing shrooms to keep, and all I ask is a flying ship and a Pop Star to steer her by."

"Geez, you got it all wrong, Neville!" interrupted Cane. "It goes like -- um -- I knew this one -- 'Earendil was a mariner, a wanderer, a terrier!' He paused, bothered. "I always wondered why they made that big poem about a dog."

"Oh, how charming, you're a Tolkien scholar," exclaimed Neville.

"Of course I can talk! You think I'm dumb or something? Oh, yeah, that reminds me about why I came here in the first place. You're the one with all the lists, I need a list of the dumbest ghosts here in the mansion. The ones that are, like, totally clueless. Sorta' like you are but worse, you know?"

"Oh, let me see, I have various lists of the occupants of the mansion, ordered by cunning, by character, by years of formal education, by eloquence, vocabulary, sophistication, or by fashion-consciousness."

Melody interrupted: "Nothing about musicianship? Pitch accuracy? Sight reading? Harmony? Criticism, for those who can't play?"

"I'm abashed to say I've been blind to that aspect of creative intelligence in my collations, my dear." He turned back to Cane: "I had a list ordered by survival skill rating but it was rather dull, as we're all dead and therefore have done badly on that score. Will any of those lists do?"

"Hmm, I'm not exactly sure," said Cane. "Isn't cunning kindof like sneakiness?"

"I shouldn't put it quite that way but I suppose such a construction of the term could be vaguely acceptable."

"What was that?"

"I beg your pardon. Yes."

"Yeah, that one will do. I'll just go to the bottom. Where is it?" he asked, already rummaging through the desk and flinging papers onto the floor and behind the bookshelves.

"Master Cane, Master Cane! Please! I've sent that list to Westin, or perhaps it was Hilton, or was that Carlton? -- the ghost in cold storage, to be laminated. Great Caesar's Ghost! (whom I should like to meet, I must say); he is so very slow; that was last year already and he still hasn't returned it. Perhaps it has to do with him being so cold all the time, eh wot?"

"Okay, how do I get to cold storage?" asked Cane.

"It's quite simple, really. Left directly upon leaving the study, down the stairs to the foyer, enter the door into the corridor and turn right, past Madam Clairvoya's quarters, over the breaker room, down the stairs, turn right, down the corridor, turn left into the cellar, exit through the door to your right, pass directly across the hallway and into the cold storage room. Is that clear?"

"Right. Right. I knew that. Left and down and like, right, and up or maybe -- well, don't worry about it, I'm cool, so I'll find cold storage, no problem."

"Just ask directions if you get confused," called Neville as Cane charged out into the hall.

"Fat chance of that," said Melody. "Come on, Neville sweetie, let's try Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

"Are you insulting the Master again? Dear me, that will never do."

About forty-five minutes later, after brief detours to the kitchen, the breaker room, the telephone room, the storage room, the sitting room, the study (again), the ballroom, the foyer, the broom closet, the pool room, Madame Clairvoya's (she hadn't foreseen his arrival and was in her bathrobe and curlers), the projection room, the courtyard, and the pipe room, Cane finally found himself in front of the massive insulated door of the cold storage room. After a few futile knocks, he pulled with both hands on the steel lever and dragged the door open. A billowing fog of chill air poured out of the door and swirled around Cane's arms and legs as he heedlessly strode forward.

The sudden rush of air from the opened door had filled the room with an impenetrable mist; all Cane could see was the indistinct yellow glow of what was presumably a light set in the ceiling. He was petrified by more than the cold when he suddenly realized that he hadn't propped the door open: if it had any sort of spring-driven closure he could easily become part of the cold storage. He tried to spin around to take some sort of precaution, slipped on the very slick floor, and fell sprawling on what felt like several sacks of ice, losing his bearings in the process. "Geeze it's FREEZING in here!" he said, rather pointlessly, trying to figure out where the door was.

"Rather pointless to say that in a freezer, young man." The voice reminded Cane of some sort of dead Kennedy, though he couldn't remember if it was the politician or the punk rockers. "Ask not what your freezer can do for you, but rather what you can put in the freezer. Most folks don't put themselves in, though: wastes perfectly good space for several chickens and a side of beef."

"Who's that? Are you a ghost?" asked Cane. Then he realized the voice was coming out of the pile of ice blocks. "Of course you're a ghost, 'cause if you were alive you'd be dead!"

The mist was slowly beginning to clear in the center of the storage room. Cane could see the outlines of a pile of ice blocks, each the size of a refrigerator. A blue head with orange hair and eyeglasses was poking out from one of the blocks. "Powerful grasp of the obvious there, Son. Westin's the name, Alfred Lord Westin. Mother named me after the poet. Tennyson."

"Tennyson? He's not a poet! I heard him read a whatchamacallit, a high coo thing last month in Mrs. Watson's literature circle and it didn't even rhyme!"

The ghost chuckled. "Son, perhaps you'd best stay out of the literary criticism business. There is no frigate like a book to take us lands away, nor any coursers like a page of prancing poetry. What brings you down heah?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm looking for a list. A ghost list."

"A list of ghosts. A list of the dead." The ghost paused and sucked thoughtfully on his pipe. "They perished in the seamless grass, no eye could find the place," he recited, "but God on his repealless list can summon every face."

"What?" Cane answered. "This list is from Neville, not God. I mean, Neville doesn't even have a white beard, he can't be God!"

"A list from Neville, eh? Which one, there've been about a hundred, I'd say."

"The one he sent to be laminated. Last year. You got that one?"

"Laminated? That fellow's head is emptier than an ice box in the desert. He told me to preserve them and that's what I did." The ghost pointed to a pile of square blocks of ice each about the size of a toaster oven; Cane looked closer and realized that a piece of paper was frozen in the middle of each one.

"Can you melt them out?" he asked.

"S'posin' I could," replied the ghost, glancing at a pile of logs frozen in a corner of the room, "why ought I to want to? Take a while unless you put 'em right into the fire, then likely as not you'll burn the paper right up as it comes out of the ice. Safer to let them thaw naturally. Ought to take a day or so if you take them outside. Half a day in the sun, if there is any. It's been a while since I've been outside. Does the sun still rise? Was ever idleness like this, within a hut of stone, to bask the centuries away, nor once look up for noon?"

"You're as crazy as Mr. Saturn!"

"They use to say that about Emily, when they said anything about her. And perhaps she was, you know. Crazy."

"Emily? Emily who? Never mind. Anyway, a day is too long, I can't wait for that. Where am I gonna' find a really dumb ghost?"

"Well, son, you ought to have a chat with Bogmire. He keeps track of everyone, seeing as he watches over the graveyard. All the ghost folk stop by theah periodically to see how their corporeal remains are progressing, you know. It's quite nostalgic for most of us, and therapeutic, too." Alfred the ghost puffed on his pipe (which made no smoke) and recited quietly to himself: "Because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me."

Cane interrupted to forestall another burst of introspection: "Great, great idea, where do I find this guy?"

"Well, you just have to get through the dog house to the cemetery. Go out of the cold storage room, turn right and go up the stairs, turn right and go down the hall, go through the first door on your left, straight through the dining room into the kitchen, take the first door on the right which takes you into the courtyard..."

"Uuurrgh! Yuck! Disgusting!" Cane was trying to figure out how to scrape ectoplasmic dog poop off of his shoes. He had only gotten lost three times on his way to the cemetery, but he had had to duck awkwardly to fit through the cramped, unlit doghouse and hadn't been able to exercise much control over where he stepped.

Cane was sitting on the tree stump in which was set the doghouse exit hole. The cemetery was suitably dour: several gnarled oaks, leafless and decrepit, overlooked the graveyard proper. Stone markers and monuments, many cracked and covered with lichen and vines, protruded at odd angles from the ugly brown soil. An occasional clump of grass complemented the rotted baskets of what used to be flowers that adorned a few of the gravesites.

Cane finished cleaning his shoes on the cracked marble headstone next to the stump (it bore:

Charlie Barker
Pickpocket, gambler, raconteur, dog
1924 - 1934
1934 - 1935
1935 - 1937

He Wouldn't Rest In Peace)

and wandered into the cemetery. "Yo, Bogmire! Up and adam! Up and atom? Atom and Eve? I never did understand that expression." Cane kicked some dirt off one of the fresher graves, in a half-hearted attempt to uncover Bogmire, presuming he was hanging out in one of the caskets. "Come on, let's roll, I've got stuff to do here!"

While Cane was ineffectually digging, his attention downward, above and behind him a nebulous mist solidified slowly into a swirling, chaotic mass of threatening darkness, out of which rose a tall bulbous purple figure with fanatically glowing yellow eyes. It grew taller, towering over the unsuspecting Cane, and then suddenly spoke in a voice like distant thunder:

"You have entered my solitary world of the dead!"

Cane turned and looked up. "Yo, Bogmire, didn't see you come in. What was that? Solitaire? You playing cards here? Radical! Canasta in the casket! Go fish in the Graveyard! Hey, do you play poker? I won three bucks off Tennyson last week in five card draw, deuces and joker wild -- of course I was cheating, don't tell him."

The glowering ghost seemed momentarily nonplussed. It seemed to take a moment to gather its forces and then tried again. "Cards? In my graveyard? If you dishonor the dead you will be buried with them!"

"Barry? Yeah, that's a great idea! I'd love to be Barry. I mean, Barry Sanders, Barry Manilow-- Barry Goldwater! Herman is awful, and Africanus is a disaster. Cane isn't much better but it stuck -- hey, that's pretty funny, ya get it? Cane -- a stick that stuck. That's a good one. You know, I was voted the funniest kid in Miss Larkin's class in third grade. Or was that grossest? I forgot exactly."

"ENOUGH!" thundered Bogmire. "Insolent brat! I WILL bury you beneath the BOWELS OF THE EARTH!" The ghost rolled its stubby arms, collecting a sort of pink shadowy lightning ball, which it tossed at Cane's feet, apparently intending to thrust him into the ground. However, the cast struck a bit too far ahead of the boy. It plunged deep into the earth, instantly forcing the soil away to form a tunnel into the depths. The displaced dirt flew up in a jet, propelling Cane high into the air towards the Mansion proper.

Bogmire shrank and looked dejected. "I hate it when that happens," the ghost mumbled. Then its eyes widened and it began to recite as it performed an awkward dance:

Oh yeah!

who's gloomy?

Oh yeah!

who's sad?

Oh yeah!

I'm scary

I'm scary and I'm bad!

Fortunately, Cane landed on a sharply sloping part of the roof, breaking his fall and avoiding injury to much outside his dignity, about which he cared little. His slide down the roof was interrupted as his butt thumped against a protruding chimney, bringing him to a shuddering halt. Cane grabbed the chimney and with some difficulty got to his feet, perched rather precariously on the steep and slippery shingles. The roof was wet, perhaps from a morning mist that was just dissipating. He didn't fancy trying to walk to the edge to look for a place to climb down. Below the chimney and to the right was

some sort of window -- a skylight, he deduced -- held in place by what he recognized as wingnuts. This looked like the most promising escape path.

Cane laid down on his stomach and slid out past the safety of the chimney. Even lying face down, his descent rapidly threatened to accelerate out of control, but fortunately his path led directly to a face plant on the skylight frame. He reached above -- below? -- his head and pushed himself back up the roof slightly to enable manipulation of the fastenings. It was difficult to twist them from his awkward position, but persistence was the only path available to him. The bolts loosened, he was able to pull the clamps they held away from the frame. The other side of the frame was attached to a sort of hinge, so Cane could deduce that he should be able to open the shaft by pushing up on his side of the assembly. The rubbery seal had set in place with time, and initially didn't want to come loose. Cane awkwardly struggled to a sitting position, his splayed feet resting against the sides of the transparent plastic, and pulled upwards at the edge of the metal bar surrounding the window. This was a mistake. The assembly suddenly popped up and out of his grasp, leaving his feet supported by nothing but air. He slid into the opening, grasped for non-existent handholds, and fell down the shaft.

Directly under the skylight was a worn sofa. Cane dropped through the air, bounced off the sofa, and landed face-first on a plush carpet of the most remarkable tawny gold color. "Ow. Oh. Yow. That hurt." Each attempt at motion provoked a new stream of complaints as he discovered yet another minor twist or bruise. Finally he got bored enough with close inspection of the carpet fibers to sit up.

Cane found himself in a room remarkable not for its structure but for its contents: paintings seemingly covered every available inch of every wall, as well as the cabinets, doors, windows, and most of the tables and dressers. Several easels bearing paintings in various stages of completion were scattered between piles of blank canvasses, paint boxes, palettes, and brushes. Paper sketch pads stuck out in odd places. At one easel floated a ghost wearing a beret. The hair exposed beneath the hat was spiky and unkempt, brilliant yellow with stripes of blue. The right ear stuck out, a kind of mauve amongst the yellow, but the left ear appeared to be missing. The mustache and short beard were orange speckled with gray. The ghost looked up from his painting and spoke:

"That was a curious way to enter the room. Why didn't you use the door at the staircase?"

"Door?" replied Cane. "I was on the roof. No door on the roof. Duh."

"No, precisely, the door on the roof," continued the ghost. "With the staircase. Spiral. Maroon supports and azure speckled with crimson for the steps." The ghost floated over to a large canvas hanging on the wall behind him; next to it was a placard, *La Chambre de Van Gore Chez Luigi*. Cane could see that the picture depicted the room from a viewpoint near where he sat on the carpet though looking back over his shoulder, and with striking and remarkable transformations of color and lighting. The ghost -- van Gore, no doubt -- briefly mixed patches of paint together on his pallet with a fan brush, and with a few deft strokes had added a door to the ceiling: even from where Cane sat the sketch conveyed the solidity and somber comfort of polished hardwood. The ghost switched to a coarser brush and dabbed a bit more orange and blue: "Eh, voila! C'est tout," he mumbled, and a very steep staircase descended from door to floor in his picture. "You see, my child?"

"I don't get it. So what? I'm on the roof -- I mean, I was -- I can't even see the painting. Geez. What a dufus."

"Mais non. I paint only what I see, my child. Turn 'round."

Cane turned his head and there it was: a door set into the ceiling, polished dark-stained wood and glistening brass knob, with a landing and short spiral staircase of red specks in a sort of blue, supported by deep reddish steel rods, just like in the painting. "The door, he says. Just use the door. Right." Cane got to his feet and strode over just to check: one good kick and the resulting additional sore foot (that was the one thing that didn't hurt! oh well) confirmed the solidity of the staircase. "So fine, next time I'll knock." When he turned van Gore was already back at work on the canvas he had been poring over when Cane fell in. Cane limped as he walked over to take a look. The canvas was covered with what appeared to him as a chaotic mess of swirling gold and orange, with some sort of rough-hewn greenish something at the bottom. "What the heck is that?" he asked.

"Oh, I have tried to express with my yellows and my greens the terrible passions of the game, the thrill of the victory, the agony of the defeat. The form swells in roundness and its inversions. I use the color in arbitrary ways to express myself more forcefully! It is, how you say, abstract, non? Not representational but transactional, gestalten not inductive."

"What a bunch of dumb silliness to excuse a crummy painting. Hey, that gets me to thinkin'. Are you dumb? A stupid ghost, maybe?"

"Oh, non, my friend. I am not dumb; on the contrary, I am brilliant! Disturbed, yes, maybe a little crazy, non? Off the proverbial rocker, completement fou, suffering from the loss of the marbles, out of touch with the reality. All true. A madman, but a genius! What golds! what browns! what pthalo green! what vigor! Can you not see?"

"Crazy. That might work. You wanna be inside a portrait?"

"Oh, I see you are working with the Professor. Non, non, my young friend: I have no need of this mechanical absurdity; I am in the self-portrait without the need of the machine, you see. I am not so foolish, eh?"

"Crum. Where am I gonna find a clueless spirit here?"

"Oh, why didn't you ask? That insane dancing couple, they drive me crazy! Always they want me to capture them on the canvas, but they do not stay still! They are spinning, twirling, bouncing, I can only paint a pair of blurs. It makes them very unhappy and they do not understand what is the problem. The fools that they are, it is not expressible!"

"Yeah, that sounds great, two is better than one anyway. How do I get there?"

"Well, down the hall, down the stairs, right, left at the second door--" van Gore began, then took into account Cane's look that combined blankness with disillusion. "I will help, let me paint you a map to depict the path to these brainless ballroom banterers." Van Gore floated to a second easel and grabbed a blank canvas. He plunged into the work, and was soon squeezing tubes of paint, whacking brushes against the easel, and mixing innumerable patches and swathes of color on the three pallets he seemed to be able to use simultaneously.

After a while Cane began to get bored and impatient. He stamped his feet, yawned, ran his hand over another canvas until he realized that the paints weren't yet dry, scratched his nose with his now vividly colored fingers and then tried to rub the pigment off (making the problem worse), and finally couldn't take it any longer: "Geeze, how long is that map gonna take?"

"Oh, it is not so simple. I must sketch the layout, lay the textures, capture the ectoplasmic light, create the background on which to build the structure of the piece. I start where we are, I evolve to where you must become. Of course, to show where we are, I must paint each of my pictures again, oh, but very small -- it is quite difficult, you see--"

"Okay, okay. No need to draw me a diagram -- I mean, you're already doing that. How long will it take?"

"It is very complex. Who can say? You must ask Madame Clairvoya! Here, let me draw you a map of how to reach her." The ghost moved to a third easel and drew up another blank canvas, plunging into yet a third work. Cane clapped his hand to his forehead (leaving stripes of color behind), sighed, and headed out the door as van Gore happily mumbled to himself. "To paint she who foresees we must see for her, coloring the future with the tints of the past..." SLAM.

Cane found himself in a short, dimly lit hallway terminating in an alcove with a portrait of a man in a rabbit suit -- probably a captured ghost. Two doors on the left and one on the right in addition to the one he had just come out of were visible. He took a look into the first door and quickly backed away: it was the Safari room. Cane would never have admitted being frightened by the head of the dead jaguar that had been reduced to a rug, but then there were lots of truths that Cane was reluctant to admit to. He moved down the corridor. The next door was bore a large black placard with yellow lettering: FAKE DOOR LEADING TO SECRET PASSAGE. DO NOT ENTER. DANGER. There was a little pictogram of a person falling into a hole. Cane cracked the door open: there was no light beyond and all he could see was a dark hole. Naturally, Cane walked in.

"Aaaaaarrghghg!!" he cried. This was a sensible response to plummeting feet first down the steep chute that lay immediately beyond the door. After that he advanced to "Oooohmphph! blurrh! owwww! blaaah!" Then his feet struck a hard object, fortunately mounted on hinges: it swung open and he flew out onto the floor of the ballroom, staggering forward like a drunk. "Geez, ya think they coulda put a warning sign on that door!" Before him was a ghostly couple twirling gracefully to the somehow-familiar music in the background (Strauss' On the Beautiful Blue Danube). He grabbed the shoulder of the male ghost, stylishly attired in black dinner jacket and black pants with a white strip down the seam.

"Oh, did you want to cut in? Of course!" the male ghost said, stepping aside. This didn't help Cane much, but he was given little choice as the female ghost, wearing a lovely strapless ballgown with glistening sequins scattered upon the pink chiffon skirt, grabbed his left hand and raised it to her shoulder-height (which, even though she was a tiny ghost woman, was still head high for Cane). Cane was still trying to recover his balance as well as his aplomb. She pulled his right hand around and pressed it behind her back, nodded, and stepped backward on the downbeat with her right foot. Cane staggered forward trying to follow her, and then became further confused as she bobbed up and slid to his right instead of continuing in the direction she had started. He practically collided with her as she came back forward again at the end of the measure. Her arm stiffened to drag him along as she executed a weave followed by a balance step. The male ghost protested, "No, no, Perdita, let him lead!" but to little effect. Perdita attempted a pirouette but this was too much: the completely confused Cane tripped over his own feet and sprawled on the polished floor.

"Oh, dear, Albert, I'm afraid he just didn't remember the routine properly at all. Perhaps he should sit out the next dance, don't you think?"

"Yes, Perdita dear, that is a very good idea." Albert strode forward, rather like a character in a cheap animated film: his feet moved as if he were walking though they slid arbitrarily above the floor as his body moved continuously to Cane. Albert stood over him looking concerned. "Are you all right, young fellow?"

"Ow. My arm hurts. My knee hurts. My butt hurts. What are you people -- I mean, dead people -- I mean ghosts -- doing?"

"Oh, we're rehearsing for the big exhibition," replied Albert.

"Waltz, swing, and foxtrot are our dances," interjected Perdita. "We are working on the waltz today, of course."

"Exhibition?" said Cane. "I didn't hear anything about that. Not that I would've cared, I guess. When is it?"

"Next week, I believe," replied Albert. "Or was that next century? I can't exactly remember."

"Was it next century?" asked Perdita. "Is a century longer than decade? It was next decade. Or next month. Or something like that."

"Yes, next something like that. That must be it," said Albert with finality.

Now Cane was nothing if not an opportunist. He saw his chance and took it. "No, no, I remember, it's today! In five minutes! Down in the workshop. You've got to come with me right now!"

"My lord!" exclaimed Perdita. "Five minutes and I'm not even dressed! Can we go on second?"

"Uh, don't worry, you're on third or maybe fourth, but we do have to hurry!" replied Cane.

Albert grabbed his hand and tried to drag him towards the adjacent cloak room, urgently inquiring as they went: "You must help me choose the appropriate tie! Appearance is as important as skill in these competitions, you know." This was only a mildly bad idea, but made worse as Albert passed directly through the wall to the cloak room and tried to drag Cane along with him.

"Oww! Urr! Oh that hurt! This is NOT my day," complained Cane.

Remarkably, the couple were fast dressers, and within the promised five minutes Cane and his putative marks were making their way down the escalator into the depths of the shack, serenaded by another of Tails' overly loud melodies:

*the story begins
with who's gonna win*

knowing the danger that lies within...

"That doesn't sound at all like waltz, dear," yelled Albert over the music. "Definitely four-four time! Shall we try foxtrot?"

"But I've the wrong gown for foxtrot, I need the billowing ribbon trim. Oh, dear, dear. What shall we do?"

"It's ok," screamed Cane, "this is just the, uh, the Less Boasting competition--"

"Don't you mean the West Coast Swing?" injected Albert.

"Oh, yeah, that's it, West Coast Swing, that comes before the schmaltz -- I mean waltz! I'll go talk with Tails -- I mean with the organizing committee!" He ran down the escalator, holding his ears, and waved wildly at Tails who was hovering above a partly-assembled billiard table. Having acquired the fox's attention Cane made a slashing gesture across his throat; Tails pulled a large knife out of his back pocket, but prodded by Cane's frantic head-shaking he finally clued and shut off the music. "I brought the third couple for the big dance exhibition!" exclaimed Cane as the Whirlindas entered the room.

"Da what?" asked Tails. Cane pointed at the pair of overdressed ghosts, then at his own head, then formed the international NOT symbol with his fingers. Tails was quick on the uptake: "Oh, yeah, da big exhibition. It's, uh, right over here in da next room, come on, ya just in time!" He led the way towards the Portraificationizer.

"Oh, a fox to introduce the foxtrot, how quaint!" observed Perdita.

"Where is the audience going to be?" asked Albert. "We want to show them our good side, you know."

"The audience -- oh yeah, dem," replied Tails. He surreptitiously flipped two switches on a little box hanging from his belt; the lights went off in part of the adjacent room. "Ya can't see 'em, dere over dere in the dark part, cause o' course da dancers are in the big spotlight! Come on, you're on next!" There was a brief delay while Tails tried to think of something in his music collection in 3:4 time: a puzzled Cane was momentarily distracted as the surprisingly gentle strains of Fats Waller's Jitterbug Waltz filled the room. Tails gestured to Cane, who directed the Whirlindas towards the intake hose of the Portraificationizer, while Tails floated over to the controls and fired up the system.

"Over here, you need to stand right by this hose here!" said Cane, ineffectually trying to drag Albert by his insubstantial elbow.

"Can you count the house?" whispered Albert.

"No, I can't tell, but it sounds like it's packed!" whispered Perdita in reply.

Out of the corner of his eye Cane could see the display light up, as a distinctive whirring sound emanated from the panel next to his shoulder. He started to surreptitiously slide the hose inlet towards the dancers. Albert was saying, "Don't forget, dear, it's a Barclay followed by a balance step after the pirouette."

"No, no, dear, it's a Promenade, I'm quite certain."

Tails looked over to Cane and gave him a thumbs-up signal as he pressed the button to initiate suction. Cane grabbed the rod attached to the aspirator frame just as Albert asked, "A promenade? Not a Barclay?"

"Quite," said Perdita. "Like this!" She took Albert's arm and the pair spun around just as Cane leaned forward to place the aspirator next to Albert. Perdita's arm, elegantly splayed outwards in her spin, knocked the control rod out of Cane's hands to the floor, causing the aspirator nozzle to sink straight down onto Cane's head. ZZZZZOOOOOOPPPSSSSS! Cane was sucked into the Portraificationizer.

"Ain't dat the dangdest thing!" said Tails. He pulled out his little control box and pressed a button; the music changed. Albert said: "That must be our cue!" He took Perdita's hand and the pair swept out into the brilliantly lit open space between the pile of broken A-wing parts and the garbage heap. Perdita's gown billowed as they gracefully traversed the floor, spinning, dipping, balancing, and then bowing to an audience whose applause only they could hear, while in the background Tails supervised the superimposition of Cane's corporeal being on van Gore's ultrarealist masterpiece, Tarry Night, gypsum and motor oil on asphalt:

*Tarry tarry night
Paint the road with dashes white
Mark them with reflectors bright
For eyes that know the blackness on my sole*

Luigi leapt stylishly to the ground from the knotted rope. The kids, the Parrot (sucked up in Erin's Pokeball, since it was no longer occupied), and four Yoshies were waiting on top of the junk. Luigi gave an unintelligible command and the four Yoshies started to push the garbage away from the X. The Yoshies worked in an uncoordinated fashion, frequently squabbling over who got to move which trash, with one pushing to the left something that a colleague had just pushed to the right. As a consequence, little was accomplished.

Meanwhile, the kids watched fascinated as several apparently wild Pikachus started to gather curiously around the group of invaders. The natives were at first skittish but grew more confident as it became apparent that the new creatures were either harmless or ineffectual. Clara jumped off the broken Crazy Red large-screen television monitor she was sitting on to approach one of the animals, but her sudden motion frightened it away. Nicholas was more patient and more successful; after several minutes of slow courtship, he was able to hand the still-suspicious Pokemon a saltwater-soaked cupcake he had saved from the dining room. The Pikachu immediately retreated to safety and greedily devoured the morsel, growling and sparking at his less-fortunate colleagues as they approached to steal a crumb or two. Then it returned to Nicholas and waited expectantly, obviously hoping for more handouts.

"Hey, guys -- and Clara! -- watch this!" said Nicholas. "I got an idea." He turned to the Pikachu and said in a loud voice, as clearly as he could manage: "Pikachu! Dig!" pointing towards the center of the X. The big mouse stood for a moment as if puzzling over the command, and then scampered away. "Uh -- he's just going to -- uh -- get a shovel!" said Nicholas. "That's it. A shovel."

"Nicholas, what would a Pikachu living wild on an uninhabited island be doing with a shovel?" asked Tennyson.

"I don't know, maybe he killed the pirate who buried the treasure to get it. Shocked him to death."

"That's reassuring. You sure this is worthwhile?"

"Oh youra worryin a too much, theres a no dangerous thinga here, the Pikachus therea very nicea," said Luigi, pushing one of the Yoshies towards a refrigerator door inconveniently lying on the middle of the X.

"So, Mister Luigi, what's going on here anyway?" asked Clara. "What's the X for?"

"Oh little Clara sweetie, itsa the buried treasure you know, I thought you could help me dig the treasure up, then we can share it you know, you gotta carry it back, itsa so heavy. But firsta we gotta get all disa junk offa where we gonna dig."

At this point Nicholas' putative friend the Pikachu came back into sight. As it neared the kids could see that clamped inside its mouth was a live baby pig, squealing loudly until the Pikachu shocked it into temporary silence. It dropped the pig at Nicholas' feet, said "Pika pika?" and waited expectantly for a reward from its new master.

"Oh, no," said Nicholas. "I said dig, not pig! Dig! Dig for TREASURE!"

"Pika pika!" The monster ran off again. Nicholas was trying to reassure the other kids that he had everything under control, while figuring out what to do with the piglet, which showed a regrettable tendency to nuzzle his legs, when it bounced back around the boulder. This time it had a stick in its mouth.

"What the heck is that?" said Nicholas.

Tennyson leaned over to get a closer look. "Oh, it's a ruler. He thought you wanted to measure something."

Nicholas slapped himself on the forehead. "Not measure, TREASURE. Dig for treasure!"

"Boys!" said Clara, jumping off the bookshelf. "Pikachu! Listen up. There is a treasure underneath this X. Dig it UP!" However, her confidence did not lead to an improved result: this time the eager-to-please animal laid a small dog in front of her. "I get it -- a pup. Dig a pup. Oh, never mind." She rummaged in her backpack and found one of Bonapa T.'s biscuits to toss to the Pikachu. "Come on, we're going to have to do this ourselves," she said. "Do we have any shovels?"

Erin decided this was an interesting line of investigation and, taking out a notebook he had found in the junk pile, began to experiment, carefully recording the results in his log:

WHAT WE SAY	WHAT WE GET
toy sword	board
cupcake	rake
carrot	parrot

the last being sniffed out of the Pokeball in his pocket.

Luigi had prepared for manual labor (as long as it didn't involve him personally); the yacht was well-supplied with digging implements. The Pikachu made nuisances of themselves following Nicholas and Clara around hoping for more meaningless but rewarding tasks to perform. Nicholas, Clara, and Tennyson were soon scraping unsuccessfully at the packed gravel beneath the marker with their shovels. It took a while for the kids to notice that one of the party was absent. "Where's Brian? It's not like him to shirk," wondered Nicholas aloud. "Maybe I'd better go look for him -- I hope he's all right."

Just then a loud grinding noise arose from an edge of the pile. Out of the junk arose something that looked a little like a motorized lawnmower with a nose job: a tiny cabin sat on wide balloon tires, with a sort of snout made of a number of spinning gears and a giant drill-like thin in the center. Brian was perched in the cabin at an elongated steering wheel. "Get clear, I'm not sure how well I can control this thing!" he called.

The kids backed up as he directed the machine in an uneven path over the junkpile to the center of the X. Luigi, startled out of his supervisory nap, said "Mama mia! Itsa da Megamaniac excavatoria, it never worked at all, I thought it wasa broke!"

"You just have to read the instructions," yelled Brian over the noise of grinding rock as the digging tool bit into the ground. Brian was soon invisible behind clouds of dust and shards of flying stone, so the kids had no idea how things were going until suddenly the noise stopped and Brian's voice arose out of the dust: "I think that's it! Let me back out of here and we'll take a look!"

When the dust had settled, Nicholas could see a sharply-sloped hole about three kids deep. At the bottom some sort of wooden frame -- the top of a chest? -- poked out of the dirt. "Great job, Brian!" said Nicholas. "Come on, let's get this thing dug up!" He grabbed his shovel and scrambled down the steep sides of the hole, to be joined momentarily by Clara, Tennyson, and Brian, now armed with a spade. It still took some time, in part to resolve where to put the dirt they dug out after throwing it at each other proved fruitless. Erin actually took time out of *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* to drag up buckets of dirt with a rope ("This is really nostalgic! Takes me back to the days of Mike the Steam Shovel. One of my favorite books at three.") and five sweaty kids later they had exposed what was unmistakably a treasure chest.

Luigi joined the kids down in the hole to look at the lock. It was a black cube of some metal the size of Nicholas' fist, holding the clasp onto the base of the chest. On the chest was a placard: Tennyson scraped away the dirt to reveal

CHILD-RESISTANT TREASURE LOCK
TO OPEN PRESS AT ARROWS
TURN 1/2 TWIST
PULL HARD
WAIT PATIENTLY.

"I can do that," said Clara. She grabbed the lock, jammed her fingers into the two arrows engraved into the metal, turned, pulled, and waited. After about 10 seconds she said "Geeze, is this thing gonna' open or what?" and threw it down in disgust.

"I guess they were right," said Tennyson. "It's pretty hard to wait patiently if you're a kid. We'd better let Brian try." It turned out to take about two minutes, by which time Brian's fingers were about to fall off, but when the lock popped loose the reward was worth the wait: the chest was chock-full of golden coins, bronze coins, silver coins, topaz, rubies, and gorgeous Damascened swords and knives in jeweled sheaths. Luigi called up to the Yoshies for sacks, and the kids went to work helping to load up the contents and drag them into the yacht.

While hauling a sack laden with gems out of the hole, Brian asked Luigi (who was providing encouragement if no assistance), "Where did you find out about this treasure chest, anyway?"

"I heard it a from onea my most reliable sources, my mothers' cousins' sisters' friends' nieces' brothers' admirers' cousins' boyfriend's dog. He told me there wasa dis article ina da Journal ofa Piracy and Illegal Occupations, I read it alla da time, it had a satellite photograph of all da x's ona Cobalt Island, dis one isa da biggest one!"

"Journal of Piracy?" asked Brian between pants. "So this is pirate treasure? Isn't it stolen, then? Shouldn't we do something to return it to the rightful owners?" Erin had commandeered a lovely scimitar with a gold-plated hilt and was busy battling imaginary skeletons armed with imaginary swords. He was entirely too busy for moral qualms.

"Oh, maybe ifa we could figure out, but ya know coins are coinsa, you can't tell whosa coins you got, anyway everybody does it, thatsa why you comea to Cobalt Island, itsa for da treasure you know."

"I always use that excuse on my dad and he never falls for it," interjected Nicholas, loading up a bag with lovely carved topaz pieces.

"What excuse is that?" asked Clara. She was tying up the full sacks.

"That everybody does it. Even like when every kid was taking Pokemon cards to school against the rules, and he said I still couldn't do it."

"I'll cut you into a thousand pieces!" cried Erin. "Oh, no, each piece turns into a new skeleton! Powerful magic indeed."

"My mom is the same way," said Tennyson. "Lots of people doing it wrong makes many wrongs, not one right. That's what she said when I wanted to throw rocks in the pond where the sign says no rock throwing."

"You mean Carwash Park?" asked Clara. "I mean, Ridgeway Park, over by the car wash gas station. Everybody throws rocks there."

"Yeah, that's what I said. It didn't get me anywhere."

"Wella, lucky I'ma not your papa!" said Luigi. "Itsa da treasure, you dug it up, we'rea gonna take it alla, nobody gonna stop us." He was so carried away with the force of his argument that he actually stooped down and picked up two sacks to toss up to the Yoshies on the quarterdeck.

"Yeah, you know, I don't know how we would return this stuff anyway," said Brian. "If say we put an ad out in the Toadtown Times or something, people would certainly call and say it was theirs but how would we know if they were telling the truth? We'd have to spend a bunch of time investigating everything they said. It's just not practical. I think we need to just do what we need to to get home. It's what my mom calls a character-building experience."

"I hope not!" said Tennyson. "That's what they say when we have to go to Uncle Mischa's opera performances. Yuuck."

"We will kill Sinbad, slice him in pieces, rip him to shreds and feed him to dogs!" sang Erin to a tune vaguely resembling The Ride of the Valkyries. "After we're done we'll trash Bernard Hermann even though he is already dead!"

"You sound great, Erin, you wanna go instead of me?" said Tennyson.

"How you saya dat?" said Luigi. "Rigoletto, Figaro, La Traviata, Il Destino, Allegro non Troppo, whatta music! Whatta songsa! We gonna listen alla da way backa to the mansion, you'll see!"

"See, Brian? You don't need to feel guilty about this, we get punished for it," said Tennyson.

Modern faucets replace old-style washers with rubber o-rings. O-rings are normally held in a machined or molded groove in one face, and mate to a smooth sealing face to close a passage to the flow of water or other fluids. O-rings take their name from their shape, though they are flexible and can be stretched to fit complex grooves--

"Erin, could you turn that off and pay attention!" asked Nicholas. Erin reluctantly pushed the eject button and popped the disk -- Dropping Drips and Lurid Leaks -- back in its cover. "I would have thought Cane was the one who couldn't stop watching TV."

"Are you kidding?" said Cane. "I don't want to be plumber! I don't want to have anything to do with showers."

"I've noticed that," said Clara.

"Come on, this is serious business," interjected Nicholas. "Can we all be quiet for just a minute? Thank you. Brian, why don't you show everyone the plans you got?" Brian took the two plastic disks out of his pocket and placed them on the green glass coffee table; the disks were a similar color and were hardly visible in the poorly lit projection room. Brian touched them again to make sure they hadn't disappeared on him. Nicholas continued: "These are supposed to be the detailed plans for the Ark space station! If we can figure out how to read them we could probably know where the secret project is located and how to find it. Does anyone have any ideas?"

"Wait, wait, slow down," said Brian. "There's some other important stuff. First of all, I didn't get these plans, Erin did."

"Erin!" exclaimed Clara. She looked a bit suspiciously at Brian. "Why did you pretend you got them? What's going on here?"

"I didn't pretend anything, you guys didn't listen!" replied Brian. "You're always doing that. You never listen to me."

"We're listening now," said Nicholas.

"Oh, yeah, sorry, you almost never listen to me. And you didn't listen to Erin. Erin found the plans while he was at the Minigames theme park, right Erin?"

"Yes, there I was, trapped between a ravenous Officer Jenny and a giant horned dinosaur--"

"Was it a triceratops?" asked Tennyson. "I love those, they are so cool, they're my favorite dinosaur, even better than allosaurus."

"You just like Cera in Land Before Time," said Clara.

"Anyway it wasn't a triceratops, it only had one horn!" said Erin.

Mr. Saturn was flipping through the Plumber's Helper Companion book next to the video disk rack. The cover illustration showed a muscular bearded chap smiling at the camera as with both hands he thrust downwards on the wooden handle of the namesake plunger; not-very-clean-looking water spewed everywhere and partly obscured the subtitle, Bathroom Reading. "Erin, I have a new improvisational exercise for you. It's called show it, don't blow it." He wiggled his nose and a marker floated up towards Erin's hand. "Go to the board and write the five key things that you learned today. One sentence each. No talking. Don't answer questions 'till you're done." He paused for a pan across all the other kids: "And you keep your mouths shut for a moment." Cane started to ask how long a moment was required but a glare from the suddenly authoritative dwarf silenced him. Mr. Saturn returned to reading about icemaker attachment water supplies.

Erin paused for thought at the board and then started writing.

1. Somebody is going to attack Ark in 27 days.
2. At least one Star Kid is involved.
3. They want Bowser to help.
4. They gave me the plans to Ark so they aren't very smart.
5. There is an Officer Jenny convention on Freedom next month.

He turned back to Mr. Saturn. "There. Can I talk now?"

"You just did. OK, Nicholas, your meeting. What's next?"

Nicholas paused and thought more than he usually did before speaking. "Right, let's go over each knowledge thing, each umm, number that you wrote. Somebody is going to attack Ark in twenty-seven days. Wow. Obviously that means we only have twenty--oops, twenty-six days to get there and get home. If that's really the way home."

"That doesn't make sense to me at all," said Tennyson. "If they're going to attack, shouldn't we just stay out of the way until whatever is happening is over? Sounds pretty dangerous to get in the middle of a big war battle thing."

"Gee, that's a good point," said Nicholas sarcastically. "Let's just sit back, relax, and wait for the station to get blown up so we can sit here for the rest of our lives!"

Suprisingly, it was Mr. Saturn who spoke next. "Tennyson, it's not that simple. I'm afraid Nicholas is right. If the attacking forces can't capture Ark they will certainly attempt to destroy it. If they succeed you're out of luck; I certainly don't know of any other way home for you."

The thought of no way home silenced the kids for a moment. Then Cane objected: "How the heck do you know? You're always just poking your big nose into some stupid book and getting into trouble. How do you get off tellin' us we're stuck here?"

"Yeah, Mr. Saturn," said Erin. "I know you know a lot more than you show but you haven't said anything like this before."

Mr. Saturn paused and put away his book. "Erin, I'm not generally a very responsible fellow. I get little respect and give back little regard. But there's more going on here than just your ride home. What did the Star Kid have to say about Ark?"

"Star Kid? What?" said Nicholas.

"I was getting to that," said Erin. "I said something like Ark is just a beat-up old space station, and the Star Kid got real huffy and said something like Ark is the most important place in the game worlds."

"So they know. Hmmm." Mr. Saturn turned to Nicholas. "Son, the Game Worlds are the simulated extrusion of the real world. I have what I believe to be reliable information suggesting that E. Gadd's project aims to turn the tables and take control of the real world from the Game Worlds. If they can make it work, then anyone in the Game Worlds who controls this project controls the future of all the game worlds. They can preserve a world as it is today, change it or destroy it completely. That project becomes the ultimate power in our universe. That is why its opponents will destroy it if they can't have it for themselves. Of course, it's a fool's errand: if the balance of power is tipped to any side, all those left out in the cold will face the same imperative: Ark must be destroyed immediately before it can be used to destroy them. As soon as the battle begins, the project's fate is sealed. You have to get these kids home in twenty-six days if you want to get home at all."

"Wait a minute," said Tennyson. "They're going to change the real world?? I mean, what the heck is going on here? What's going to happen to our home? To our families? Are you sure this is for real?"

"Well, you don't have to worry right away," replied Mr. Saturn. "The Committee is quite paranoid and has insisted that no changes are to be made in the real world until it has been conclusively demonstrated that the inhabitants thereof can be kept in the dark. So they'll make small changes to begin with."

"But what stops them from changing their minds later?" asked Clara.

"An astute remark, young lady. Nothing. So far certain members of the Committee have counseled restraint, but most inhabitants of the game worlds have no knowledge of or respect for the real world. Changes that would wreak havoc on your homes, your families, your people, don't bother most of us if we benefit. Of course, in that respect we're no different from you; after all, we get our essential nature from our human creators."

Nicholas turned back to the board. "Gee, maybe that's more than I wanted to know. At least we're sure we need to get there soon. What about items two and three?"

Erin pointed at the second line on the board. "The Star Kid is the guy who I was talking with. He was boasting that he had connections in Hyrule, and, um, the Nook guild -- in Animal Crossing, I guess --

and that Giovanni was going to help, and probably some other ones I've forgotten. Of course, I don't know whether that's all true or whether he was just pulling my leg, and even if it was true some of the armies could change sides later, like in a war game."

"Why was this Star Kid talking to you anyway?" asked Clara. "I mean, we like you okay but you're not anybody special. How is it he's spilling all this stuff?"

"Oh, he thought I was Bowser!" replied Erin. "I was wearing the Bowser suit. And acting obnoxious, that was important. I told you he wasn't too smart."

"Where did you get a Bowser suit?" said Clara.

"I won it. See, Mr. Saturn, don't you think I should've just told the whole story?"

"Nope, Erin. That would be a good course of action only for a person capable of relating events without embellishment, and that ain't you."

"So what you're saying," said Brian, "is that the Star Kid was supposed to have a secret meeting with Bowser and instead met with you by mistake. That's why you know that they wanted Bowser to help. Fine, but what about the real Bowser? Did they discover their mistake?"

"Yeah, maybe that parrot was assigned to do you in!" said Cane. "Did you find out?"

"I forgot about him. He's still in the Pokeball, I guess. Should I let him out?"

"Holy cow, what if he's been listening to us?" asked Tennyson.

"Let's threaten to pull off his wings to make him talk!" said Cane.

"Oh, come on, he's kinda cute," said Erin. "Look, why don't we just ask him?" He took the Pokeball out of his pocket and tossed it on the table. It popped open and -- nothing was inside.

"You sure you put him in there?" asked Clara dubiously.

"Thought I did. You think he turned invisible?"

Erin began to feel around wildly; Cane took him up on the idea and waved his arms around wildly, banging them into Tennyson and screaming "There he is!!" He jumped on top of Tennyson. "I've got him, let's defeatherstrate him!"

"Get off me, you dufus!" replied Tennyson, rolling off the chair onto the floor.

"Can't you guys keep on the subject for ten minutes?" said Nicholas.

"Ignore them," said Clara. "What the heck is this thing about an Officer Jenny convention?"

"Get off me!" said Cane, as Tennyson had managed to invert roles and was pushing Cane's head behind the TV screen.

Erin stepped over the struggling pair and handed Clara a little plastic card. "See, it's going to be at the capitol city on Freedom. It's in three weeks; just the right time. We could pretend to be going there so nobody gets suspicious."

"I don't know," replied Clara. "I'm suspicious. Where did you get this card from?"

Erin blushed bright red. "Oh, I just -- uh -- picked it up on the -- uh -- the sidewalk."

"I'm not the parrot! OK?" said Tennyson, who had Cane pinned with his face stuck in the magazine rack.

"Hey, look at this!" replied Cane, staring into the rack. "Skolar's ultimate cheat code guide! Cool."

"Never mind," said Tennyson, getting up. Cane, having forgotten about the putative parrot, picked up the guide and started to browse. "Get a clue, we're in the game, didn't you notice?" added Tennyson. "The cheat codes don't help any more."

"Oh, wow," said Cane, ignoring him. "You can flatten out the Simpsons characters by pressing L and R and X4 at the Options menu."

"I'll remember that if I run into Bart some time," said Tennyson.

"Was she cute?" asked Clara, referring to Jenny. Erin suddenly found the cheat code book very interesting. "Oh, look, he's blushing! Come on, Erin, did you kiss her? Was she prettier than Zelda?"

"Gee, that's hard to say -- I mean, how would I know? -- I mean, I didn't notice -- I mean -- kiss her? Are you kidding? Why would I want to kiss a girl anyway?"

"Yeah, I guess you wouldn't know," said Clara.

"You forget this is the guy who doesn't know what goes on in the girl's bathroom," added Mr. Saturn. "Nicholas, did you want to accomplish something here?"

"You're right," said Nicholas. "Okay, that's enough. Cane, stop reading cheat codes. Tennyson, don't sit on Cane unless he reads the cheat code book again. Erin, don't kiss Clara. Clara, leave Erin alone or he's going to kiss you anyway. Brian -- have you been paying attention again?"

"More or less," said Brian. "I'm not quite sure why Erin would want to kiss Clara if he's in love with Princess Zelda, but then again there's a lot about girls that I don't understand. Maybe he's practicing."

"I DON'T want to kiss Clara and I'm NOT in love with Princess Zelda!" said Erin. "I should've just learned more about o-rings." He sat down in front of the TV display and tried to figure out if he could set the brightness down so that Nicholas wouldn't notice he was watching.

Nicholas took advantage of the brief lull in the verbal animosity: "Brian, how many coins have we got now?"

"Well, I counted almost all the coins up when we got back. I counted the jewels too before I gave them to Mr. Luigi, so that he would know what he got. We have around nine thousand three hundred coins, assuming the gold ones are worth ten silver coins like Mr. Luigi said. That's in addition to the coins I still have left from the quiz show."

"That should be enough, if Tails was right, and he seems to be pretty smart about things," said Nicholas. "I guess we ought to figure out how to contact Fox so we can hire him to take us to Ark really quick. Does anyone know how to get in touch with him?"

"Wait a minute!" said Clara. "How much is it going to cost to hire Fox?"

"Tails said somewhere around seven thousand coins, I think," said Brian.

"So how many coins are we going to have left after that?" asked Clara.

"Well, the hiring cost will leave us about twenty-five hundred coins," replied Brian, "but then of course we're likely to have to buy food, and maybe pay for hotel rooms and more plane tickets or something like that. Plus maybe getting some more items: we should probably have more different kinds of weapons and maybe some medical stuff and armor. Anyway I would think we might have to spend more money. So maybe we'd have five hundred or a thousand coins left over."

"Who cares?" said Tennyson. "Unless somehow we're going to bring these coins with us; I mean, I don't think we'll need these coins when we get home."

"But what if we don't get home?" said Clara. "I mean, we don't even really know what's at Ark, and how it works, and whether it could take us home, and whether they would let us use it. What if we don't get home? What if we have to stay here? Then we're going to need coins for food and clothes and a place to stay, and who knows what else. Like, we might have to pay for school. I don't think we should just spend all these coins right away. My father always says to plan carefully for all the things that could happen."

"Pay for school?" said Cane, alarmed. "Why would we have to go to school? Our parents aren't here! Your dad isn't either. Who cares what he thinks?"

"Who cares what you think!" said Clara. "If you think at all."

"I think enough to remember that that parrot is still missing!" replied Cane. "I'll bet you forgot about it."

"Did not!" said Clara defensively; she had. So had Nicholas. He was getting a bit confused trying to keep everything organized and everyone on track.

"Did so!" accused Cane. "I'm not going to school until I find that parrot! Course I don't want to go then either. And I'm not paying for it, that's for sure!" Cane picked up a magnifying lens that Erin had borrowed from the study the previous day during one of his Holmes moods, and began to inspect the corners of the room for signs of the missing robot bird.

Meanwhile, Nicholas tried to get control of the group again. "Fine, Cane will look for the parrot while we finish. Meanwhile -- where were we? Oh, yeah, we were trying to figure out if we should save our coins or go to Ark." Nicholas tried to imagine that he was Mr. Classen. "Okay, we're going to give everybody a chance to vote. The question is this: do we hire Fox to go to Ark even if it means we spend

most of our money, or do we save our money and stay somewhere safe, even if means we might never get home?" The last sentence made Nicholas' stomach feel strange, but he plowed determinedly ahead. "Brian?"

"I think," said Brian carefully, "that everything we've heard just supports what we were going to do before. I think we have to do whatever we need to to get home. We don't belong here, even though some of the folks here are very helpful." He glanced at Mr. Saturn, who nodded in acknowledgement. "I'm sure that we can get home if we work together and don't give up. I don't think we should worry about the money as long as we don't just waste it or something."

"Not worry about money?" said Clara. "Brian Chang says not to worry about money?"

"Clara, come on," said Nicholas. "Anyway, it's your turn next."

Clara hesitated and looked at Tennyson for support. He smiled and pressed her hand. She made up her mind: "Princess Zelda told me that she would look after me if -- if we didn't go home. I'm sure that means all of us. Except maybe Erin."

"I'm NOT in love with Princess Zelda!" said Erin.

"Sure looked like it last night," said Cane, who was now inspecting each video disk for feathers.

"That was last night! I'm over it now. It was -- like -- just a crush."

"Okay, okay," said Nicholas. "Clara is talking. Go ahead, Clara."

"I'm not sure whether it's such a good idea to plunge into Ark. It sounds like it's all really dangerous. We already were going to deal with the asteroids and probably security robots, and now it sounds like we might be in the middle of a war! I mean, we're just kids, it's not like we're teamed up with some grownups, we have to do this ourselves." She drew a breath. "Maybe we have to face the fact that we're not going to get home."

"Okay, Brian is for Ark, Clara is for Hyrule," said Nicholas, jumping in to try to keep the discussion rolling. "Erin?"

Erin had a strange look on his face for several moments, as if he were rifling through a Rolodex of characters trying to find the right personality for the occasion. Then he looked with un-Erin-like directness at Nicholas: "I thought about using Henry the fifth's speech, you know, 'We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; For he to-day that sheds his blood with me, Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile'; but then that sounded kindof morbid, like we'd get killed for sure, and besides it might make Cane my brother, and Clara would get mad at being left out, 'cause they didn't let girls fight back then except for maybe Queen Elizabeth, except that she didn't have to fight, being the queen. Then I tried Humphrey Bogart, like in Casablanca, 'I'm no good at being noble but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world'. Well, of course, I could make it six little people, but then it should really be six kids, and I kindof like beans -- at least Garbonzo beans, and I'm still hungry, too -- so that didn't come out right. The Good Witch of the North doesn't work 'cause I don't want to be a girl and besides, can you imagine Clara wearing ruby slippers? So I'm stuck: we have to do the brave crazy thing and go in even if we never come out because I can imagine everything except never getting home again. I'd rather be replaced with another Erin, I might as well be. Or never replaced. I just can't think of a better way to say it."

"Don't need one," said Mr. Saturn.

"Does it matter to anyone that we have no idea what you're talking about, Erin?" said Tennyson.

"Not to me," said Cane.

"Cane," said Nicholas, forgetting that he was going to leave Cane out, "it's your turn."

"You guys are totally crazy," replied Cane as he inspected the back side of the oil painting hanging next to the TV monitor. "I can't believe I'm saying this but I agree with Clara. Wow. I must have lost my mind in that danged portrait."

"You didn't tell us you were in a portrait again!" said Tennyson.

"What? Never mind. I didn't say that. I mean, I did say that I agreed with Clara but -- I mean just forget it. Clara is right. We should keep all that money and live like kings! We can stay with Luigi and have lots of stuff to eat. We can tear all the feathers out of that parrot when I catch him. We can go

back to Fourside and watch TV. Erin can even stay with Mr. Saturn and read all the time. We can visit Clara at Zelda's castle if we don't have to dress up too much. And no school. It's a great life. Why mess it up?"

"I don't know if I need that kind of agreement," said Clara.

"Tennyson, you're last," said Nicholas.

"No, I'm not," said Tennyson. "Aren't you going to say anything yourself, Nicholas?"

"Oh, yeah, I guess you're right. But you go next anyway."

"Okay. I guess I'm going to sound really stupid, but it seems to me even in these worlds where almost everything is based on fighting, that there are so many people already who have helped us. Even Ness was trying to help us, in his own way. And remember even after we fought with Fox and his friends they were still nice when it was over. We have to believe that we're going to find the help we need. We have to have faith that some of the essential goodness in people is in the things that people make, even if they didn't mean to. And we have to have faith in ourselves. Brian is right. If we stick together we'll get through somehow. So that was pretty dumb, right? Your turn, Nicholas."

"Well, let's see: Brian for Ark, Clara for Hyrule, Erin for Ark, Cane for food, Tennyson for Ark. That's three to two for Ark." Nicholas experienced a brief temptation to just accept the vote of the others, as it saved him having to actively make a decision; after all, that's what Mr. Classen would have done in a situation like this. Mr. Classen was always telling the kids in the class to take charge of their lives, and how they couldn't rely on teachers, parents, or other grownups to solve all their problems. But he realized he would be letting the other kids down if he failed to take a stand. "I think we need to take the right way, not just the easy way. Ark it is. If Clara and Cane want to stay here that's ok. They can keep their share of the coins. We'll try to come back for them somehow if we can."

"Clara and Cane eatin' up some shroom," chanted Erin, "stayin' behind while we go boom!"

"I'm not sure I needed that kind of support," said Nicholas.

"That's what I said," said Clara.

"Politics makes strange bedfellows," said Mr. Saturn. "Lucky you're too young to worry about the implications."

"No problem," said Erin. "Chants for chumps, help for the hopeless, clues for the clueless, ditties for the doomed -- we've got 'em all!" He was back to normal.

"Are you really going to stay behind?" asked Tennyson. He meant Clara.

"Of course!" replied Cane. "I'm sure not leaving until I find that parrot!"

"I meant Clara," said Tennyson.

"I'm not trying to find Clara," said Cane.

"I'm not trying to talk to Cane," said Tennyson. "Clara, are you really staying behind?"

Clara was hoping that the boys would continue their spat so she wouldn't have to address the question. She met Tennyson's eyes with a look that was meant to say, Let's discuss this in private. Fortunately at that point Nicholas interrupted: "Tennyson, nobody really has to make their mind up until tomorrow, so let's just, um, get some sleep, okay?"

"Nicholas, what about the plans?" said Brian, pointing at the two forgotten green disks.

"Oh, yeah, the plans! How the heck do we read what's in here? Anybody got any ideas?"

"Why don't we ask Mr. Saturn," said Erin. "I bet he knows how to read them."

"I'll bet he doesn't," said Cane. "He's just a dumb short guy with a big nose."

"Cane, what does that have to do with anything?" said Clara.

"Yeah, you're short too!" said Tennyson. "Even shorter than Brian, I'll bet."

"I am not! Anyway I'm taller than Mr. Saturn," replied Cane.

"We're not asking whether he can hold the disks up real high, we're trying to find out how to read what's on them," said Brian. "What does his height have to do with it?"

"It's not the height, it's the nose!" said Cane. "It gets in the way of my search. He's probably hiding the parrot under his nose! That's it!"

"Enough, Cane!" said Nicholas. "Mister Saturn, do you know how to read the plans on the disks?"

"Can't say as I do," said Mr. Saturn.

"See! I told you! See!" said Cane.

"However," began Mr. Saturn.

"He's a dufus! A short dufus with a big nose and no hands!" said Cane.

"You're a dufus!" said Erin. "A short dufus with a big nose and no brains!"

"However," continued Mr. Saturn, "I know the next best thing. I know someone who will know."

"He's just bluffing!" said Cane. "Make him prove it."

"Cane, go back to looking for the parrot," said Nicholas. "Tennyson, sit on Cane if he doesn't shut up. Mr. Saturn -- do you really know someone who can help?"

"Of course, Nicholas, very kind of you to ask. Just a moment." The little guy waddled to the TV set and pressed two spots with his nose. A hidden control panel popped open revealing several switches and a number pad. Mr. Saturn punched in a series of digits and waited. The TV monitor suddenly brightened. A furry creature with a long snout -- a weasel, thought Brian -- was staring down at something they couldn't see. It wore a blue suede suit and a bright yellow tie. In the background was a table covered with pieces of some sort of electronic equipment in various states of disassembly. Several small apparently dead creatures, rodents of some kind, hung from strings to one side. The weasel looked up suddenly at them. "Snide, it's Saturn here."

"Yo, Saturn, bud!" said the weasel. "How's it hangin'? What's the haps, bro? Where's your homeboys? You slummin' again?"

"A pleasure indeed, my friend. Of course I am. I have a problem which I suspect you can solve rather easily. We have obtained a couple of document disks, right here." He wiggled his nose and the disks floated up towards the monitor. "Familiar with this type?"

"In my sleep, big daddy. Ain't no plan I can't scan. How'd you get your invisible mitts on 'em? That's Star Spirit, they don't take kindly to pokin' in their data."

"Rather not say. If it were legal would I have called you?"

"Legal? Frag that hag, bag man. Pop 'em in the slot, I'll run you a download."

"Erin, would you be so kind as to insert the disks, one at a time, into the slot over there at the bottom corner of the screen?" said Mr. Saturn.

"Uh, sure, but -- isn't that slot just a picture of a slot on the TV screen? Is it real?"

"Not to fear, just push," said Mr. Saturn. Sure enough, the disk slid gracefully into the picture of an opening, with a slight whirring sound, it's partner following soon after. "Is that sufficient for your needs, big fellow?"

"Slam bam thank you ma'am. We be done down and dirty. Comin' right back at ya, psy guy." The weasel manipulated something out of sight and his image on the screen was suddenly replaced by a floating image which Brian, Clara, and Nicholas immediately recognized as Ark (that group having been the most avid players of Sonic Adventure). The image appeared so realistic it jumped out of the screen, and what was even cooler was that as they watched, it was as if a giant knife sliced off one edge to reveal a cross-sectional view of the edge of the station. Each second or so, another slice was removed, so that they could see successive slices through Ark, finally leaving only a tiny edge of metal and then nothing; after that the process repeated itself. If you watched for a couple of cycles you obtained a very clear idea of the three-dimensional structure of the station. "Slick wick, ring man, yo?" said the weasel.

"Excellent," replied Mr. Saturn. "I am in your debt yet again. How can I port the images over here?"

"Where's that big butt o' yours planted?"

"Luigi's place."

"Oh, yeah, just snag a GBH. I'll do a compatible dump." The weasel did something else, and from the picture of a slot in the TV screen two rectangular slips of plastic extruded.

"Game Boy packs!" said Nicholas.

"More or less," said Mr. Saturn. "We need to find a Game Boy Horror; there used to be several in the mansion, probably one or two still around that we could borrow. Anyway, we're set here. Many thanks, Snide," he finished, turning back to the screen.

"Anytime, bro. When you gonna' stop by?"

"Got a space station to crash first. If I come back we'll do some licks. Otherwise look up my replacement and belittle him for me, would you?"

"He won't need it. Break a leg, peg. Yo." The screen went dark again.

"Brian, do you want to take charge of the plans again?" said Nicholas. Brian nodded and stuck the game pack in his pocket. "You can probably ask Neville where to find a GBH." Nicholas paused a moment to try to remember what else needed to get done. "Oh, yeah, we'll need to talk to Tails to find out how to get in touch with Fox."

"Whatcha wanna' talk to Fox about?" The door bounced open and Tails drifted inside, hovering lazily a upside down at waist height. He was gnawing on a piece of something that looked like a lamb chop. "Oh, yeah, I remember, you was lookin' ta' get to Ark, right? Yeah, crazy, gonna' be expensive. But okay, any friends o' Cane, dey must be buddies o' mine. One tough cookie, dat kid. Twice into the Portraificationizer, a volunteer no less. Wow. How ya' doin man?"

"Twice?" asked Tennyson. "I thought you were going to find some sucker to get sucked up for you?"

"I guess he only had to look in the mirror," said Clara.

"Tough, yeah, that's me!" said Cane, forgetting about his magnifier. "Tough as pails -- um, I mean, nails! Squashed, rolled, pounded, shocked -- all in a day's work for Cane, the boy of steel. Pretty as a picture, too, cause he is one!"

"You went into the portraificationizer on purpose?" asked Nicholas skeptically.

"Of course," replied Cane. "I'm not afraid of anything. I am impervious to pain!"

"What's impervious?" asked Tennyson.

"It means he's making it up," said Clara.

Cane was still on all fours on the ground, where he had been searching under the carpet. Brian intentionally stepped on his left hand. "OWWWW! What did you want to go and do that for?"

"I thought you were impervious to pain?" said Brian quietly.

"Not my own!" replied Cane.

"Okay, maybe we were wrong about him," said Nicholas, still dubious. He turned to Tails:

"Anyway, we decided -- that is, most of us are going to try to go to Ark. So do you think Fox would really help us? We have lots of money, we can afford to pay him. How could we get in touch with him? Can we call him on the phone?"

"Naah, I wouldn't bother, he don't return calls much unless it's a really foxy chick and I mean dat both ways. Ya gotta go talk to him, best to get him when he's a little bit lit up."

"You mean he glows?" asked Brian. "Some characters can do that but I didn't know Fox had a light attack."

"Sometimes ya can read too many guide books and ya don't know nuthin', little guy," said Tails, flying figure-8's around Brian. "I mean when he's like stoned, fried, bingin', plastered, soaked."

"Oh, you mean when he's been drinking," said Brian thoughtfully.

"Yeah, like dat. Lemme see, where's he bin hangin' out? Hmmm. He likes Rivet's, if not maybe Cymballine's, dat's da alien jazz club. Prob'ly dere, yeah, best shot. If ya don't find him ya can get somethin' ta eat and hang out for a day or two, he'll show up."

"OK, how do we get there?" asked Nicholas.

"Yeah, well, I usually take da ghost train. Kinda boring seein' as they hardly ever got any live folks, pretty dead hangin' with the ghosts in the lounge car and the dining car is terrible. Da food is all rotten, dey don't care. Dey got carts in the cars, dey sell whatcha call 'em ectobits, little bits o' ectoplasm stuff with chocolate. Actually not bad. Cheap fares."

"Great, great!" said Nicholas. "How do we catch the train?"

"Oh, dere's a station right down da street from here, ya' can walk but'cha gotta' watch out for da crazy NASCAR guys comin' barrelin' down da hill, otherwise it's really nice in da' mornin. Train leaves about nine thirty. If you're lucky you can catch a rabbit for breakfast, down in the field around da corner, good eatin'!"

"Uh, I think we'll skip the raw rabbit," said Nicholas. He turned back to the kids. "Okay, does that sound good to everyone? We'll get our stuff and head to the train station tomorrow at nine. Clara and Cane, if you're going to stay, why don't you get your coins from Brian before we go to sleep?"

"Hard to believe that a courageous kid like Cane is willing to turn his back on the challenge of getting into Ark," said Tennyson.

"Yeah, I would've thought he'd be begging to blow up some asteroids," said Clara. "But he probably lost his nerve. It's not like getting into a portrait, after all."

"Yeah, what do you know?" said Cane. "I'm not a wimp like you. I jumped right in that horrible machine just to help my buddy, Tails. Not a second thought! I just don't like security robots, they're so prissy."

The door swung open again, and a pair of ghosts swirled gracefully into the room: Perdita and Albert. They executed a perfect pirouette, a dip, and a promenade ending in a bow to the children; only Clara applauded but that appeared to be enough. Albert recognized Cane and nudged Perdita with his elbow. Her eyes went wide and they whispered briefly together. "Oh, yes, certainly, we must!" she said.

The pair approached Cane, who was sitting on the floor by now; Albert bowed elegantly while Perdita did a courtesy with her flowing chiffon skirt. "Young master, we have only just seen the video of our performance!" said Albert. "We had no idea that we had pushed you into that infernal machine! We thought you'd just grown bored of the waltz and went in to wait for the tango. You can imagine our chagrin. Such an awful way to treat our benefactor; without you, we would have missed the competition altogether."

"Yes, indeed," continued Perdita. "We were wondering if there was anything we could do to make it up to you."

"We've been looking for you all evening," said Albert.

"We thought perhaps you were afraid of us," said Perdita. "We promise never to do it again!"

"Ah, so I guess it's safe for you to stay behind after all," said Clara.

"Yeah, you'll just need to restrain that impulse for self-sacrifice," said Tennyson.

"Altruism can be such a burden," said Mr. Saturn.

"Al who?" asked Cane. "Whoever he is I'm not carrying him! And I'm still not going!"

"Oh, wonderful, you're staying! We can teach you the rhumba!" said Perdita, grasping Cane's forearms and sweeping him into the air. "The rhythm is like so, rhum - ta ta - rhum, and we start with the basic box step, left forward close, right back close, rotate left, underarm walkaround -- you should be leading, dear!"

"Yes, I'm certain with only a few years of practice you could be even better than I am!" said Albert. "Elbows out, don't let that dance frame collapse."

"Come on, children, we don't want to interrupt the lesson," said Mr. Saturn, leading the kids out into the pool room.

"Pushed in," said Tails thoughtfully. "An' I thought he just changed his mind."

"Not likely; he'd change his clothes before he'd change his stripes," said Tennyson. "And he doesn't change clothes very often."

"I'm sleepy!" said Nicholas. "Let's worry about Cane in the morning." The kids started to file into the hallway.

"Gee, it's not that I like him that much, but it does seem strange to leave him behind," said Brian. "What will we tell his parents when we get home?"

"Do you think they care if he comes back?" said Tennyson. "His sister has probably already rented out his room."

"Oh, come on, she's not that mean," said Clara.

"Which Melissa do you know?" said Nicholas. "I bet she's sold all his stuff too."

"Come on," said Brian. "Don't you think you'd miss him?"

The projection room door flew open and Cane came running full tilt, closely pursued by Albert and Perdita. "Come back! Come back! We'll stick to waltz, I promise! Oh, do stop!" Cane ran right over Tennyson, who was knocked to the floor, as he flew into the hallway and raced away.

"I'd miss him a lot more," said Tennyson, flat on his back, "if he would miss me."

Chapter 12: I'd Rather Jump Over the Moon

Nicholas had stopped by the kitchen to say goodbye to Bonapa T. He found the Toad already in his tall chef's hat and sparkling white apron. Sitting next to him was a mysterious youth in a gray weatherbeaten robe and hood. The windows above the kitchen sink were wide open, letting in a chill morning draft. The Toad held a small bird about the size of a chicken in his left hand on top of a cutting board; in his right was a cleaver. To his right was a large empty tray labeled "breasts" and another labeled "thighs", a third for "wings"; on the left was a tall garbage bin labeled "guts". The bird squawked and screamed. Nicholas couldn't blame it.

"Hey, Bonapa T., I heard you were busy this morning, and we've gotta take off before breakfast," said Nicholas, "so I just wanted to stop by to thank you for all the good eats."

"Zut! alors, you are leaving? C'est dommage. I am preparing ze glorious feast for tonite, it is a big state dinner, we will have thirty, forty guests. Neville is forbidden to enter ze dining room during dinner. Everything will be perfect!"

"Oh, is that what the coocoo is for?" asked Nicholas.

"Précisément, mon ami," replied Bonapa T. "We are having coocoo flambée avec sauce a l'orange, it will be magnifique!"

"But you've only got one bird for all those people, will that be enough?" asked Nicholas. "And don't coocoo's go in flocks? I thought if you attacked one of them the whole flock would get after you."

"Precisement, my young friend," said Bonapa. "Zat is why my friend Anikin is here. He will help."

The Toad lifted his cleaver into the air. Nicholas looked away: the shadow of the blade against the wall rose and fell: THUNK.

A rushing noise arose outside, growing louder and louder, punctuated by squawks and screeches. In seconds a tornado of winged creatures burst into the room. Bonapa T. retreated to the wall as the robed youth swiftly stood and reached for his belt: a brilliant blade of light extended, humming loudly above the rush of the birds. A hundred coocoos dove to the attack: the light saber leapt to meet them, spinning and jabbing, moving with blinding speed. Screams and wet smooshy splats filled the air; parts of birds flew left and right, while the mysterious Jedi stood motionless, only his weapon twirling and dancing. Bonapa T. said "Ça suffit, my friend, zat is enough," and pushed the window closed. The light saber retracted with a hiss. One last coocoo flew heedlessly into the window, flattening against the glass with a splat, and slipped slowly down the pane.

The trays on the table were now filled with neatly piled, mostly-plucked breasts, wings, and thighs. The garbage bin was piled with steaming, gross-looking bird innards. A few miscellaneous chunks of bird flesh were splattered on the table and the floor nearby, but for the most part a miraculously accurate butchery had obviously taken place. Anikin turned, his face flushed beneath his hood, and glanced at Nicholas. "I killed them all," he said. "Nobody poops on my speeder." He returned the light saber to his belt and walked down the hall.

"Merci, mon ami!" said Bonapa T. He was already plucking the last few feathers and rubbing spices into the carcasses in preparation for cooking.

"Yuck," said Nicholas. "I think I'll stick to heating up a carton of noodles in the microwave."

"Microwave! Oh, la la, zis is the great abomination for the true gourmet. Speak not ze name of microwave in my kitchen!"

"Sorry, Bonapa," said Nicholas. "Maybe it was better when we didn't know about how you made dinner. Anyway, I don't know what kids could do for you but if there's anything you just let us know."

"It was nothing, mon jeune ami, you must come back whenever you have ze chance. I will make such a feast! Nicholas and ze children of doom! Or perhaps just ze cosmic bowling reunion celebration.

Ah, well, bonne chance, adieu, my friend!" Overwhelmed by a burst of sentiment, the Toad grabbed Nicholas by the shoulders and kissed him on each cheek. The uninvited display of affection was not rendered more palatable by the blood and guts left behind on Nicholas' shirt.

"Uh, gee thanks, but I guess I'm, uh, late for the train, gotta' go!"

"Be careful, my friend, make sure to eat things before zey eat you!" The Toad turned back to his plucking as Nicholas headed down the stairs.

The foyer was in chaos. Between the ghosts come to pay their respects, Luigi simultaneously trying to talk them out of leaving and offering various sorts of irrelevant assistance, and the kids constantly heading back to their rooms for forgotten items, it was a big challenge to get everyone collected and ready to leave.

Neville was handing several lists to Nicholas: "This one contains all the items you might need at Freedom. This second list catalogs necessary garments and accoutrements, undergarments, and perishables that you should carry on the spacecraft, and then the third list includes diversions and entertainments useful in the case that you should be captured and relegated to a prison cell for an extended period of time."

"Thanks, Neville, thanks, that's great," said Nicholas, picking up the lists and dropping them again as he tried to attract the attention of Jack and Ellie, who were talking to Clara. "Hey, Mr. -- um, Jack, wait a minute!" Clara glared at him, but Ellie took her shoulder and led her away for some private advice. Nicholas reached into his backpack and drew out the Golden Hammer. "Mr. Luigi said this was okay, I hope you like it."

"Good Lord, son, I'd quite forgotten about that. That's a right kindly thing you're doin'; hardly proper fur me to turn it down agin'. Thank you very much." He leaned down next to Nicholas' ear. "You get to Ark, you just look up Mary Ellen, all right? You can rely on us, we'll get them the word."

Nicholas tried to acknowledge but he was swept aside as Lydia drew him into an embrace, shoving him face-first into her ample and scantily-covered cleavage. "Oh, we're going to miss you children so much!" the ghost gushed. "I can't believe you're leaving so soon, with a feast tonight and all. And you're so cute, too! I could just eat you right up." She kissed him on the cheek, a chilling as well as embarrassing experience. Nicholas started to blush red, and it was only made worse when Ellie leaned over to buss his other cheek with Clara on her arm staring right at them.

"You take care now, young man, and watch after the others," said Ellie. "Clara will help."

"I'll watch them all the way to El Dorado if I can just avoid any more kissing!" mumbled Nicholas. Clara snickered but didn't dare do more under Ellie's watchful eye.

In the corner near the mirror, Slim Bankshot was talking with Brian. "Always keep your cool, kid," said Slim. "Same face when you're ahead by 10 and losing by 10. Same eyes when the bet is a dollar or your life."

Brian looked dubious. "That's sounds pretty tough, Mr. Bankshot."

"Call me Slim. You're a tough kid. Keep cool, you'll be okay. I pity the ghost that tangles with you."

Tennyson was chatting with Melody under the chandelier. Tennyson had borrowed Clara's ocarina and Melody was demonstrating some useful songs. "This one can call up a storm if you're outdoors, though I can never get it to work inside." A lilting melody, lovely even through the thin tones of the simple instrument, rose momentarily above the noise of conversation. Tennyson sang the song back to her; Melody joined him and Tennyson shifted up a third to harmonize, the pair improvising an extemporaneous suspension resolving to the major to finish. Melody laughed with the pleasure of the music and hugged Tennyson insofar as a ghost could manage the feat. "Do you really have to leave?" she asked. "We could do duets at the piano, we could sing -- it would be wonderful to have another musician in the mansion!" Tennyson turned to see Clara behind him, hands on her hips, looking upset and somewhat envious.

"Thanks, thanks, we've got to go. You'd better give Clara back the Ocarina."

"Have you seen Mr. Saturn?" Erin interrupted. "I was sure he was going to go with us, but he's not in the study or the projection room."

"He can look after himself," said Clara. "Who needs him anyway?"

"That's a heck of a way to treat him, he was really nice to you when we got here!" said Erin.

"Yeah, when he's not trying to look up my skirt," said Clara.

"Well you're wearing pants today!" said Erin.

"Come on, come on," said Tennyson, separating the two. "Erin, I'm all finished packing, so I'll go check in the gallery to see if Mr. Saturn is there--"

"Here he is!" said Brian. Mr. Saturn waddled in from one of the rear doors under the twin stairways. He was carrying a cloth bag on his head, balanced presumably by psychic forces as it had no decent physical reason for remaining poised in that precarious position.

"Not to fear, Erin my boy," Mr. Saturn averred. "Just doing a little last-minute rummaging."

"Oh, yeah, okay!" said Erin, relieved. "What's in the bag?" Mr. Saturn glanced towards Luigi. Erin nodded. "Ah, dirty laundry."

"Yep, never know when you'll find a cheap laundromat on your travels," said Mr. Saturn.

"It's gonna be so sad in the Mansion witha nobody, who's gonna pulla me up when I'ma bungee jumping?" Luigi was trying to talk the kids into staying. "I gotta lottsa coins, we can go to the movies and have all the popcorn you can eata, come on, you gonna stay, Clara sweetie?"

Erin put his hands out to his sides, palms up. "Let's see. On the one hand, permanent exile, loss of friends and family, destruction of our homes by game characters gone wild, probable elimination as agents of the enemy no matter who wins. On the other hand, free popcorn -- and, admittedly, no income taxes when we grow up since we'll never live to grow up! Yep, we'll let Cane stay behind."

"Look, we really appreciate everything you've done for us, but we can't afford to waste time if we're going to get home," Nicholas interrupted. "We've only got twenty --"

"Days or so of funds, I believe you were going to say, right, Nicholas?" interrupted Mr. Saturn. "Luigi probably doesn't worry much about money," he continued, staring pointedly at Nicholas. "If he did, maybe he would be on our side of this dispute. Or maybe not."

"Oh, yeah, well anyway we've really got to make the train!" said Nicholas. "Take it easy, Neville!"

"Thanks to everybody!" said Tennyson.

"Except Jarvis!" said Erin as the reclusive fugitive poked his head briefly through the wall, snagged a jar of peanut butter from Brian's open backpack, and disappeared again after a moment's struggle to get the glass through the wall, leaving a dripping sticky mound of peanut glop behind.

Brian shook Luigi's hand. Clara visibly hesitated and then quickly hugged the older man before running back to join Tennyson at the entry. Nicholas screwed up his determination and pushed the door open. He was nagged by the worry that he was leading them all to disaster, but determined not to let it show. He charged outside and headed down the path towards the gate. The rest of the group followed in a ragged line, turning to wave to ghosts sticking their heads out the windows; Erin was carrying the cloth bag for Mr. Saturn, who waddled along at his side. As they passed the shack, Nicholas stuck his head in the door and yelled goodbye to Tails, but with little hope of being heard: the echoes of Tails' tunes were painfully loud even at the top of the escalator.

The gate to the estate swung open automatically as they walked up. The brisk morning air and the prospect of a train ride -- one of Nicholas' favorite recreations since he was little -- had brightened his mood; he was eager to get on with the trip and find out what the next challenge would be. At the moment his foot passed through the gate, a loud shout rang out from the house, and the door slammed with a boom. The kids turned to see Cane running down the stairs, holding his backpack in one hand while he stuffed clothes back into it with the other. His shoes were untied and his shirt was on backwards. He waved frantically to the kids to keep going as he ran full tilt towards the gate.

"I thought you were staying!" yelled Tennyson.

"Are you kidding!" panted Cane as he ran between Clara and Brian without slowing down. "Come on! We gotta' get outta here before they find me!"

A window swung outwards from a second-floor gable. A long-haired ghost stuck her head out: "Cane, darling? Where are you? We still have to work on the tango!"

"Hide me, hide me!" Cane hissed, concealing himself behind the trunk of a fir tree at the gateway. Nicholas gestured for the rest of the group to continue their orderly walk down the path; he nodded as they passed and Cane slunk out to one side of Clara and Tennyson, concealed from view of the Mansion.

Another window on the third floor went up. A male voice called: "Young man! Young man, where are you? We must think about our schedule of exhibitions, you know. Perdita, do you see him anywhere?"

"What's the deal?" asked Clara quietly without looking at Cane.

"They thought I was their agent! I was supposed to get them all these dance exhibitions and stuff. And do all the counting stuff!"

"Accounting," corrected Brian.

"Yeah, that's what I said. Boring boring boring! And the lady was always grabbing me and trying to do this durango thing--" ("Tango", added Brian) "--yeah, that's what I said, and it was terrible, her you-know-whats were stuck in my face and she's pushing me around and this guy is always lecturing me about how I'm supposed to read--" ("Lead", Brian started to say before being halted by a glare from Cane) "-- and then they wanted me to wear an albedo -- shut up, Brian! -- and I just grabbed everything I could find and ran! How could you guys desert me like that? I thought you were my friends."

"Seems to me you were lecturing us yesterday on how stupid it was to leave the mansion," said Clara.

"What? I never said that," said Cane. "Besides, so were you."

"Well, I changed my mind," replied Clara, grasping Tennyson's arm tighter. "You should make up yours before you go accusing people."

During this exchange the kids continued down the road, which turned left and descended steeply through a tree-lined gully. Erin was supposed to be watching for race cars barreling down the road, but he was busy describing his adventures at the mini-games park to Mr. Saturn. Nicholas was trying to remember Tails' instructions, simple though they were: he was a bit bothered that there was no train station in sight after what seemed like a good distance, though they had actually walked for only a few minutes. "Hey, Tennyson, what time is it?"

"About ten after nine," Tennyson replied. "Relax, we should have lots of time. Look, there's the field Tails told us about. We're fine." The road came out of the gully and passed by a lovely meadow, decorated with purple and yellow wildflowers still sparkling from the morning dew. A fox sat on its haunches on a tree stump just off the road, watching alertly for signs of prey. It glanced nonchalantly at the crew as they walked by. A small flock of pigeons burst out of the bushes to the left, frightened by the kids' loud argument. The fox watched them wistfully and then returned his attention to the grass.

The road straightened and led them between the walls of more very fancy-looking estates. On the left a vine-covered brick wall surrounded a red-roofed wood-framed building with huge picture windows everywhere. A wrought-iron gate flanked by security cameras carried a nameplate proclaiming in block letters: THE TORTIMERS, and below in smaller script, slow and steady wins the race. A smaller sign next to the gate proclaimed, NO ADMITTANCE. BY APPOINTMENT ONLY. NO SOLICITING. GO AWAY.

The road turned to the right again, past a fortress-like building surrounded by a huge wall and sporting scary-looking guns at all the corners with no obvious windows. A tiny door set in the glistening steel wall said: ARAN and nothing else. There was no doorknob, bell or knocker, just a tiny slot set taller than the kids could reach. The ground in front of the door was bare, with several prominent black patches that looked like scorch marks and a little blob of what might have once been molten metal.

As the kids passed the corner of the shining wall the train station came into view. A low brownish art-deco building was set behind a sizable parking lot, tastefully landscaped and sparsely occupied with both recognizable automobiles and stranger vehicles. Nicholas had just stepped out into the middle of the street to lead the kids towards the entrance, when a loud screeching sound followed by the roar of a car engine burst out behind him. Clara grabbed Nicholas by the shirt and jerked him

backwards as a recklessly-fast car flew skidding into the lot, heedless of the kids or any other occupants of the road, and came to rest perpendicular to a minivan. The car was marked with a prominent '24' in block numbers and several sponsorship announcements; it was a stock race car. The doors flew open and two men dressed in white racing suits with EARNHARDT lettered across the back jumped out and ran full tilt towards the station.

A family of squirtles piled out of the minivan as the kids walked onto the lot, the little ones squabbling and dousing each other while the adult -- the father -- admonished them, while he squirted angrily at the two NASCAR drivers and simultaneously grabbed suitcases from the back. A whistle sounded and a sleek green-and-white-striped locomotive pulled out from behind the station, pulling four bizarre green-glass cars that appeared to be filled with water, in which floated some sort of fish-like passengers or cargo. There was a snack truck outside the station entrance, run by a raccoon who occupied himself arranging the price tags while keeping up a constant patter with a rather fat koopa troopa, apparently a security guard, who hovered, huffing and puffing, around the entrance. As the kids hadn't had time for breakfast, everyone was soon plying Brian for coins to pay for the food and drinks they were grabbing. Nicholas could see a big clock inside the station through the window: 9:21 AM. "Come on, one item each, we've got to go!" he shouted, while making Cane put back the three packs of shroomsticks, four PandaCanes, and two Berry Tarts he had packed into his shirt. Copies of the Toadtown Times were stacked next to several other newspapers and magazines; Nicholas slapped his forehead: "Geeze, we were supposed to call Hedley!"

The glass doors of the station slid silently apart as the munching group of fifth-graders entered, Nicholas at the front encouraging them to move faster. Inside the station people and stranger creatures walked hurriedly back and forth past the various platforms, some already occupied with locomotives of every shape, color, size, and technology. There were sleek electrics, antique steam locomotives, and even a hover train. A glowing display hanging from the roof listed the trains:

PLATFORM	TRAIN DESTINATION		DEPARTURE
1	32b	Hyrule Central	10:22
2	Ornt Exp	SPECTRE Hq.	9:47
3	1+8i	Pikmin University	10:05
4	K64 02	Mt. Rugged	10:24
5	HV44	Mos Espa	9:52

... and so on. Nicholas scanned the list with some anxiety until at the very bottom he found:

18	Jack O' L1	Corneria	9:31
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"Let's go, let's go, we've only got six minutes!" said Nicholas, trying to gather the group up as Tennyson gawked at the huge hover train floating above its track, and Cane tried to snag another bag of popcorn from a pushcart. They hurried across the polished marble floor towards the last platform. As they reached halfway Nicholas noticed a large black-on-white sign suspended above one of the dividers: "TO PLATFORM 9 3/4". A long line of kids with luggage carts protruded out into the waiting area; as Nicholas watched, the kid at the front of the line ran full tilt at the steel wall under the sign and crashed into the barrier, spewing books and parcels onto an already- extensive pile. The stunned child barely had time to crawl out of the way before a young girl flashed by lemming-like on her way to her own collision.

Finally they reached platform 18. An imposing steam locomotive stood hissing like an angry cat; the front of the boiler was painted like a jack-o-lantern with glowing eyes and mouth looking into the firebox, and the remainder of the boiler was decorated with spiral red stripes. The driving rods were brilliant yellow. At the entrance to the platform hung a large black placard about chest-high to the kids, lettered in brilliant yellow: YOU MUST BE TALLER THAN THIS SIGN TO RIDE. Next to it was a ghostly chimpanzee in a blue uniform smoking a cigar (the smoke tended to leak out the back of his head). The kids started to walk onto the platform when the chimp blew his whistle and pointed at Mr. Saturn. "This one cannot ride, it is not allowed, you must see this, yes?" said the chimp.

"What!" exclaimed Erin. "That's ridiculous! Why not? Come on, Mr. Saturn."

The chimp reached down to his belt and pulled out a communicator. "You must not advance. I will call Officer Jenny if you go any farther. This creature must not ride. It is against the rules."

"Officer Jenny -- oh, no," said Erin, sitting down onto the ground. "Not her again. What are we going to do?"

Mr. Saturn waddled up to his side. "Don't worry, Erin, I'm fine. I'll just take the other train -- just an extra couple of stops. If you'd be so kind as to take the bag everything will be fine."

"Other train?" asked Erin. "What other train?"

"Platform 17, of course," said Mr. Saturn as he waddled away. Erin looked up. Under the big red "17" was a white placard with elegant cursive lettering:

Paper Pacific Toy Trains Special: The Ambivalent Express

--luxury for toys so wealthy they ought to feel bad about it--

Featuring:

- unlimited hot and cold beverages*
- meals prepared in your compartment by our 5-star chefs*
- all legal game consoles; choose from over 1000 cartridges and disks*
- 133 channels of broadcast entertainment*
- private video selection, over 500 titles*
- social events for all species*
- private Jacuzzi tub in every compartment*
- 2000-volume library in every car*

Stopping at:

Brinstar

Coruscant

Conker's Corners

Corneria

Larry's Leisure Lounge

and points beyond

Only 25,000 coins (but if you had to ask you shouldn't ride)

"Wow!" said Erin. "Hey, Mr. Saturn, I want to ride with you!"

Mr. Saturn shook his head and directed Erin's glance towards the placard he was waddling under: **YOU MUST BE SHORTER THAN THIS SIGN TO RIDE.** Beyond it was a brightly colored train even smaller than the fake steam trains that Erin remembered riding as a kid at the zoo: way too small for even Mr. Saturn to fit inside the cars. Erin could see a tiny lounge car, dining car, and seven obviously luxurious passenger carriages behind the yellow, red, and gold windup locomotive.

"Hey, Mr. Saturn," called Brian. "How are you going to pay for that? I didn't give you any coins. Besides, we don't have that many!"

Mr. Saturn wiggled his nose; the cloth bag in Erin's hands popped open and a little embossed square of plastic floated out. "We'll just let Princess Zelda's credit card worry about that," he said, as the card slid through a reader at the side of a little gate. Mr. Saturn walked in, glowed purple for a moment, and walked out the size of a large rat -- enabling him to comfortably fit through the festooned entrance to the first passenger car and disappear.

Now that the chimpanzee's objections were removed, Nicholas led the crew towards the ghost train. As the kids hurried down the platform, the locomotive let loose with a loud blast of its whistle, and an ethereal whisper like a remembered friend echoed down the platform: all aboard... Ghostly figures hurried up the stairs of the cars or simply floated in through the walls. Nicholas ran up to the first door, where a blue ghost in a black uniform and cylindrical hat waited. The ghost glared at them and pointed

up at the sign next to him: DEAD ONLY. "Your kind's not wanted here," he growled. "Dontcha know anything? You haveta go to the back of the train."

"Okay, thanks," said Nicholas, not wanting trouble. The whistle blew again. Past the dining car another blue ghost was reaching out to pick up the entry stairs. Nicholas screamed "Wait!" and started running full speed, passing right through two ghostly old ladies ("The nerve of that brat!" "I never would have behaved that way when I was alive!"), grabbing onto the stairway just as it started to go up.

Fortunately the conductor in this car, though he looked just like the first, was more kindly disposed. "Come on, children, hustle now, we're starting to move," he grumbled, as a clank propagated down the length of the train and the wheels slowly began to turn. Nicholas, Erin, and Brian jumped on, followed by Clara, who turned to help Tennyson. Cane barged right past him and jumped on. Left with no choice, Tennyson leapt onto the now-jostling platform, tripped, and did a face plant into Cane's stomach.

"Get off me!" said Cane, as the ghost pulled the stairs closed, tumbling the kids into the corridor.

Nicholas stood up and helped the others to their feet. He turned to thank the conductor, but the helpful ghost was already floating down the lower aisle collecting tickets. The car was dimly lit by oil lamps suspended by no visible means at intervals above the corridor. Large picture windows lined both walls, but the images of the outside world were somehow subdued and cast little cheer into the somber interior. The seats were arranged in facing pairs, so that four could sit together in a cozy group if they were kids whose knees didn't bang. On the wall below the window next to each set of seats was a little console with buttons: probably a mobile phone. There were about 15 rows of seats on each side of the corridor; most were vacant, with eight or ten occupied by ghosts of various descriptions, and a pair of koala-like furry creatures slept contentedly in the row just in front of the kids.

"Come on," said Nicholas, and led them to a pair of empty groups of seats. Nicholas, Brian, Erin and Cane took the front four, while Clara and Tennyson took the next set. The two vacant seats became the dumping ground for their backpacks and miscellaneous items; Erin threw Mr. Saturn's bag onto the luggage rack above them.

By this time the train had backed out onto a siding and stopped momentarily. They started up again with a lurch, allowing Tennyson to wrap his arms around Clara's waist under the pretense of steadying her as she stowed her Superscope on the luggage rack. The other kids settled into the ride as the steady click-clack of the wheels accelerated again. Nicholas looked out the window: they were riding gently uphill through a narrow gully lined with pine trees. The train gained speed as it pulled out onto a granite plateau; the tracks curved to the left towards what appeared to be a deep canyon crossing their path. As they neared the edge of the canyon it became apparent that the tracks didn't turn back, but simply ran right to the edge of the rock and -- ended. Nicholas didn't know quite what to make of this: his stomach felt quivery but no one else on the car seemed to have the slightest apprehension.

At that moment the door at the far end of the car hissed open and the ghostly conductor lazily drifted into the corridor. The train was moving fast now, rolling and jerking to the nervous clacking of the wheels over the joints in the track. Just as Nicholas stood up to go ask the conductor what was going on, Cane (having finished his snacks) looked out the window. "HOLY COW WE'RE GONNA' DIE!" he shouted, grabbing Nicholas and forcibly directing his gaze back outside. The engine had already flown right off the edge of the cliff, charging straight over the abyss, and as the kids watched the bottom dropped right out from under them, their stomachs following along, as the canyon wall plummeted to the river valley far below. The train passed into the air, unconcerned by their panicky exclamations: the only effect of the loss of the track was a sudden quiet as the ride smoothed and the noises of the wheels died away. The whistle blasted lonely through the unending sky. The conductor bustled up and asked for their tickets.

Brian was pale but calm as he counted out coins for the fare. "Beg pardon, Mr. Conductor sir, but are there any restrooms?" he asked.

"Course, son, live folks allowed on this car. In the back by the trash cans; train schedules too if you need some readin' material. Car behind this is the lounge car, tee vee and picture windows, card tables, an' such. Then another live car, and the dinin' car; baggage car and caboose -- that's ghosts only,

don't be goin' in there. Snacks in the lounge car too. Thanks for ridin' Jack O' Lantern 1, we appreciate yer business even though you're still alive."

While Brian headed off to the restroom Nicholas stared fascinated out the window. As they executed a wide left turn he discovered that you could still see a sort of track, barely visible as a silver streak across the blue sky, when the sun was at just the right angle. They were still climbing; Nicholas felt like they were getting as high as an airplane although he couldn't quite judge how high that was. Below him the canyon wound off to the right, and a range of low hills extended to the left. Before them was a hint of glimmer that slowly resolved itself into a stripe of blue: the sea.

Nicholas heard the click of someone turning on a microphone and then from a speaker on the ceiling came a voice that seemed somehow very distant even though it was loud and distinct: "Welcome to Jack O' Lantern Line. This is Spirit Express 1, passing over Pokemon Sea, Johto, and Pallet Town, on our way to our first stop at Corneria, arriving at precisely 11:27 AM. We will stop for 40 minutes; passengers who wish to leave the train should be sure to retain their tickets to reboard. Our staff of conductors, serving ghosts, and assistants will do everything in our power to make sure that your trip is eternally memorable, even for those of you who are still alive. The dining car, located behind the lounge car, will be serving brunch shortly; for reservations, please contact a conductor. Various recreational activities, snacks, and drinks are available in the lounge car. I'll be calling your attention to particularly striking views from time to time as our journey continues; meanwhile, please relax and float comfortably above your seats."

"Dining car!" said Cane. "Brunch! Wow! Which way did that conductor go?" Brian pointed and Cane went off in search of a reservation.

The car door slid open with a hiss. A wheeled cart creaked in, pushed by a ghost with huge wide eyes and a vicious grin -- Nicholas recognized it as a ghost from Freedom, Sonic's world. He was momentarily frightened until he saw the coin changer strapped around its waist and the cap on its head. The cart creaked slowly up the aisle. "Paper?" said the ghost in a cute squeaky voice entirely unlike its appearance.

"Sure, that would be fun," said Brian, returning from the bathroom. "I always read the newspaper on train rides at home. How much?" He reached into his backpack on the seat and pulled out some coins.

"Two coins," squeaked the ethereal vendor.

Brian opened up the Toadtown Times and sat down in his seat. The vendor ghost pushed the cart down the aisle. Nicholas glanced at the front page: Children Missing: Foul Play Feared. "Wait a minute! That's two days old!"

The ghost twisted its head around, distorting its mouth and eyes into ovals. "Only live folks worry about what day it is. If you ride our train you'd best learn our ways. Harroomph!"

"Don't worry about it, Nicholas, I didn't see this issue anyway," said Brian.

"We did," said Nicholas. "Oh, yeah, that reminds me! I'm supposed to call Hedley Medley T. Can I borrow the front page for a second?" Nicholas yanked the handset from the wall and dialed the number in the article. A voice in the handset mechanically noted: "5 coins for five minutes. Pay up, you miser." Brian handed over the coins and went back to the paper; Nicholas popped them in the slot next to the controls. Ding ding ding ding BONK. "Okay, go ahead and talk. Sucker!"

RING. RING. RING. "Hello and good day, you've reached Hedley Medley T., standing guard as always to protect the Mushroom Kingdom here at the Chess Board Field. How can I be of service, unless of course your intentions are inimical to the interests of our beloved Princess Peach in which case I shall be reluctant to provide you with any kind of assistance at all."

"Oh, hi, Hedley, this is Nicholas."

"Nicholas? Nicholas... oh, yes, with the children! We were so sorry to hear of your demise. How is ghostliness?"

"No, no, we're not dead. At least not yet. We're just riding the ghost train. We escaped from the Starmen."

"How wonderful! You're still alive, and all your charming friends, and Cane as well. Oh, in that case, your brain still works. Perhaps you can help me with a vexing dilemma. Should I try knight to king three or king's bishop to queen's bishop five?"

"Gee, Hedley, it's sort of hard to say without being able to see the board." Even if I knew, though Nicholas. He didn't play much.

"Dash it all, you're right! No matter, how can I help you?"

"Well, this newspaper article says we're supposed to call you to say we're still alive and stuff."

"Oh, quite so, quite so! Yes, well, since you're alive, could you ask Princess Peach to provide a relief for me? As you might recall I importuned you on this topic at our previous encounter, but it seems that little has resulted. I've now been here for several weeks, I should think."

A background voice -- Parakarry, Nicholas remembered -- broke in: "Gawd, it's 'ardly been five days, an' all ya' do is play chess an' complain about me drinkin' beer an' whippin' ya."

"Yes, of course, five days and six nights, quite so," said Hedley.

"Look, Hedley, sir, I'm sorry I forgot to talk to Peach last time, but I don't know what we could do now," said Nicholas. "We're probably not going to be at the castle any time soon."

"Well, of course, but perhaps if you happen upon a Committee meeting up there at Snark or Lark or wherever it is, you could have a word with her, eh wot?"

How the heck does he know where we're going when he doesn't even know we're alive? thought Nicholas. But Mr. Saturn's caginess had not been entirely lost on Nicholas: "I'm sorry, you've got me pretty confused. We're going to--" (Nicholas thought fast) "Johto, to learn Pokemon training, I always wanted to do that! Anyway, thanks, just let the folks at the castle know we're okay. Oh, and thanks again for their help." He pressed the OFF button and leaned over to replace the phone console, but Erin grabbed it.

"Hey, mentioning Johto, that gives me an idea," said Erin. "I'm going to call up Professor Oak and ask if something can escape from a Pokeball."

"Oh, you're not still looking for the Parrot," said Brian.

"Yeah, that's right," said Erin.

"Yeah, yeah, the parrot!" said Cane. "Let's get out the Pokeball again. I'll bet he's hiding INSIDE the Pokeball, we never looked there!"

Erin ignored him and punched menu buttons until he got to Directory Assistance. "Hi, could I get the number for Professor Oak?"

A tinny voice replied: "Dat vill be four coins for de answer to your question."

"Oh, okay," said Erin, grabbing the coins out of Brian's pack without asking. DING DING DING DING. "So?"

"The answer is yes. Of course you can get de number for Professor Oak. He is famous and many people vant to call him, so of course I know how."

"Well, what's the number?"

"Dat vill be five coins, for the actual number."

"What! I already paid you."

"No, dat vas for de question of whether I could get ze number. Ze number itself, zis is extra."

"What a ripoff!" said Erin, but he paid, despite Brian's glare.

DING DING DING DING BLONGGG. "Five seven two seven three four nine two two zero vun. Sank you. Sucker!"

"Dang, did anyone get that?" said Erin.

"Five seven two seven three four nine two two zero one," repeated Brian. "Here, I'll do it." He took the handset from Erin and punched the number in himself.

Ring Ring Ring. "You have reached Oak Research, where we can help you access the huge untapped Pokemon consumer market. For Sales, press one; for customer service, press two; for accounts receivable, press three; for press releases press and release four; for technical support, press star three star one four one five nine two six five three five pound two star seven one eight three eight and be prepared to derive the best rational approximation to an elliptic integral of the second kind; for accounts

payable press six and remain on the line during the subsequent two hours of intolerable screeching noises and endless insulting rants from our executive staff; for all other inquiries, press zero and wait patiently as long as we deem necessary. The current queue time is six hours and four minutes. Thank you for calling Oak Research. You have reached Oak Research, where we can help you make up your mind about which button to press since apparently you can't manage this feat yourself. If you don't have fingers, press eight--"

"Geeze, Erin, press a button!" said Cane.

"Yeah, yeah, I just wanted to examine all my options," said Erin, pushing the 0 button. In only a few seconds a very pleasant female voice answered: "Oak Research, you can pay us now or pay us later, the choice is yours."

"Hi, I'm Erin, I was just wondering if I could ask a question about Pokeballs. I mean, ask Professor Oak."

"If a Pokeball has malfunctioned you need to contact technical support. Please press star three star one four one five nine six--"

Erin interrupted. "Yeah, yeah, I know that, but this is a more general question. I'm looking for a parrot--"

"Oh! That's where it came from. I'll put you through to the Professor immediately, he'll want to talk to you right away." Beep click beep.

"This is Professor Oak," said a cheerful male voice. "How can I help you?"

"Hi, Professor, I'm Erin Hollin, and I was wondering what happened to this parrot that I put in this Pokeball I found in the bathroom, and--"

"Oh, wonderful! I was hoping you'd call. That parrot you captured is just dandy! He makes a perfect playmate for my Togepi's, and a charming companion for my Jigglypuffs. Where ever did you find him? I must have another!"

"Oh, so that's what happened!" said Erin. "I was going to ask if they could have escaped from the Pokeball, but I guess you just took him in."

"Well, here at the Laboratories we always have room for Pokemon in need. Would you like to speak to him?" The voice became tinny as the speaker turned away from the handset and called out: "Rashomon! Rashomon! Would you like another cracker? No? Well, fine, there's someone on the phone for you."

A loud rustling sound, punctuated by complaints and shrieks, followed. "Yeah, who is it?" said the parrot's screechy voice.

"There you are! It's Erin. Remember, you tried to kill me yesterday."

"Oh, it's you." The voice dropped. "Listen, if I had known what a sonuvabitch you were I never would have tangled with you. I admit defeat. I'll talk. I'll tell you anything! Just GET ME OUT OF HERE! If I have to choke down one more stale cracker I'll explode."

In the background Professor Oak's voice could be heard: "Oh Rashomon, the Smoochum want to play, can you come by as soon as your call is finished?"

"Not the Smoochum! Erin you've GOT TO SAVE ME."

His experience as Bowser had gotten Erin thinking. "I don't know," he said silkily. "What assurance can I have that you won't have another go at me? Who hired you, anyway?" the last being a calculated risk.

"How did you know that?" said the Parrot.

"Rashomon? Rashomon! They're waiting," said the Oak voice in the background.

"Oh, geeze, allright, allright, anything. Killing you was just a side job. I was spying on Luigi. I was hired by a Star Spirit named --" There was a SWOOOP and then a THUNK, as if the phone on the other end had been dropped. The kids could hear running footsteps and shouting voices: "Professor, are you all right?" "I'm fine, Amy, fine -- it wasn't after me, it was going for the parrot." "Oh, the poor dear. Head blown clean off. A Q-laser, it looks like." "Yes, there's the hole in the window. How rude! That will be a pretty penny to fix." "And he was so cuddly, too." "We lose more playmates that way." CLICK.

"Wow," said Nicholas. "I wish Mr. Saturn was here. There's a lot going on and I get the feeling we don't know about most of it."

"Yeah, well, he was a stinky Captain Flint anyway," said Erin, though he looked a little sad. "I'm gonna' go check out the lounge car." He stood abruptly and strode down the corridor towards the back end of the car.

Clara and Tennyson were conversing quietly, partly hidden behind the others' packs and items. "No, I haven't," said Clara. "I still think this is crazy. We're sticking our noses into the middle of a war. Kids don't belong in something like that. Didn't you see Grave of the Fireflies?"

"No, what's that?" replied Tennyson.

"Oh, never mind. This is like Star Wars, where Obi Wan says to go off on a damn fool quest -- except we're the fools. My father always tells me you have to face facts no matter what they are, and the facts are that we don't even know what we're trying to do, but we know that we're likely to get caught or killed trying to do it. Does that make any sense? I think you guys are just fooling yourselves that we have any kind of chance. It's like you think you're living in a movie, but this is real life." Tennyson raised his eyebrow. "Oh, you know what I mean! I don't know if it's real or what but it seems like it." She kicked him in the shin. "Hurts, right? That's what I mean."

"Well, if you feel that way, why did you come along?" Tennyson tried to be cheerful but he looked hurt by more than a sore leg.

Clara looked away and was silent for a moment. "Dad says duty is the guiding principle of an honorable life. When you betray your word you lose part of yourself."

"But you never promised to go with us. None of us volunteered for any of this. It was an accident."

"That's not it. I mean, every time we got in trouble whoever could help has done their part. You and Cane defeated the Yoshies, and Brian got the coins to get us to Fourside, and Nicholas has really been a good leader, and Erin found out about the plot on Ark. If I stayed behind, I'd be taking advantage of everything you guys did and then leaving you to your fate."

"That's silly. You helped with the Yoshies and dealt with the Twins. You were the one who captured that crazy robot parrot. You've saved us a bunch of times already. You don't owe us anything."

"Are you trying to make me go away?"

"No, no, I mean -- I don't know what I mean. I'm glad you came. You may think we're crazy but I think we've got a much better chance when you're along."

Clara smiled and squeezed Tennyson's hand. "My father also says sometimes you just have to trust your feelings and not try to make sense of them."

"He does? That doesn't make a lot of sense."

"Nope, it doesn't. Do you wanna get a snack?"

Tennyson nodded; they rose and walked hand in hand towards the lounge car, stepping aside politely as a fat ghostly lady dressed in a horrid yellow and chartreuse polka-dotted blouse appeared through the sliding door and waddled down the corridor.

The lounge car was much like those familiar to Clara from train trips with her father: huge picture windows reaching partway across the ceiling covered the walls, providing a panoramic view of the ocean outside. In one corner there was a large television monitor, and across from it two video game controllers and a screen; at the other end of the car was a small snack bar. Near the entry two Yoshies sat on the swivel chairs next to the windows, munching nuts (tossing the shells on the floor around them). A round Kirby-like fellow sat on the other side of the car, talking in some unintelligible tongue with a ghostly figure in a robe that reminded Clara of Obi Wan Kenobee. A mother Boo and two little boos in pointed hats sat by the window eating transparent glowing sweets from a basket in front of them. Erin stood at the snack bar talking to a bulbous ghost with a broad smile and stubby arms, dressed in the same blue uniform as the conductors. Tennyson recognized Wisp from Animal Crossing. "I guess times are tough everywhere," he whispered to Clara.

"Erin, what's up?" said Tennyson as they walked over. "Anything good?"

"Naah, it's pretty dull," said Erin. "I watched the teevee for a few minutes -- but it's not all of Fantasia, they just keep playing Night on Bald Mountain over and over again. And the only games you can play are the ones with ghosts, like you can play the boos in Paper Mario but you can't play the rest of the game. See the sign up there?" He pointed to a placard tucked up on wall over the door. It said: G-RATED ENTERTAINMENTS ONLY.

"Right. And nothing to read except a couple of brochures for ghost resorts. Seems like ghosts go on vacation to watch things rot. Not very exciting if you ask me. I think I'll try sneaking into the ghost car. Maybe I can smear some of this stuff onto my face and look like a zombie." Erin walked back to the passenger car, squishing Ectobits over his nose and across his cheeks. Tennyson and Clara continued to the snack bar, where for two coins Clara bought them a box. They munched the curious confections, chocolate on the outside and puzzling but tasty ectoplasm on the inside, as they watched the ascending sun glint off of the waves far below.

Back at their seats, Nicholas and Brian had finished squabbling over the Toadtown Times comics. (Most of the strips were only okay, but there was one called Koopa Kops that had Nicholas in stitches every time he saw it.) The speaker clicked again: "Good morning to everyone; I hope you're having a pleasant trip so far. This is your conductor speaking; I just wanted to point out a couple of notable landmarks on this part of our route. We are completing our crossing of the Pokemon Sea, dotted with picturesque islands whose traditions date back before Pokemon the Movie 2000. If you look to your left you can see that we have reached GoldenRod City in Johto. The city was originally built for the Pokemon Games Gold and Silver Jubilee, and features a five-story shopping mall. It is also home to the Johto Bullet Train station, directly below and slightly in front of us at the moment."

From behind him Nicholas could hear one of the little boos: "Mommy, mommy, I want to see!"

"Just stick your head through the floor, dear, and do be careful of the tracks!"

Then somewhat muffled: "Oh, there is it, wow, can we go down?"

"Now now, Ophelia, maybe some other time."

Meanwhile the narrative continued: "The bullet train to Saffron City in Kanto departs in thirty-two minutes; ghosts wishing to make a connection should float through the floor at this time. GoldenRod city also holds a giant radio tower, visible off to the right. Across the sea to the west lies Hoenn, famous for its pivotal role in Pokemon Sapphire and Pokemon Ruby. As we cross the peninsula we will pass over the Misty Marine Preserve, where you'll be able to see various water Pokemon frolicking happily together when they are not dining on each other. We'll be calling your attention to other particularly notable sights from time to time during the remainder of our short journey."

Cane returned, holding a little blue card in his left hand. "Hey, Brian, gimme some coins, I wanna hit the snack bar!"

"Okay, just a minute," said Brian. "Just let me finish this article." He was reading about the financial troubles of the KoopaVision Corporation, which had been badly affected by the scandal resulting from an admission by a Goomba that the quiz shows were fixed.

At this point Erin, face still covered with chocolate, plunged back into the car, turning around to push the door closed behind him. The mean conductor stuck his head through the steel partition as it slid fast and grunted, "And stay out!" After a few steps Erin stopped running and tried to wipe his face clean, which merely resulted in spreading chocolate stains onto his clothing. Having recovered his composure, he made his way back to where the others were sitting.

"So, how'd it go?" said Brian.

"Well, the ghosts-only cars are much nicer than these! The seats are bigger, and each one has its own built-in headstone that shows the name of whoever is sitting there along with 'rest in peace' or 'he died with his boots on' or probably whatever you ask for, and there're a couple of special casket-shaped seats for vampires, and there's a plastic tarp dispenser for zombies to collect their body parts--"

"I meant, how did the zombie disguise work?" interrupted Brian.

"Oh, not very well! These conductor ghosts are a lot smarter than Neville. I hardly had a minute to read your 'wanted' poster."

"My WHAT?" exclaimed Brian.

"Oh, your 'wanted' poster. Somebody wants to have you killed."

"What? How do you know that?"

"Oh, it says: 'WANTED. KID. DEAD OR DEADER.' And it has a picture of you. And a big reward, I forgot how much 'cause I had to run back here, maybe ten thousand coins. Hey, where you goin? That conductor is mean! Brian!" Brian was walking down the corridor, ignoring Erin's pleas. "You know, that conductor does look a bit blue," reflected Erin.

"I don't think Brian is very afraid of ghosts any more," said Nicholas.

HISSS. The door slid open. Brian strode ahead, stomach slightly queasy, but the conductor was busy arguing with a balding man in faded slacks: "What do you mean? I'm Malcolm Crowe!"

"You don't look dead to me. You're just that die-hard Willis slumming again."

"No, no, I'm a ghost. It's a non-judgmental life choice -- I mean, death choice. I'm coming to terms with my self-dissolution."

While the two argued Brian was left free to explore the car. On the wall next to the Security Vacuum holder there was indeed a large poster:

WANTED: KID.

DEAD OR DEADER.

over a recognizable photograph of Brian, clearly taken in the pool room shortly after the demise of Inky, as the pieces of the pool table were still strewn against the wall. The text continued:

Accessory to Murder -- Property Damage -- Rendering Assistance to PacMen. Goes by the name of "Brian". May be traveling in ghost disguise; AKA Spirit of Christmas Past.

REWARD 10,000 COINS OR EQUIVALENT IN CURRENCY OF YOUR CHOICE.

Below that were a smaller set of photographs of some of the other kids:

STICK (that was with a photo of Cane) REWARD: 500 coins

AARON (with Erin) REWARD: 500 coins

On separate charges: Kidnapping and Molestation

CLARISSA (a photo of Clara) REWARD: 5000 coins

TS ELIOTT (Tennyson's image) REWARD: 5000 coins

Reward guaranteed upon presentation of the corpse or residual spirit, by PacGhost Guild and Protective Association. Signed: Blinky.

The bald man was rattling the chains that the conductor was wrapping around him as Brian returned to the mixed-being car. By that time Clara and Tennyson were back, so he described the poster to the group.

"What about me?" said Nicholas, feeling left out.

"Being on a wanted poster is not a distinction!" said Clara. "Besides, how come Brian gets a bigger reward than I do? Probably just because he's a boy."

"You got a bigger reward than me!" said Cane enviously. "Five hundred coins! I'm gonna go complain. Clara worth ten times more than me?"

"Dividing in his head, wow," said Brian, impressed.

"Come on, even Cane can count zeroes," replied Erin.

"He couldn't in Math Manipulatives last month," said Brian.

Nicholas had by this time gotten over his resentment and started to reflect on the situation. "Wait a minute, you know, maybe we'd better get under cover. What about the baggage car?"

"We can't go to the baggage car!" complained Cane. "I've got a dining reservation!" He held up the card, adorned with a little Jack o' Lantern logo and a block number. The ceiling speaker clicked: "Attention in the train: dining car reservations seven, eight, and nine, your tables are ready. Dining car reservations seven, eight, and nine, please proceed to the dining car, where the Maitre d' is waiting."

Nicholas looked at the number on Cane's card: 231. "I think you'll be joining the ghosts from starvation if you want to wait until your reservation comes up to eat. Come on, let's get our stuff and move."

Erin was standing on Clara's backpack to grab Mr. Saturn's bag when the speaker clicked on again. "Attention, passengers. We're sorry to disturb you again, but we are having some difficulties with the tangibility generator. Occasional intermittent failures may occur over the next half hour. Ghosts should not be inconvenienced, though you may wish to take precautions for any corporeal luggage you are carrying; our conductors will be passing through the cars with complementary levitation spells. For our live customers, we know you have a choice in transportation and we thank you for riding the Jack o' Lantern line. We hope that we'll remain your preferred means of travel after your imminent demise. We'll keep you advised as repairs proceed."

"Demise," said Cane. "Demise. What the heck is that? It sounds bad."

"Death," said Brian. "Imminent. That means soon."

"What? what?" cried Cane. "Can't they even use language I can understand when they're trying to kill me?"

"Shut up," said Clara, eyes hard. "What do we do now, Nicholas?"

"Clara's right, let's stay calm--" Nicholas started to say, when the light suddenly brightened as the walls of the train flickered and disappeared. As the seat backs faded Nicholas could see the little Boo waving to him: "Bye bye!" Then the kids were plummeting downwards.

It seemed like they were falling more slowly than would have been the case back home, though it was hard to tell for sure given their considerable height. Nicholas shirt began to flap in the wind as he dropped butt downwards. The other kids were falling with him, and out of the corner of his eye he could see some other figures similarly plunging from rearward cars. Over the whipping of the wind came Erin's voice shouting a familiar tune:

*"All the kids are falling down,
falling down,
falling down,
all the kids are falling down--"*

and then as one all the other kids finished the verse:

"SHUT UP ERIN!"

Pllloooooommmpphhh!!

Chapter 13: Don't Change Keys

"Are we dead?" said Cane. He was immersed in a soft white fabric like a cloud; perhaps this was heaven?

"The only thing dead is your brain," Clara replied.

"Wow, this is great," said Erin, the sound of his voice somewhat muffled by the plush stuff. "Like our old red recliner chair except it isn't broken. Speaking of which, why aren't we broken?"

"Maybe we are," said Brian. "I can't get up. What is this stuff?"

Clara pushed herself up from the unctuously forgiving surface. She rose to a sitting position with difficulty and looked around. All she could see was blue sky over a curving featureless white surface. Nearby were kid-shaped depressions with a hand or a knee sticking out of the fuzzy fabric. "That's a good question. What the heck is this thing?" she wondered aloud, as she awkwardly crawled to the nearest lump. It was Tennyson: she grabbed his shoulders and helped him up.

Nicholas had managed to get up on his own. As he was reaching to lend Brian a hand, he suddenly turned and pointed behind Clara. "They're Pokefloats! Look!" Rising slowly over the edge of the fabric in which the kids were immersed was a huge, dark blue soft-edged figure with immense thick wings: a Butterfree. As the kids watched, the Pokemon-shaped balloon performed a leisurely roll to the right, its vastness lending a certain dignity to the uncontrolled motion.

The kids gathered themselves and their stuff, getting the hang of moving on the compliant surface of the balloon. All around them, floating monsters appropriate only to the pockets of a supergiant danced up, down, and over, tumbling randomly yet gracefully in the seemingly gentle breezes. Nicholas identified a Snorelax, a Psyduck, a Bulbosaur, and a Meowth all in close proximity to whatever figure they rode; other Pokefloats straggled off in an easterly direction where they merged indistinctly with patches of cloud floating in the distance.

Nicholas collected the kids together for a council. "I guess this is better than being squashed and drowned like I expected, but we're still stuck out in the middle of nowhere with no food, water or shelter. We've got to get some help!"

"Does the train return on the same route?" asked Brian. "Maybe they'll come to look for us."

"Gee, I don't know," said Tennyson. "They didn't seem too concerned about their live passengers, judging from that announcement. Besides, we're hundreds of feet below the track. Would they see us even if they were looking?"

"This is outrageous!" said Cane. "Dropped in the middle of the ocean with no lunch! I had a reservation! I want a refund! I want compensation! I want an apology and 20 free anytime minutes!"

"Hey, hold on," said Clara. "That's a good idea."

"Good idea and Cane in the same sentence?" said Tennyson. "You sure you're okay?"

"No, no, I mean the anytime minutes. What we need is a phone to call for help."

"Didn't we try that before?" said Nicholas. "Besides, I don't have a cell phone. Even at home. Nobody got a phone at the Mansion, did they?"

All the kids shook their heads, but then Erin slapped himself on the forehead: "Just a minute. Let's take a look in Mr. Saturn's bag -- you never know what kinda stuff he can walk off with." The bag, being lighter than a kid, had bounced off the surface of the balloon and landed some distance away. While Erin struggled over to recover Mr. Saturn's grab bag, on Nicholas' suggestion the others bounded awkwardly around collecting their backpacks and weapons.

"Let's see," said Erin, carefully laying out objects one by one as he withdrew them from the sack. First was a blood-red stone about the size of Erin's fist, inscribed To Zelda for a truly magical evening -- Harry. "Oh, the Philosopher's Stone," mumbled Erin, putting it aside. Next was a book of sheet music entitled Melody's Ignorable Songs for Mealtime; a box labeled Ectoplasm Repair Kit, containing (according to the list on the back) spirit glue, impalpable patches, and guilty tape (guaranteed to adhere to

your conscience indefinitely); a very long list, obviously by Neville, this one entitled Things the Master Wishes to Dispose of As Embarrassing or Compromising Which Have Been Retained Nevertheless Due to Neville's Absent-Mindedness; a pair of boxer shorts with a monogrammed LM, a little box labeled Nose Wax, and a golden dog bone. "Oh, this is interesting!" Erin held up a leather-bound book: SECRET DIARY, VOLUME III was imprinted on the front cover, and below that was written Luigi with what looked like a black marker. The book was held shut by a locking clasp.

"What good does that do us?" asked Clara. "Who wants to know about Luigi anyway?" She lost interest and started off to explore whatever it was the kids were riding on.

"Besides, it's locked up, we can't read it," added Cane.

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Erin. He turned the book around: a small silver key, strung with a round tag labeled in block letters KEY TO DIARY, DON'T FORGET!, was taped on the back. He peeled the key off, unlocked the book, and opened a page in the middle marked by a small card: "June 27. Professor walks right into my bedroom, can you believe it? And just when Daisy and I were getting friendly, it's a shame, now she went home. He's goin' on about needing more space, I told him he can have the whole shack but that's not enough, he wants it bigger. Then he tells me if I won't give him space he'll just go talk to Mario. Everybody always wants to go to Mario. Mario, Mario, Mario, always Mario! It makes me so mad! I make the shack bigger, I told him, that's all, bigger than Mario ever would, bigger than Mario's whole house, only don't tell me about my brother any more! It's okay, I'm not upset. Really.' Oh, and look, the bookmark is Luigi's library card! I don't see how Mr. Saturn is going to use it though -- he doesn't look much like Luigi."

"Enough, enough!" interrupted Nicholas. "We were looking for a phone, right?" Erin went back to work. Next came an inflatable travel pillow, a jar with something disgustingly alien floating inside, a plastic bag filled with loose chess pieces, and finally -- "Aha!" -- what was obviously a sort of mobile phone. The handset flipped open to reveal a sizable glowing screen -- apparently the unit was activated when opened -- and a number of large and small buttons. Erin had played with his mother's cellphone often enough to have some feel for how to navigate the menus; it took a couple of tries to get to the address book section.

"Let's see...Nook Financial Services-- we don't need a loan... Skolar, that's interesting ... Peach's Castle Library, don't want to call them -- Fourside University School of Plumbing and Sanitation, hm, didn't know he had a degree -- Saturn Snowboarding School, no snow around here -- yeah, here we are. Emergency Road Service."

"Oh, really," said Nicholas skeptically. "I hate to bring this up but I don't see any roads in the vicinity," he continued, pointing towards the blue ocean extending to the cloudy horizon in all directions.

Erin shrugged and pressed the button on the phone, ignoring Nicholas. After a brief set of beeping noises, he heard a click and: "You have reached Conker's Emergency Road Service, where we are constantly dedicated to your satisfaction. Yes, at Conker's pleasing our customers isn't just a style, it's a way of life. We are devoted to serving your every road service need. For us, every day is a good customer day! Our staff of trained drivers and mechanics can guarantee tip-top performance for your vehicle no matter what its operating principles. We offer our no-hassle guarantee with every service order..." Erin rolled his eyes as the greeting droned on.

"What's going on? Did you reach anyone? Did you leave a message?" asked Brian.

Erin held the phone up for her to listen: "...We have eight repair centers, so there's one conveniently located near you. We offer free transportation to and from our repair center and complimentary chocolate lon lon milk while you wait..." "I would leave a message if they would shut up!"

Finally there was a telltale beep. Erin started talking immediately: "Hi, my name is Erin. We fell out of the ghost train and we're stuck here on the Pokefloats. We're on a -- a -- hey, Nicholas! What are we on?"

"Clara, isn't this a squirtle?" shouted Nicholas. Clara was partway down the sloping edge of the thing by now.

"Yep, that's it," she shouted back.

Erin nodded and finished: "On the back of a giant squirtle. We have lots of coins so we can pay the bill if you'll pick us up. The phone number here is -- um --" Unfortunately there didn't seem to be any indication of the number, if any, assigned to the phone. "Well, just call Information for Mister Saturn. Come soon! Thanks."

"Okay, I guess now we just wait for somebody to come by," said Nicholas. He looked at his watch: it was a bit after 11. "I'm hungry! Hey, everybody, I think we might as well eat our lunches now." He reached into his backpack and pulled out a little container about the size of a juice packet; tugging the tag on the top caused it to go poof! and expand into a little self-contained, self-heating lunch tray, with an entree pocket, side dishes, a roll, a drink cup, and dessert. "I wish my Mom could give me these for school!" said Nicholas as he took a bite out of a maple-flavored rice ball.

It didn't take long for the enticing aromas to induce the rest of the group to follow Nicholas' example; even Clara, having found little of interest, bounced back to sit by Tennyson. Each of the kids had received a lunch pack as a parting gift from Bonapa T., except of course for Cane. "Hold on, what's the deal?" he complained. "I want something to eat! Didn't somebody pick one of those up for me?"

"You weren't coming, don't you remember?" replied Nicholas.

"I believe your words were, 'I'm not leaving until I find that parrot!'," added Brian, between mouthfuls of cocoo salad.

"I think it was, 'I'm sure not leaving until I find that parrot'," added Erin. He was eating his dessert first: chocolate mint flowers.

"Right, sorry," said Brian.

"I can't believe this!" said Cane. "What a bunch of friends. Stuck on a balloon in the middle of nowhere with nothing to eat!"

"Oh, come on, we can share some," said Clara. "Here, have a carrot." She held out a largish orange stick with some white dip on it.

"Carrot! You trying to poison me? I HATE vegetables. Too many nutrition things in 'em. Oh, forget it, you guys are no help." Cane opened his pack and started tossing stuff onto the balloon surface, looking for food: out came a sock, a used tube of toothpaste, an empty pillow cover, a book light, and a stuffed frog. It was obvious that he had hurriedly grabbed whatever was at hand in the bedroom that morning in his haste to depart. "Not one edible thing. Man. Oh, yeah." He turned to Brian, holding a large device with a glowing dial. "Hey, Brian, I grabbed this clock radio thing on the way out, but I can't figure out how to set the time and it runs backwards, it like says it's almost noon now and that's not right, could you figure it out?" He tossed the object into Brian's soup.

"Geeze, Cane, could you be a little careful!" said Clara.

"Careful and Cane?" said Erin. "What in our history together would cause you to utter those words close to one another?"

Brian, having cleaned the splattered soup off his glasses, picked up the putative radio for an inspection. He jumped up onto his feet, spilling his lunch all over the place (including on Nicholas, who was sitting on his left) and bouncing higher into the air than he had intended. "Cane, this is a time bomb! And it's about to go off!"

"Oh," said Cane, grabbing it back from Brian. "Oh, okay, we'll just get rid of it, it wasn't mine anyway." He tossed it back over his head. It landed some distance away, bounced off the fabric surface and then rolled to a stop partway down the sloping edge.

Clara was on her feet (lunch tray carefully set to one side) in a flash. "How long do I have, Brian?" she said.

Brian counted in his head. "About three seconds."

"Oh." She reconsidered her options and flattened herself on the balloon, dragging Tennyson down with her.

BOOOOOOOM!!! (boom) (boom) (boom) The time bomb exploded, the sound resonating in a disconcerting fashion off the interior walls of the Pokefloat. As the reverberations faded away they were replaced by a similarly disturbing hissing noise. It was immediately apparent that the balloon was sinking

and, worse still, turning over. Nicholas tossed his lunch aside: "Grab your stuff and follow me!" he shouted as he headed up the suddenly sloping surface.

"It's not my fault! It's not my fault!" said Cane, still planted face down in the cloth.

Clara dragged him up by the collar. "Shut up and move!" In a moment the kids formed a straggling, struggling line trying to keep up with Nicholas as he bounded towards the new top of the float.

In moments it became apparent that the quest was hopeless: the balloon was turning faster than the kids could run and losing altitude as well. "What now?" asked Clara.

"I'm not sure," said Nicholas, looking around desperately.

"Unknown!" said Erin.

"That's what I said!" said Nicholas.

"No, Unknown!" Erin repeated. He bounced up, grabbed Nicholas by the hair, and turned his head. Just below them on the increasingly sloped surface was a large floating Unown Pokemon.

"Oh, I get it," said Nicholas. "Very funny." He gauged their position: the squirtle was dropping rapidly and would fall below the other float momentarily. "Okay, looks like this is our only chance. Jump!" and he did.

Erin followed, shouting "No taxation without representation!"

"What?" said Tennyson, as he grabbed Brian and gave him a shove.

"Come on, didn't you read chapter 7? It was last week's assignment," said Brian, flying towards the Unown.

"Jump!" said Cane. He grabbed onto the fabric. "That's crazy!" Clara stuck her foot on his chest and shoved, projecting him into space, before grabbing Tennyson's hand and jumping herself.

Ploooooomph! Plooomph! Ploomph! The surface of the Unown was harder than the squirtle: the kids bounced awkwardly as they struck but managed to hang on. They watched the deflating squirtle rapidly sink below them. It fell increasingly behind the other floats, and after some moments they could see the water far below glisten momentarily as the now-shapeless fabric struck the surface. The former creature bubbled and twisted as it slowly sank beneath the waves. "Good call, Nicholas," said Tennyson. "Now what?"

"Oh oh," replied Nicholas. The Unown was much smaller than the squirtle had been, and it seemed the weight of the kids was enough to unbalance it: it was beginning to tilt to one side.

"Seems like we've been here before," said Erin. "Who's writing this script? Can't they come up with a new peril?"

"Clara, do you think we could balance this thing if we move around right?" said Nicholas, casting about for some way to save them.

"We can try," she said, getting to her feet, but it was apparent within moments that even that course of action was doomed to failure. The balloon tilted more and more rapidly as their offset weight moved away from the top.

"Forget it!" shouted Nicholas. "Get down and hang on!" The surface was soft enough that it was possible to grasp a handful and obtain some sort of grip. Within moments the kids were dangling by their hands as the balloon continued to rotate, slowing as they passed the lowest point and then rocking back and forth.

"Hey, Brian, didn't you hang from the parallel bars for two minutes last month?" asked Tennyson conversationally.

"Yeah, I was second place in the Gymathon," said Brian. "Clara won the girls."

"Oh," said Nicholas. "I was last. My hands are tired already. Ouch."

"If you took your backpack off you'd be lighter," said Tennyson, trying to be helpful. He had come in fifth in monkey bars.

"How do I take my pack off without letting go?" said Nicholas, skeptically.

"You could do it one hand at a time," replied Tennyson.

"Hmm, one hand? I can barely hold myself up with two," said Nicholas. "I think we're really stuck now. Any ideas, Clara? Anyone?"

In reply, Erin began to sing:

*Take me out to the fall game!
Take me out where it's loud!
After a while everything turns black.
I know my body will never be back!
And so even if I survive this, I'll be in serious pain,
for it's jump, scream, splat and your dead
at the old fall game!*

"In other circumstances," said Tennyson, "I might clap, but you know it's a little difficult at the moment to free up my hands."

"I'm just about at the point where I might as well," said Nicholas.

"You guys are crazy, my hands hurt, I'm gonna die!!!" screamed Cane. He tried to shake his body for emphasis. This was a mistake, as it caused him to lose his grip altogether and drop. There was a surprisingly brief "Aaaaaaa!" followed by a plonk! and an unfamiliar voice:

"Conker's Emergency Road Service; remember, we're constantly dedicated to your satisfaction. We're always ready to listen to your problems, so don't hesitate to--"

"Great," interrupted Nicholas, "are you below me, 'cause I can't hold much longer!"

"Just a second... there we go, you should be able to jump," said the voice.

"Ain't got no jump left, I'm just dropping," said Nicholas, and he did. He landed with a loud BANG! onto an empty metal cylinder about the size of a trash can, twisting his ankle but otherwise coming out unharmed. The cylinder was sitting in a blue open boat as long as the school bus, crowded with boxes, crates, tools, and piles of tires, wheels, and less recognizable parts. At the controls sat a gorilla wearing a blue uniform with red stripes and a beret marked with the outline of a squirrel. He waved at Nicholas and maneuvered the boat closer to the bottom of the Unown. Cane was still lying where he had fallen, on the deck between two canisters marked "FUEL CELLS". "Oh, my lumbago," he complained, "whatever that is."

"Are you okay?" said Clara, squeezing her head between her shoulders to look down.

"Ow! Yeah, yeah, I'm fine, I guess," replied Nicholas. He surveyed the situation, making sure that all the kids were safely over the boat, and then said, "Okay, everybody drop on my call. Be careful of where you land! Clara! Tennyson! Brian! Erin!" One after another the kids fell into the boat. Clara came down hard on some crates, and Brian dropped awkwardly on a deck chair, but Erin landed on fairly soft piles of rope and was unscathed. "Get off me!" complained Cane, although Tennyson had actually only half landed on top of him. Nicholas limped over to help the other kids up and then turned to the driver. "Geeze, thanks a lot, whoever you are! That was fantastic! You sure know how to show up on time!"

"Just another part of our friendly service! Remember, at Conker's we're dedicated to your every road service need. We have eight repair centers so there's one conveniently--"

"Okay, okay, we know that," said Erin. "Aren't you Donkey Kong?"

"Oh, wow, yeah, how did you know?" replied DK.

"Donkey Kong?" exclaimed Clara. "You're famous. What are you doing driving a tow truck? I mean, boat?"

The big gorilla looked away sheepishly. "Oh, well, ya' see I needed some money for -- well, Candy wants to go to Club Sixty-Four and I promised I would take her and it's really expensive -- and I asked Cranky but he wouldn't give me any money, he just complained, and -- well, so I got this job. Oh, but I'm not supposed to talk about that while I'm on duty! Where's your vehicle? I'll hook it up and we can head back to the shop."

"Oh, we don't have one of our own," explained Nicholas. "We were riding the Ghost Train, you know, the Jack O' Lantern 1, but then the fungibility generator or whatever failed, and it dropped us right out onto the Pokefloats."

"Again? Those guys are terrible. That's the third time this month. They ought to have a big sign at the train stations, it's just not right--" DK stopped himself suddenly in mid-tirade. "Oh, man, I can't tow anything, how'm I gonna' make any money?"

"Towing makes you money?" asked Nicholas.

"Yeah, you see, we normally pick you up for free 'cause then we tow your car or plane or whatever to the shop and fix it, and I get a ten percent commission for anything that I bring in, which is really good 'cause you can bet that I don't get much for my wages. Of course there isn't much to do either until somebody calls, and I do spend most of the time sitting around sending messages to Candy even though she hardly ever writes back, and stuff. Anyway what am I gonna' do here?"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," interjected Cane. "Do you have anything to eat on this stupid flying whatever?"

"Yeah, yeah, I got lotsa stuff in case I get hungry when I'm out on a long boring patrol or something." The gorilla knuckle-walked over to a neat pile of boxes near the stern. "Let's see, I've got baked bananas, fried bananas, steamed bananas, plantain porridge, banana nut bread with banana frosting, condensed bananas, banana chips, banana dip, bananas with sour cream, bananas with yogurt, frozen bananas, candied bananas, chocolate covered bananas, bananas jubilee, banana cream pie, banana ice cream, banana milk shakes, and Manyabanamanania -- that's a frozen banana smoothie with a banana peel boost."

"Banana ice cream? That's disgusting! Great, I'll take it, I'm starved! " Cane pulled out a handful of coins and tossed them to DK. "Is that enough?"

"Oh, gee, thanks, I mean this is my stuff, it's not for sale," DK said, embarrassed.

"Fine, you drive a hard bargain," said Cane, emptying his pockets to produce another 10 coins (as well as a beat-up looking toothbrush and a 'borrowed' box of Madame Clairvoyant's Prescient Playing Cards).

"No, no, you don't understand--" began DK. Clara interrupted: "Look, just take the coins, he doesn't need them as much as you do."

DK reluctantly stuffed the currency in his breast pocket and dug into the pile. While Cane chowed down on yellow ice cream in yellow cones, he made his way to the prow. "Well, I guess we ought to get back," he said. "Oh, wait a minute, maybe I should take you guys where you were going since you lost your car, I mean train, I mean you didn't have one, you know. Where were you going, anyway?"

"Corneria," answered Nicholas.

"Where in Corneria?" asked DK. "That's a big place."

"We're looking for Starfox. Where was it Tails said we were supposed to go? Ummm... Symbols? Samples?"

"That's not right, we're supposed to go to a submarine!" said Cane between mouthfuls of ice cream.

"Submarine?" replied Nicholas, puzzled. "I thought Fox only flew R-wings. Besides, it's supposed to be some sort of music place or something like that, for grownups."

"Cymballine's," said Brian. "It's a jazz club."

"That's right!" said Nicholas. "Geeze, Brian, how do you always know this stuff?"

"You just have to listen," said Brian.

"Cymballine's?!" said DK. "Whoah! That place makes Club 64 look cheap. I've heard that just looking in the door costs 50 coins. I don't even know anybody who got in. Wow. Hey, do you think you could talk to Fox about getting me some tickets or something there? Candy would be so impressed if I could get her into Cymballine's!"

"Gee, I don't know, we really don't--" began Nicholas.

"Of course we can try," interrupted Clara. "If you can take us there."

"Yeah, yeah, I know where it is. Well, let's see if I can get this show on the road." DK swung himself effortlessly up onto a stay and traversed the rigging above the kids' heads to the front of the boat. He leaned over the prow and spoke to the figurehead, a wooden dragon with glowing jeweled eyes: "Hey, dragman, you think you're up for a little trip?"

The sculpture's eye squinted towards him and a puff of flame came from the mouth. "About time you asked. You never talk to me any more. You're just like everyone else. You think you can ignore me because I'm blue. Would you ignore the spirit of Red Dragon for twenty minutes to get a bunch of spoiled kids ice cream? I think not. I can't believe I'm stuck in this lame job with a lame dork for a driver rescuing lame punk kids." The head stopped for a moment and sighed, expelling a puff of smoke from its nostrils. "What did I do to be so blue and blue?" it hummed to itself.

DK rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, come on, we goin' or what?"

"Okay, gimme a stogie, I got maybe twenny thirty minutes left in me."

DK reached down to a little storage cabinet under the bulwarks and pulled out the biggest cigar the kids had ever seen: it was almost as long as Brian was tall. From a sheath mounted next to the foremast he pulled a longsword and, laying the smoke down on an air vent, with one thwack cut off the end. DK clambered out onto the rigging and stuffed the huge stogie into the sculpture's mouth.

"Hey, what's this, whatta about a light?" said the statue dragon, mouth distorted to speak past the cigar.

"Light? Light! Light it yourself! Oh, fine, I'll help." DK reached downwards, pulled the cigar out and held the end near the dragon's face. The dragon wheezed as it inhaled, and then a huge tongue of fire shot out from his mouth; the cigar burst into flame for a foot along its length. "Too much! too much!" cried DK as he damped the flames down with his cap. A brief struggle sufficed to return the now-smoldering ellipsoid to the dragon, who took a deep drag and then puffed out a burst of acrid smoke. Below their feet the kids could hear a rumbling and whining as whatever drove the boat came to life.

"Okay, let's go," DK said to himself as he swung across the ropes back to his little steering deck. The wheel and controls lay on a raised platform just forward of the stern, about where the steering board would have been found on a true Viking craft. Nicholas, taken with curiosity, limped and struggled across the crowded deck to join DK as the gorilla gracefully swung across a boom and down to his stool. Where the steersman sat, along with the little wheel, was some sort of compass in a transparent glass cover, a display screen with lines on it that looked like a navigation aid, a series of buttons and levers, and a telephone with a computer keyboard. A little rack held a hand towel emblazoned PROPERTY OF HOTEL DELFINO. Next to the controls was an ashtray that looked rather disconcertingly like a human hand, holding a placard saying REVENGE behind it. In the front was a tall transparent windscreen protecting the steersman from the wind of the passage; dangling down on strings from the top edge were trinkets of various size and description: a tiny glass palm tree, a toy cannon of some sort, several little gorilla dolls, and a plastic tiger.

"Hey, that reminds me!" Nicholas said to himself. Nicholas pulled off his backpack and reached inside, taking out a little unopened brightly-colored box. "Hey, DK, I got this back at the gift shop. It's a Tiger Bobble Head toy, you could put it on your windshield or something. Would you like it?"

"A Tiger Bobble head! Wow, that's fantastic! I love Tiger bobble-heads. Yes, yes, yes. How much do you want for it?"

"No, that's okay, you rescued us, take it." Nicholas shoved the box into DK's hands, feeling a certain warm satisfaction in being able to do something for their benefactor.

The gorilla awkwardly removed the shrink wrap and ripped it open: a little tiger doll bobbed its head as if sickened by the motion of the ship, as the craft began to move away from the Unown. "This is great!" said DK. "I can't believe I got a Tiger Bobble Head!" He turned away from the controls and opened a cabinet mounted on the partition behind him. Looking in, Nicholas could see rows and rows of Tiger Bobble-head toys, identical as far as he could tell to the new one in DK's hand, filling the voluminous storage compartment. "Nope, no room there... let's see." Two more cabinets and a drawer later DK found a spot not already occupied with a bobble toy and stowed the precious addition safely

away. Nicholas felt somewhat less pleased with himself than before but DK's appreciation was obviously genuine if inexplicable.

Meanwhile near the prow Erin had gotten the top off a huge plastic drum, perched precariously on a smaller wooden shipping container tucked behind a toolbox on wheels, which turned out to be full of some sort of wonderfully sticky sand. While the other kids were checking their packs and items for damage, he had started to construct an elaborate castle, using a pair of flat-bladed chisels from the second big drawer as shovels. Tennyson, who also retained an unashamed enjoyment of sandboxes, joined in, building a road to the castle and decorating it with rods from the carton marked DIPSTICKS next to the toolbox.

Brian accidentally discovered still another cabinet full of Tiger Bobble-head toys, which he began using to decorate the entry to the castle. "See, these are like the lions of Nebuchadnezzar at the gates of Babylon," he said.

"The what where?" asked Tennyson.

"That's not right," said Erin, ladling sand onto a corner tower. "It's the Assyrians who liked giant lions by the gates, and besides those are tigers. I've got it! This is the castle of the Legendary First Emperor Shin Shwang!"

"That's Qin Shi Huang," said Brian. "And he didn't use tigers, he used warriors made of clay." He climbed into the impromptu sandbox. "See, he would make a pit like this, and bury the warriors with their weapons to protect him in the afterlife." He started digging a little trench, and carefully laying tigers in rows within."

"Really?" said Tennyson, kneeling over the trench. "This is cool. Like Egyptian mummy stuff. Did he have rows of tigers like that? Could you go see them?"

"No, no, I'm just using the tigers 'cause I don't have action figures," said Brian. "They were terracotta warriors, that means clay, they look just like they were alive. There's a museum in Shin Xiang or something like that."

Cane joined in, dripping the last of his ice cream onto the sand. "You guys have it all wrong. This is the castle of Doctor Caliglerio, evil mad scientist who turns teenagers into flying saucer aliens! Like my sister! See, lemme show you." He tried to climb into the drum to join the other boys, but this was too much weight on one side: the boys jumped out as the drum flipped off its unstable pedestal, spewing sand onto the deck.

DK looked up from the nav computer. "What are you guys doing? You're getting sand in my tigers! Oh, man, I can't believe this."

"Wait, wait, no problem, I can clean this up," interrupted Cane. He had grabbed the straps of a unit somewhat resembling a Poltergust and was mounting it on his back.

"What are you doing now?" said DK.

"Relax, I know everything about these, I'm an expert," said Cane. "I cleaned up the whole mansion with one of these." Clara looked away in disgust.

DK finally clued: "No, wait a minute, that's not a vacuum cleaner, that's a fl--!" but it was too late. Cane, directing what he thought was a carpet cleaning tool at the sandpile, had pushed a button on the panel. Two powerful blasts of water burst from nozzles on the bottom of the FLUDD jetpack, soaking Erin, Brian, and Tennyson, and propelling Cane straight upward head-first into the beak of a Psyduck, drifting at the lee of the pack of Pokefloats. When the boys were able shake the water from their eyes, they could see Cane's feet dangling from the bottom of the beak; from his shouts it was apparent that his head was sticking out of the top.

"Can we get him out?" asked Nicholas of Donkey Kong.

"Seems to me this is not a new question," Clara remarked.

"Oh, man, look at my castle!" said Erin. The water jets had sloshed sand all over the foredeck, leaving only a misshapen pile where his building had been.

"Now, don't you worry, at Conker's we always have the tool for the job, and a full staff of factory-certified technicians to get your vehicle back on the road," said DK, remembering his customer relations training. He opened a storage door and withdrew a long-shafted gun-like tool. "A Longshot

ought to take care of this. Let's see..." He rested the shaft on an air vent and took aim: a rope with a hook at the end flew out of the Longshot, narrowly missed Cane's dangling foot, and continued past the Psyduck to latch onto the leg of a Kabuto drifting aimlessly beyond the Psyduck. DK tossed the Longshot off the boat in disgust: it soared downwards in a long arc and back up, swinging pendulum-like a few times until it dangled below the giant floating insect. "We really only get two days of training," he whispered to Nicholas. "I have no idea how to aim this thing right."

A second shot with a new tool produced a similar result, though in this case the hook hit nothing at all and could be reeled back in. Clara stepped forward from where she had been brushing sand off of Tennyson's back and took the tool from DK's hands. "Let me do this. Geeze."

"Wait a minute, you're going to rescue Cane?" said Nicholas.

"Well, it would be better if his head was showing instead of his feet," replied Clara as she balanced the ungainly launcher against a bulwark, exhaled, and slowly squeezed the trigger.

FWOOOSH! The hook flew out, struck Cane on the knee and wrapped itself around his feet. "Owwww!" came the distant sound of Cane's complaint. "That huuurrrts!" Clara gave a perhaps unnecessarily hard tug to make sure the hook was secure, prompting another round of complaints from around the beak of the Psyduck, and then handed the Longshot back to DK.

"So now we reel him in and cut him out, right?" she asked.

"Well, not exactly," said DK, lashing the Longshot onto a deck winch with a length of line. "We're supposed to have a balloon cutter but I didn't have room for it on the boat after I put in the freezer for the banana ice cream, so I left it behind at the shop." He glanced conspiratorially at Nicholas and Clara. "You won't tell my boss, will you?"

Clara patted him on the shoulder. "Of course not. What do we do now?"

"Well, we'll have to tow him back to the repair station. It's not that far, maybe an hour since we can't go too fast dragging a Pokefloat behind us."

"You won't get into trouble showing up at the shop like this, will you?" asked Clara.

"No, I'm supposed to be towing something back to the shop. Looks better this way."

"Okay, thanks," said Nicholas. "You know, we really are pretty good at cleaning up, we'll get all this sand back in the drum." He walked forward to collect the other boys and start picking up, then stopped and turned back to DK. "Hey, would you still be able to get us to Corneria?" he said, hesitantly.

"No problem, dudes! I mean, sir. At Conker's the customer's wish is our command! We're always ready with a helpful hitch and a tow rope."

"I would say it's more of a foot rope," said Tennyson, looking up.

"Get me outta here!" cried Cane, as the Spirit of Blue Dragon began to move again, sculptured figurehead contentedly puffing away at the half-burned stogie, dragging the ungainly Psyduck by its beak. The rising smoke from the cigar swirled around the Pokefloat. "And stop poisoning me!" yelled Cane between coughs.

The boys plied towels and collected sand, while Clara pumped the gorilla for the details of his bumpy relationship with Candy. As they slowly left the fleet of Pokefloats behind, Erin poured the water from a carton of banana nut muffins onto the remnants of his sand castle and sang off key:

*By the waters
the waters
of Babylon
We lay down and wept
and wept
for Qin Shi Huang.
We have soaked
our history book so
we've forgotten
who he was.*

- - - - -

"But you guys already paid me a lot, you don't have to do that," said Donkey Kong, as the DeLorean hover car settled down next to a big yellow sign that said LOADING ZONE: 2 MINUTE PARKING.

"Don't be ridiculous!" said Clara. "I'm sure we'll be able to get tickets for you, it's the least we can do." The gull-wing doors popped open and she jumped out onto the sidewalk. She turned back to DK and shouted over the noise of the traffic and talk: "Are you sure you're not going to get into trouble for borrowing your boss' car?"

"No way! I'll just use the time reverser and be back a minute after we left." He looked up into the traffic zipping by overhead. "I just have to find room to get this thing up to 58 mph... should be okay. See ya!"

"Oh, how will we send the tickets?" asked Clara.

"Just call me at the shop!" said DK, pointing at Erin, who was slinging Mr. Saturn's bag across his shoulder as he clambered out.

"Okay, bye! Thanks again!" Clara waved, a bit wistfully, as the doors hissed closed and the hover car merged into the stream of vehicles zipping restlessly above their heads. They watched as the silvery vehicle accelerated into the fast lane and then disappeared in a bright flash. "What a nice guy," she said to herself as she turned back to the others. "I mean, gorilla. Oh, well."

Just then there was a pzzzoopp! sound and the DeLorean reappeared next to the curb. DK was inside, looking puzzled. Clara walked back over to the window. "I thought you were going back to the shop?"

"So did I. Let's see, six-three-one-two, set accumulator, adjust to peak field strength...hmm, it should have worked. I'll try again. See you!" The sleek car rose once again into the sky and hummed away, this time proceeding a bit more slowly and perhaps methodically. The boys had already lost interest, but Clara watched until another flash signaled DK's departure.

Nicholas was busy organizing the unruly troupe; when he was sure that everyone's packs and supplies were accounted for and Cane had temporarily stopped complaining, he turned around to try to figure out where they were.

It was early evening in Corneria. Skyscrapers towered above their heads, windows glowing yellow and orange. The hover cars were turning on their headlights, making long lines of flying blue-white twinkles through the air. There was an elegance about the architecture, a thematic dignity, quite distinct from the garish visual polyphony of Fourside. It was a place of wealth that placed value on beauty. But when Nicholas turned his eyes back to ground level, it was still pretty intimidating for a bunch of kids on their own: all manner of creatures walked, ran, and leapt from place to place, conversing loudly in unfamiliar tongues. Signs and advertisements, some readable and some mysterious, glittered above the windows of shops, restaurants, theaters, and recreational centers. As the cars flew above pedestrians, there was no need to make provision for their travel on the surface, which was thus a complex of walking areas at various levels, with elegant stairways, ladders, and climbing structures suggestive of a giant playground leading from one level to another. There were no recognizable streets or street signs.

Just as Nicholas' stomach began to drop with the thought that they were lost again, an elegant cursive sign, glowing bright green against a deep blue background, caught his eye: Cymballine's. Below the script was a model of a saucer-shaped craft embedded in the end of a horn or trumpet of some sort, with a huge stick or tree trunk sticking more or less through the center; a little purple-and-yellow figure seemed to be sticking its head (or something vaguely resembling one) out of a saucer window and shaking a fist (same remark) at the obstacle. The sign hung unsupported in the air above a small building some distance below where the kids stood; two absurdly tall creatures with fox ears and long snouts flanked a pair of doors upholstered in red leather. Smaller windows at the side revealed a dimly lit, crowded room. Nicholas could see silhouettes of figures seated before a stage illuminated by colored spotlights.

"Okay, come on!" he said to the kids. "Keep together, it would be pretty easy to get lost here." No one seemed to be noticing them, but even so Nicholas felt uneasy. Maybe it was just the crowds and

the tall buildings, but he decided to be extra careful. "Weapons out just in case." He pulled his beamsword out of his backpack but left the blade retracted. Tennyson made sure he could reach the handle of his bat in the pack. Cane got his ray gun out and made to shoot passersby.

"I'll go first," said Nicholas. "Then Brian, Erin, Tennyson, Cane; Clara will watch our backs."

"Okay but I'm not holding Clara's hand like a kindergarten kid!" said Cane.

"Fine, I will," said Tennyson, switching places. Clara smiled briefly but refused the offer; she wanted both hands free for her Superscope. She shared Nicholas' apprehension; something didn't feel right, though she couldn't identify what was bothering her.

The ragged line of kids started down the first stairway. It wasn't easy to keep together as they were jostled by the crowds. A group of five bird-like bipeds singing very loudly to music from a floating spheroid without obvious support or guidance strode heedlessly right through the kids, almost knocking Brian over. Along the walkway doorways led into dimly lit halls; in some of the doors poorly-dressed, rough-edged creatures held little bowls up to passersby: "Alms for the gameless!" said a fox with one ear. "Could you spare a coin for a hungry SuperNES veteran?" this from a dog-like creature who looked as if it had once been brilliantly colored but then was left out in the sun. "Hey, kid, whatcha want for dat homerun bat, I give ya coins you betcha!" said a bird with one patched eye. By the time they reached the entrance they were all a bit jumpy, but no worse for the trip.

Up close, the two doorwardens were even more improbably tall and quite intimidating. Nicholas was afraid of dogs anyway, and these foxes gave the appearance of combining human cunning and canine viciousness. He repeated his mother's line about "It never hurts to ask" several times to himself but his feet seemed reluctant to go. After a couple of minutes the kids were growing impatient and somewhat anxious, when suddenly one of the foxes noticed the kids loitering by the door. It growled and reached menacingly into its bulky leather jacket. "What do you want?" it said in a raspy grumble. "Get outta here, punks."

At that point Nicholas was ready to retreat and regroup, but Clara strode forwards to address the guard. "We're here to see Fox McCloud," she said. "Tails sent us."

That was enough to make the guard pause. Nicholas noticed that the other fox, rather than participating in the discussion, stepped out past the clump of kids to maintain a clear view of the approaches to the club, and continued to scan the crowds. That's military discipline. Wow. What kind of place is this? he wondered to himself.

"You sure about this? Does Fox know you're coming?" inquired the warden, skeptical if not outright suspicious.

"No, I guess he doesn't." Clara looked momentarily stumped.

By this time it seemed likely that the fox guards weren't going to bite. Nicholas gathered up his courage to opine in the discussion: "But he knows us! Tell him it's the kids he fought with at Fourside. He'll remember." Nicholas rubbed his thigh. "I sure do."

The guard spoke into a microphone attached to his coat, and then listened intently, his eyes scanning the crowds all the while. "Okay, right," he mumbled. He turned back to Nicholas and Clara. "Yeah, you can go in. It's twenty coins per person cover charge, that's 'cause your kids, half-price night. Pay at the door inside. Lemme see your weapons first." The fox nodded nonchalantly at the bat, ray gun, and Superscope, but was taken aback by the beam sword. "That's a beauty. Who'd you kill for that, punk?"

Nicholas was offended enough to forget to be afraid. "Princess Peach gave me that sword! Go and ask her."

"All right, all right, I -- get down!" The tall fox shoved Nicholas to the ground and crouched behind him, firing a tiny gun that made an implausibly loud BOOM with each shot. The other guard opened fire less than a second later. Clara had dragged Tennyson and Brian to the ground immediately, and Erin and Cane had ducked into the doorway. People and creatures all around fled for cover as a pack of wolf-like bipeds wearing some sort of armor charged towards the door. One of the wolves carried a banner saying simply "I IV V". The wolves' armor seemed to be no match for the weapons of the fox guards: one after another they fell, punctured or even dismembered, while their return fire zinged and

spatted but did no damage other than to punch out a stripe of Erin's hair. The attack was over almost before the kids had time to be frightened. Within a minute a crew of weasel-like creatures had driven some sort of street cleaner machine from a nearby alley to the scene and were slurping up the remains.

"What the heck was that?" exclaimed Nicholas.

"Ain't nothin'," rasped the other guard. "Just a gang of Fundamentalist Punk Rockers. They hate us because we modulate."

"You what?" said Cane. "Sounds gross."

"Change keys," said Tennyson. "Musical stuff."

"Right, kid," said the guard. "Don't pay them no mind, though, just one-key trash is all. Go ahead in." The guard pulled one of the big leather-covered doors open and shoved the kids through.

A kid-sized creature that looked for all the world like a giant frog sat on a large pedestal inside the door. It was hard to tell what the frog was looking at, but it grunted and then said in a surprisingly lovely feminine voice, "Welcome to Cymballine's. Here you'll find matchless melodies and versatile verse to transport your thoughts while we lighten your purse. Children are half price on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Twenty coins each please." Nicholas and Tennyson pushed Brian to the front. Brian pulled some coins out of his backpack and looked around puzzled for a repository in which to deposit them, when the frog's tongue leapt out suddenly and wrapped itself around the coins, removing them from his grasp; with another sluuuooooop they were deposited in a drawer against the opposite wall. "Thank you, you still owe ninety coins." Brian, better prepared this time, counted the remaining fee and placed the coins in his open palm. sluuuooooop! "That was 130 coins, did you wish the excess to be considered as a gratuity?"

"A what?" said Brian, nonplussed.

"That's a tip," whispered Tennyson.

"Oh, right, sure," said Brian.

"Thank you for your consideration," said the frog hostess. She tucked the extra coin into a pocket on the pedestal. "A poetry reading is in progress in the performance space; please refrain from discharging your weapons unnecessarily during the recitation. You will find Fox McCloud at table 11, to the left of the bar at the lower level. Rest rooms, recharging stations, and dueling alcoves are at the back, two coins for fifteen minutes. Ayumi will be your waitress, remember to consume our exquisitely expensive food copiously and please don't forget to tip generously lest she launch into song and we don't want that, do we? Enjoy your stay."

Tennyson seemed uncomfortable. "Are you sure kids are allowed in there? It's a bar, you know. I never get to go into one of those at home."

"Yeah, Tennyson's right, we're not supposed to go in there," said Brian.

Nicholas sensed the same awkwardness, but he also hated having Clara rescue him at the doorway, and was feeling unusually assertive in compensation. He addressed the frog: "Is there any problem with kids being there? Against any rule?"

"Not since you've paid, young Master."

"Are we supposed to drink alcoholic beverages too?" said Clara. She was never permitted this at home, though her father drank a glass of wine with dinner most nights, and found the thought enticing if a bit frightening.

"At Cymballine's we have every beverage and narcotic known to gamespace. From fruit juice to freebase. You don't need to indulge in anything but you are free to indulge in everything. Your waitress can provide suggestions if you like."

"Oh. Wow. I'm not sure I'm ready for that," she said, half to herself.

Her hesitation gave Nicholas a chance to take back leadership of the group. He thanked the frog and led the way through the short hallway into the nightclub. The spotlight stage stood out over the dimly lit tables and the crowded bar. At the back of the room, illuminated by the reflected glare of the spots, Clara noticed a reptilian-like creature in leather armor looking up to meet her eye: it spat out its drink in surprise and immediately rose and walked out of the back of the room. On the platform was a huge, frightening-looking scaled creature with vicious claws and a long whiplike tail, wearing a helmet and

glistening yellow-and-blue armor, holding a little microphone in one hand, reciting as he paced back and forth across the stage:

*...I walked in the field of dreams
craven to an opiate desire
I gave my feathers to the awakening flowers
I broke my fangs asunder
And cast my lot with a falling star
With cruel and shocking thunder*

*Who now repairs the hearts that once pulsed
Warm in the morning dew?
Who now remembers joy reduced
To bones in a petroglyph glue?*

The raptor lowered the microphone and slowly bowed his head. Enthusiastic if scattered applause broke out through the room.

"What the heck was that?" Cane asked Tennyson as they descended the short staircase into the performance space, speaking loudly even for Cane in order to be heard over the noise of conversation and bustling waiters and waitresses. "I didn't understand a word."

"It's poetry, you dufus," said Tennyson. "It doesn't, like, mean something literally. It's images and stuff. Pictures in your head." Erin, forgetting the other kids, wandered towards the stage to listen.

"Come on, come on, let's get to Fox," shouted Nicholas. The bar was crowded with creatures talking, shouting, playing games, eating and drinking, as well as waiters and waitresses bustling back and forth with trays of new and used refreshments. The occupants, if not hostile, were self-absorbed and not particularly polite. It wasn't easy for the kids to make their way across the room to where Nicholas had gotten a glance of Fox from the entry.

As he bumped into a rushing ceratopsian, he heard Clara apologize behind him: "Oh, sorry, sir." He turned to see what was going on: standing at a tall table was a human-sized squirrel-like creature, its bushy tail taller than Nicholas: it was like a giant stuffed animal, absolutely adorable. Its face was dripping with some sort of liquid -- apparently Clara's accidental impact had knocked the creature's drink over. "Oh, my, let me find you a napkin," Clara added as she noticed the results of the encounter.

"Sorry's not enough, you little slut!" rasped the squirrel in a gravelly bark quite at odds with its endearing appearance.

The creature's tablemate, a cat-lady with multicolored whiskers, tried to intervene: "Conker's having a bad fur day, dear, you'd best--"

The squirrel turned viciously on her. "You stay out of this. If you were a dog you'd be a bitch." Clara had started to back away, thinking about her Superscope but not really wanting to start a fight in a bar (what would her father think of that?). The squirrel jumped at her and grabbed her shirt in its claw, pulling her off the ground. She kicked at it ineffectually. "Maybe I should rip your head off and feed you to my goats. If I hadn't eaten them already."

Nicholas was getting worried, but once again tried to think of how Mr. Classen handled kids having an argument: "Okay, calm down, Mr. -uh - Conker, we can buy you another drink, I'm sure. Brian, coins?"

Instead of being mollified, the squirrel was further enraged: "Another drink? You brain-dead ignoramus, she drenched my fur." The squirrel flicked its huge tail at Nicholas, knocking him over, and started to drag Clara away.

Nicholas wasn't thinking too clearly at this point, but he certainly wasn't going to allow one of the kids to be taken away; after all, having one of the group get captured was always the start of all the problems in movies. He shouted, "That's enough! You just wait a minute, Mister!" and reached into his backpack for his beamsword hilt. He meant only to wave it around threateningly, but the guard got stuck in the zipper, and in his rush to brandish the weapon he pulled harder. Suddenly the guard came loose,

and at the same moment his index finger engaged the button that extended the blade as he lost his balance. The squirrel angrily threw Clara to one side and turned to berate Nicholas: this was an unfortunate decision, for it caused Conker's neck and a portion of his shoulder to intersect a chord of the arc described by the blade as Nicholas unintentionally spun to his right. The beamsword made nothing of the obstacle: the decapitated squirrel stood for a moment headless and then fell backwards into the tall table, spewing blood onto the cat-lady as she tried to escape.

Nicholas stood shocked for a moment: the noise of the bar had vanished suddenly as all eyes were turned towards him. Now I'm in trouble he thought to himself, but it also occurred to him that no one else knew he hadn't intended to attack the squirrel. Mr. Saturn's voice seemed to whisper at his side, what they don't know -- can be used to your advantage. He looked around in what he hoped was his meanest glare and said in as low a voice as he could manage, "Anybody else wanna try?"

Clara was shaking and partly covered in blood, but she recovered herself almost instantly, and in a moment stood at Nicholas' back, Superscope at the ready. Tennyson was slower on the uptake, but in a moment he was flanking the little group with his bat held prominently on his shoulder. Clara jabbed Cane with the butt of her weapon several times before he realized what she wanted and drew his ray gun.

"I didn't know you could do that," Clara whispered to Nicholas.

"I didn't either," Nicholas whispered back. "What now?"

Brian came to the rescue. He calmly strode in front of Nicholas' glowing blade as if nothing had happened and said to the crowd, "We'd like to talk to Fox McCloud. Over there, at table 11. If you don't mind?"

In two seconds a wide path was cleared through the crowd to Fox's table: Nicholas could see the familiar canine flirting with a very attractive female fox. Brian whispered to Nicholas: "You can put the blade away now." He reached into his pack and withdrew a handful of coins, pushing them into Nicholas' fist; "Give them to the bartender."

Nicholas tossed the coins up onto the bar as he walked by in his best imitation of confidence: "Sorry about the mess."

The barkeep, an iguanodon in a striped apron, picked the coins up and stuffed them in the register drawer. "He had it comin'. Here, kid, have his Margarita. On the house." He reached over and handed Nicholas a tall glass containing something that looked like a smoothie but smelled more dangerous. Nicholas figured it would be uncool to refuse the drink; he took it in his left hand while continuing to wave the beamsword hilt meaningfully with his right. After one lick his tongue was tingling; after two, he was beginning to think that Conker wasn't such an accident; after the third, he was ready to take on the whole bar at once. Fortunately, Brian tugged on his sleeve and pushed him down the steps towards Fox and Crystal.

While this was happening the dinosaur on stage returned to his recitation. Erin was planted in a comfortable recliner just out of the glare of the spots, sipping sparkling cider from an elegant glass flagon; he hadn't even noticed the disturbance.

*...Ah we could share
long conversations in the twilight
And we could soar
long peregrinations in the high light
And we could bore
long penetrations lit with my light
Until reality intervened
with its wry light
And made us long for our dreamscape
no more.*

"Urrrgh!" said Fox. "I liked him better when he was trying to kill me."

"Brain-dead male!" replied the female fox. "Listen to the imagery! The calculated ambiguity of expression. Use your imagination!" McCloud licked a little chocolate mouse from a tray on the table and appeared unimpressed. "Oh, forget it, all you think about is eating."

"Come on, Crystal honey, that's not all I think about," said Fox, nuzzling the back of her neck with his long nose.

She pushed him away with a smile. "Not here, everyone's watching."

"Sounds exciting," replied Fox, looking up. "Is there a mirror on the ceiling?"

Crystal slapped his muzzle with her cap. "You are impossible! I'm going to talk to Scales."

Fox hesitated for a moment, trying to decide whether to follow Crystal or finish his drink. Brian took advantage of the momentary lapse in the conversation to step forward. "Excuse me, Mr. McCloud, I wonder if we could have a moment of your time?"

Fox looked over, distracted, and then nodded. "Oh, yeah, I remember you guys. Coupla' days ago at Fourside. You ain't still hangin' with Ness and his crowd, I hope." He looked at Nicholas. "That was nice swordsmanship takin' out Conker, kid. You been practicing? Looked a lot better than the last time we met."

Nicholas tried to decide what to say, but before he could decide whether to be honest or cagey, Brian jumped back in: "We've learned quite a lot in the last few days, sir. Among other things, we've learned that we need to get to Ark as soon as we can. Your friend Tails suggested that you might be able to help us out. We can make it worth your while."

Fox leaned back in his chair, suddenly more attentive, sizing Brian up. "Ark. Hmmm. Asteroid field. Security robots. Guns on the towers and surface. Don't have good maps or plans. You're right, you'll need to make it worth my while all right. What do want to go to Ark for anyway?"

Clara helped Nicholas to take a seat next to Fox and sat down in what had been Crystal's chair. Tennyson sat on the table, legs dangling, next to Clara, while Cane picked up a menu and tried to figure out what grilled filet of coelacanth in lemon caper sauce would taste like.

"We're trying to get home," said Nicholas.

"You live on Ark?" replied Fox, puzzled.

"No, it's that reality thing," said Nicholas. He was still floating slightly from the drink, which he had ill-advisedly continued to consume.

"You mean reality TV? Are we on a game show?" Fox looked around for a camera. "I thought they went broke."

"Only the quiz show underwriters," said Brian, kicking Nicholas under the table. "We have reason to believe that there are people at Ark who can help us return to our homes. In the real world, you know."

"Yeah, we were born!" said Cane, looking up from the menu. "Years ago. We're not made like you guys out of somebody's computer program -- we came from a real hospital! I even saw one. The babies come out on little green tables with plastic boxes and lights. Ugly, I can't believe I started like that. But then I ate a lot. Speaking of which, is there a waiter around here?" He waved at a passing bulldog-man laden with two large trays of snacks, who ignored him.

"That's all very interesting, I guess, or would be if I cared," said Fox. "What people? Who are they working for? What skeletons are they storing in the closets?"

"What business is it of yours?" said Clara. "We'll pay you, that's all you need to know."

Tennyson picked up the glass in front of Clara, simultaneously moving between her and Fox. "It looks like you've run dry here. What were you drinking, friend?"

"I don't know if I'm your friend -- yet -- but I like your style," said Fox, leaning back in his chair. "Brandy Alexander, double, crushed ice."

Tennyson somehow managed to make eye contact with a bustling feline on his first try, frustrating Cane who had still not been able to gain the attention of a server. The cat lady was dressed in a scanty version of the green-striped blue Cymballine's uniform; she leaned over and sniffed Tennyson's cheek. "Suhiro was right, you are a cute one!" she said. Then she did a little courtesy and licked Tennyson's cheekbone. "I'm Ayumi, remember me in your will, dear. Are you ready to order?" Clara's

eyes were flashing unfelt lightning into Tennyson's back, while Ayumi rubbed her side against Tennyson's and purred loudly.

"A refill on the Brandy for Fox. I'd like a lemonade. Nicholas, did you want another margarita?"

Nicholas' eyes were crossing. He shook his head vehemently, but stopped immediately as it made the room spin.

"Hey, what about me?" interjected Cane. "I'm hungry! thirsty too!"

Ayumi paid him no attention. Tennyson stroked her under the ears and asked over his shoulder: "What did you want, Cane? Quick."

"Gee I don't know, I don't recognize anything. Gimme whatever the house specialty is and a Coke."

"Are you sure you want Coke?" asked Brian. "Remember what the frog at the door said."

"What are you talking about? You're still worried about that science fair experiment?" Cane had done his third-grade science fair experiment on the baby teeth he had saved as they came out, demonstrating graphically that little remained of one after a week in a bottle of Coca-Cola. He had regarded this as proof of his hypothesis that a Coke should always be drunk with french fries, inspiring a memorably incomprehensible lecture from Miss Anders on the meaning of the term non sequitur.

"Never mind, just get a lemonade, trust me," replied Brian.

"You'd better do as he says," added Fox. "Speaking of which, dinner does sound good. Get me a ornithomimus flank cut with the sweet peppers and worms, and a bowl of archeopteryx stew."

"So two lemonades, ornithomimus, stew, special, brandy," Tennyson repeated to the apparently insensible Ayumi. "Brian? Clara?" Clara glared back; Ayumi's eyes were closed as Tennyson rubbed the fur on the back of her neck. Brian shook his head. "Okay, that's it."

Ayumi popped up, suddenly distant and businesslike: "Drinks will be right up, sir. About ten minutes on the meals." She bustled off into the crowd, but was as good as her word: within two minutes she returned, beverages tucked into the pockets of a sort of tray arrangement balanced on her head. She distributed the refreshments and rubbed against Tennyson's legs and purred loudly while she spoke: "That's two hundred twenty coins, sweetie, minus twenty coins special discount for heavy petting." Tennyson looked at Brian, who fished out the money and handed it to him. Following Ayumi's glance, Tennyson deposited the coins into the little apron-pocket Ayumi wore between her un-feline breasts. Ayumi ran her raspy tongue over Tennyson's hand and then popped back up again. Clara pictured what Ayumi would look like after a beamsword treatment.

With what Brian assumed were the necessary preliminaries taken care of, he went back to work on Fox: "Clara was right. We can pay you generously for your services."

"That really wasn't the point," said Fox, leaning back in his chair lapping the creamy drink up with long tongue. "Just at the moment we're doing pretty well, don't really need the money. I wouldn't be spending weeknights at Cymballine's if I was broke, now, would I?"

"Gee, if you can always get somebody to pay like this, it's not that expensive," said Nicholas, honestly puzzled and now definitely alcoholically fogged. Brian kicked him under the table and turned back to Fox. "Would you stop that?" mumbled Nicholas.

"Besides, you haven't answered my question. Who are we trying to help? Who are we up against? Basically, why should I risk my neck for a few coins? I'm doing fine the way I am. Or would be if Crystal would get her cute little behind back here and you kids would go to bed, it must be late."

"That's a heck of way to behave when we're buying you drinks and dinner!" flashed Clara. "We worked hard for those coins you're guzzling away."

"Actually," said Brian, "those are from the treasure chest stash, so technically we didn't earn them, we stole them."

"Oh, come on," said Clara. "I thought Luigi straightened you out."

"I agreed it was impractical to return the money. It's not the same."

Tennyson tried to defuse the dispute and get the conversation back to Fox. "Look, Mr. McCloud, I think we ought to let you know what's at stake here."

At that moment Ayumi returned with a sizzling platter containing a slab of steaming aromatic meat surrounded by little things that looked like earthworms, still wriggling. "You said it, mate!" said Fox, digging into the dinosaur remains.

"Come on, let's get serious," said Tennyson.

"That's my line!" said Nicholas.

"Look, Fox, this affects everybody," Tennyson continued, refusing be distracted. "You need to understand what's going on at Ark. It's not just a space station, it's --"

Brian interrupted: "Tennyson, Nicholas, come here for a minute. Excuse us, Mr. McCloud?"

"Sure thing, kids," said Fox, applying himself to the stew bowl Ayumi had just placed on the table. "Ayumi, love, another brandy and a schnapps on the side?" Ayumi hissed at the canine but nodded, while she laid Cane's plate in front of him: it was a tiny bit of root looking like a deflated carrot with a single leaf on top, lying in a puddle of brown sauce the consistency of mud.

"That's three hundred eleven, dear," Ayumi said to Tennyson.

"Didn't we already pay?" asked Brian.

"That was for the drinks, darling," she replied. "I can run a tab if you like." Brian wasn't sure what that meant but it sounded like it would make her go away for a moment so he nodded.

Brian pulled Nicholas and Tennyson off to a vacant little round table a few paces away. "I don't think we should just go around letting Fox know about everything. What if he's not such a good guy?"

"What do you mean by that?" asked Tennyson.

"I mean, what if he's working for the other side?"

"Well, if he's working for the other side, he already knows what they're up to, it doesn't make any difference if we tell him," said Tennyson.

"Don't you get it?" retorted Brian. "If he knows we know, he'd have to get rid of us!"

"What, right here in the middle of the restaurant?"

"Of course, right here in the middle of the restaurant? Did you see any police coming to pick up Nicholas?"

"Police?" said Nicholas, looking around. "Where? What did I do?"

"What did you do? You killed a giant squirrel! And nobody cares. They rewarded you. Do you think that would happen at home?"

"I don't know what goes on in bars at home," said Nicholas. "We're not allowed to go in. You know that. Besides there aren't any giant squirrels in the bars at home."

"How do you know?" said Tennyson. "You can't go in."

"Oh yeah, right," said Nicholas. By now he had forgotten about the police.

"The point is, nobody cared about what Nicholas did. Nobody would care if Fox wiped us all out, as long as he pays for the cleanup. We can't just tell him everything!"

"But we already know that he knows that we know," said Tennyson.

"But he doesn't know that!" said Brian. "Besides, what if he knows that we know he knows we know? We might try to get rid of him, or at least he would think we might, so he'd want to do us in first!"

"If he already knows, and he already knows that we know, and that we know he knows, what difference does it make if we tell him?" said Tennyson.

"I'm confused," said Nicholas.

While the three kids were huddled together, Cane stared at the plate. "That's the special? Especially pathetic, that's what it is. I wanted food!"

Fox took a moment off his stew slurping. "You ought to give it a chance, it is really good, and remember I'm a carnivore who says it."

Cane reluctantly picked up a fork and took a slice off. "Holy cow! You're right. This is great stuff!" He went to work with a vengeance on the defenseless root. "So, anyway, you're right about this Ark stuff, it's really dangerous and stupid, I wasn't gonna' go at all except that those Whirlindas were after me. I never get to do what I want in the real world, why should the game worlds be any different? We'll just be doing what somebody else tells us, it's just like some other bunch of grownups. I say, one

bunch of nerds is like another one! Let 'em take over the reality modifier or whatever it is -- they'll just mess everything up like the grownups always do anyway!"

"Oh, really, you're probably right," said Fox, pricking up his ears over the food. "What's that modifier thing?"

"Oh, we heard about that when we were listening in on Professor Gadd, he was talking to Zelda, you know, but we were all there, I practically ate Clairvoya before she gave me my fortune! I didn't understand it anyway. So he said he was messing with the real world and Zelda just had a cow, like he wasn't allowed to pee if she didn't approve of it. Princesses are all like that. A guy can't even burp around these people."

"Yeah, you're right about that, son."

"So Brian figured out it was that they have this thing at Ark that you can change the real world with, or maybe it was Mister Saturn? And then you could make your game world better. Like they could get all the kids to like the Stupid Ghost Show Game best, then I'd be famous!"

"So you agree we shouldn't just up and tell him everything?" said Brian. Tennyson reluctantly nodded his head.

"I don't see the point of worrying about when to tell him," said Nicholas, who had tuned out on the Brian-Tennyson argument. "Cane just did."

"WHAT!" said Brian. "Cane!!"

"What? You want some of this, no way! Get your own!"

"Now you've done it," said Brian.

"Done what?" replied Cane.

"Never mind, it's okay," said Tennyson. "See, I told you we might as well let him in on everything."

"Not that way! Now we're stuck. What if he doesn't help us? I don't like him."

"You just don't like dogs."

"He's a fox. Besides you're the one that's scared of dogs."

"I am not. Any more. Hardly."

Nicholas summoned an effort to stop his head from spinning and broke in: "You guys, it really doesn't matter what we meant to do. Let's just try trusting Fox. If he's gonna get us we're doomed anyway. Oh, my head. I don't know if it's so bad to be doomed. At least my head wouldn't feel so awful."

Brian reluctantly nodded agreement. Tennyson said, "So now you understand more or less as much as we do. If they can control the real world at Ark, then we care because it's our home that's in danger. But who knows what they'll do to the game worlds, too? I think it affects everyone."

"Fine, so it's a danger to me, maybe. What am I accomplishing by getting you to Ark? Are you going to take it over? If so, how can I trust you? Or are you just going to go home and leave us to whatever fate we encounter?"

Tennyson was nonplussed; he hadn't thought that far ahead. "I guess you're right; we were just hoping to get home. We don't even really quite know how to arrange that. Maybe if we destroy the equipment we'll never get home. I guess we just counted on hiring you. We weren't looking out for anyone but ourselves, were we?"

"Look out for number two, that's what I say!" Cane interrupted. "Oh, I mean number one! That's me! Even though I hardly ever actually get number 1 in anything. I sure don't care what happens to some dumb fox in a game if I get home. Unless I can use him to get Melissa off my back. Can I get another of those special root things?" (the last to Ayumi as she paced past the table, ignoring him).

"I guess that's what you were all doing," said Fox. "Refill, honey?" to Ayumi. The fur on her back rose, but Tennyson nodded and rubbed her belly fur until she relented.

"We were not," said Clara. "We had a simple straightforward deal. We'll pay you and you'll get us there. Don't try to make us look dishonest. You're the one who's doing sneaky stuff."

"Clara," Tennyson said. "We're trying to convince him to help us, why are you insulting him?"

"I don't trust him. Why do you think they call them foxes?"

"You're just mad at me because of the waitress."

"You're right I'm mad at you. You can't take your eyes off her. To say nothing of your hands."

"But I like cats."

"Not cats like that!"

"I think you two are little young to be having this kind of spat," said Fox. "You leave that to Crystal and me. I haven't said no yet. I haven't decided. It's an intriguing problem. You know I can't do this myself; we'll need every hand if we're going to fight our way into Ark, and Slippy and Peppy can't come."

"Why not?" asked Nicholas. "I wanted to meet them."

"Oh, you can meet them," replied Fox. "But they're not allowed to do mercenary work. Insurance rider. So that means you'll have to fight. You guys were, to be blunt, pretty pathetic back last time I watched you. Although I have to say Nicholas, at least, showed me something back there a minute ago. But you'd better lay off the sauce, kid, it doesn't agree with you." Fox stared at them with calculating eyes. "I'd need to teach at least three of you to fly an Arwing properly, the others have to be gunners. Then we have to break through the surface channels -- that needs some real skill with a handgun as well as agility and smarts. Takes guts and training. We'd need, oh, three four months to get you up to snuff, it you've got what it takes to begin with."

"We haven't got three months," said Brian. "We've got three weeks."

"You said that, why? What's the deal?"

"Well, we have reason to believe that somebody is going to attack the place in -- um -- 25 days. If we don't get in before that we'll get caught in the battle, and who knows if the station will survive the assault? We figured the only safe way is to be there first."

"Who's attacking? who did you hear this from?"

"Well, we think it's a Star Spirit or a Star Kid, and maybe soldiers from Bowser, and they said also Giovanni."

Fox laughed. "Star Spirits. Academics. No danger from those jerks, they'll spend six months arguing about the whichness of the who before they do anything. Bowser's a posturing puff ball. Giovanni an infantile egomaniac. I can deal with these guys. No need to hurry. Anyone else?"

"Well, I think they were negotiating with the Tom Nooks."

"The Nooks?! Holy crap. That is scary! Nooks in control of anything is a crisis. Conformity out the wazoo. Hurts my head even thinking about it. If you're sure about this I'm your man."

"Erin found this from a Star Kid," said Tennyson. "He said -- the Star Kid, that is -- they were negotiating with the Nook guild. Course maybe he was just claiming that to try to get Bowser to help him."

"Geeze, don't say that!" said Brian. "You're trying to convince him."

"Kids, you're not up to lying at that level yet. Just stick with the truth. So it's not certain that the Nooks would end up in control. I don't know. Thanks, Ayumi. (slurrrp) I think I'll have to reflect on this over another brandy. Who's Erin? Oh, yeah, I remember, the kid hanging with Saturn. Where is he?"

"Oh, he's over there by the stage," said Tennyson. "Talking with a fox."

"Talking with a fox -- he's talking with Crystal! What's goin' on over there?" Crystal, Erin, and Scales were engaged in some sort of heated discussion. Crystal's arm was around Erin's shoulders and her head next to his. It looked compromising.

"Oh, don't worry, he's sworn off pretty girls," said Brian.

"Maybe not foxes, though," said Tennyson.

Just then Erin and Crystal got up and started to make their way through the crowded bar towards the other kids. "Oh, Fox, you have to meet this boy. He and his friends are so brave! They volunteered to come to the game worlds, knowing they might never get back, just to rescue a dromeosaur in distress. And they were all world-famous game experts in the real world, and had perfect grades in school -- why, they even have a motto, 'one for all and all for one', isn't that touching and original all at once?"

Tennyson's jaw dropped; Clara was left blankly staring at Erin. Brian put his head in his hands. Nicholas said, "Wait a minute, I thought my head hurt."

Cane looked up from his second special: "About time somebody realized how important we are. Who are you, anyway? I'm Cane, you know. Everybody back home knows me!"

"Crystal, honey, it's a little more complicated than that," interrupted Fox. "Here, sit down, have a drink. Tennyson, get a vodka gimlet for my foxy lady, will ya?"

"Don't try to distract me, Fox McCloud! You're trying to weasel out of anything that involves work, I know you. If you don't fly these children to Ark to rescue that dinosaur I'll never talk to you again, I swear it!"

"Calm down, darling, of course I'll help them, did you doubt it?"

Brian dragged Erin off to the side. "What the heck is this stuff about a dromeosaur? How could we rescue a dromeosaur? there aren't any in the games!"

"Are so," said Erin. "I whacked one with my staff when I was fighting with Trixie." Crystal pricked up her ears and went to Erin's defense, leaving Clara and Fox together at the other end of the table.

"So you're going to help just because she said so, is that it?" said Clara.

"Did I say that?" replied Fox, sipping his drink. "Oh, yeah, I did. I was just calming her down, she gets excited sometimes. High-strung."

"So you're just making it up. I thought so. I don't know why we're talking to you anyway."

Fox laughed. "You don't like me, do you, little girl? What was your name again?"

"Clara. You're right. I don't like you and I don't trust you."

"Do you want to know why you feel that way?"

"What? I know why I don't trust you. It's cause you lie!"

"No, that's not it. Course I do play fast and loose with the truth when it serves my purposes. So do you. You don't like me because I'm like you. Determined. Self-centered. Unscrupulous. Undiplomatic. Amoral, you know what that is?"

"I'm not like that at all. I'm not unscrupulous. You know what I mean!"

"Really? All right. I'll call it realistic. You're not impressed with Fox McCloud, we know that. You don't believe these kids can make it to Ark, with or without my help. You're worried about where the next meal will come from. You're worried about spending too much money tonight. You're worried that you gave your heart prematurely to a fellow whose attention can wander. What you need is your own stash and I can fix it. You see that twit -- I mean, that wolf over there?" He pointed to a canine two tables down, engaged in a heated discussion with an armed human. "Does some work for Andross. A friend of Conker's, you know, the squirrel that was hassling you until the other kid -- uh, Nicholas -- until Nicholas saved you. I don't much like him. I'll give you two thousand coins if you take him out right now."

"What?" said Clara.

Brian thought she was responding to Erin's remarks: "See, even Clara can't believe that. You can't just make these things up!"

"What do you mean?" replied Erin. "How did we get here in the first place?"

Fox recaptured Clara's attention with a glance. "Two thousand coins. And I'll help out your friends, though you don't really care about that. Here, take it, payment up front." Fox reached into his pouch and counted out twenty large striped coins marked 100. He pushed them across the table to Clara.

"But -- the Superscope just hurts, it can't kill anybody."

"After you train with me you won't be caught dead exposing that much ignorance of your weaponry." Fox pointed at the Superscope, resting against the table. "Gimme that for a second. See here?" Fox popped a little panel on the side of the weapon, exposing a dial. "All the way to the right, little angel. Fatal. One shot on the mark and it's over. You need to charge it up after that, of course."

Clara's eyes widened, absorbing the implications. "So you're saying I should challenge this wolf to a duel?"

"Oh, I never said that. I'd just whack him from here if I were you. Wait until you get a clear look. You're supposed to be a good shot, right? Two thousand coins. Take it or leave it. This is what

it's going to take to survive on your own here in the game worlds. Think about it." Fox handed her back the Superscope and sipped his brandy, waiting.

Brian was trying to prevent Tennyson from correcting Crystal's misunderstandings; the discussion was growing tense. Clara paid it no heed. "Fine. Fine." Clara scooped the coins into her backpack and put the sighting scope to her eye. Fox watched. Nothing happened for a moment. She started to drop the gun and then returned it to firing position. Erin said "That's not true, why, don't you remember when I trashed ten dodongos in one shot, just like this!" and tossed the ashtray he was holding in his right hand like a frisbee, right into Clara's back. There was a buzzing pop, almost lost in the crowded noisy room. Two tables away the wolf slumped forward onto his drink. His table mate slammed down its glass in disgust and walked away. A waitress passing by, another cat lady, hissed at the wolf, and then signaled to the bouncer. Clara dropped the Superscope onto the table and sat motionless, her eyes fixated on nothing.

Just then there was a burst of applause from the audience. Nicholas looked up at the stage to see a familiar little round figure waddle towards a short stool in the center: it was Mr. Saturn! Or at least, it looked just like the Mr. Saturn he knew. In the shadowed back of the stage a bird-like creature sat down at a keyboard of some sort. The room grew silent as a microphone floated over to the little guy:

"Thank you, thank you, great to be back here at Cymballine's. Everyone's having a good time, I'm sure, because you're certainly paying for one. After my friend the General's descent into the depths of palindromic profundity, I figured we'd better indulge in some lighter entertainment. Here's one I wrote back on Pop Star, it's called Parrotty"

The keyboardist played a short introduction, way too chromatic for the kids' taste in music, and Mr. Saturn launched into song. He had the remarkable ability to sing three-part harmonies by himself. The song went like this:

Parrot
don't pair it with ferret
that's a pair with no merit
it's like mixing haiku and bowling

Parrot
it means imitation
a thieves' adaptation
to powers beyond controlling

No need to think
you can copy
No need to skate
on the brink
of creation
No need to wait
for a late
inspiration
No hope of breeding
a great
innovation

Smart bird
just to speak what is spoken
don't fix what ain't broken
it's a token
of what you might learn
if you had awoken

*A fire of creation
that you could be stokin'
to fry that bright plumage
and beak that was pokin'
in places that you weren't aware of
in faces that you weren't scared of
in pretensions that you could make fun of
in defenses that you could be one of*

*Take the old cloth and wear it
Hide your dream and don't bare it
Live a lie and don't tear it
scare it
Parrot.*

The microphone dropped to the floor. Applause and an assortment of whoops, barks, and squawks filled the room. Mr. Saturn did a sort of a bow and then waddled off the stage, disappearing into the crowd. Within a minute he popped into view again next to the presumably dead wolf: he stopped for a moment, inspecting the creature. Clara's heart pounded as he met her eyes. Without a word Mr. Saturn made his way towards table 11.

"Saturn!" said Fox. "Still writing in parallel fifths, don't you ever learn anything new? Better than Scales, at least."

"Those who can't shall be critics," Mr. Saturn replied. "Great Fox ready to go? These kids need to start first thing tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I remember!" said Fox. "Slippy and Peppy are greasin' the gears while we speak. I'm thinkin' that'll take us through Arwing training, then I'll need to find a good ground site for the rest."

"Wait a minute!" Brian exclaimed. "Do you mean you already talked with Mister Saturn about us?"

"Sure, this morning," said Fox.

"I got everything arranged during my sauna," said Mr. Saturn. "Didn't he tell you?"

"Yeah, how was the train ride, Mister Saturn?" asked Erin.

"No, no, shut up for a minute," said Brian. He was looking at Fox with his hands on his hips, about as frightening as Brian could manage (which wasn't very). "You mean to tell me that you already agreed to train us this morning? We've spent I don't know how many coins on food and booze --"

"That's nine hundred fifty-four, dear, did you want to pay it off now?" said Ayumi, who had stopped at the table to take up the empty glasses and rub against Tennyson.

"Nine hundred coins!" Brian shouted.

"More than that," said Tennyson. "Remember you paid some before she started running the tab." He was stroking Ayumi under her ears.

"Son, look at it as a quick course in practical diplomacy, and cheap at the price," said Fox. "Or ask Clara for a refund, if you prefer. Up to you."

"Clara?" said Brian, puzzled. Tennyson glanced at her; Clara stared at the stage and refused to meet his eye.

Mr. Saturn stepped in. "Children, children, you forget we're still amply equipped for any occasion." A familiar little square of plastic floated from his pocket over to Ayumi. "Miyazaki Ayumi-chan, would you be so kind as to record the charge against this account?" The waitress scanned the card through a little box dangling from her belt, nuzzled Tennyson again, and bounced back up to finish clearing the tables. "My friends, we'd best make our way to the Great Fox before the punk rockers regroup; it's such a pain sneaking out under fire."

Fox nodded. "Slippy should be bringing her into the plaza in about 5 minutes." He emptied the last of his creamy refreshment and stood. "Crystal, honey, you gonna' come? Slippy and Peppy will get these kids rolling, I don't really have any need to get up early tomorrow. You can share the suite again."

"I certainly will come, to keep an eye on you!" Crystal said. "And I'll stay in two-sixty if you please. You can snore by your lonesome, dear." But she allowed Fox to take her arm.

Cane whipped out his ray gun and ostentatiously led the way towards the front door; memory of Nicholas' beam sword was still fresh enough for the crowd to make way for the children. At a hint from Mr. Saturn, Brian tipped the doorwardens twenty coins each as they made their way out. With Fox and Crystal leading the kids quickly arrived back almost where they had started two hours before. Looking up, they could see a sizable craft descending slowly through the skyscrapers, stopping repeatedly to wait for the flying traffic to clear before dropping to the next level.

Suddenly there was a loud pop! from behind them. Nicholas tried to spin around and fell down: he was still feeling the effects of the alcoholic smoothy. Clara picked her Superscope up, then remembered that she had used up its charge. She turned to see Donkey Kong sticking his head out of the DeLorean, looking puzzled and frustrated. Relieved, she walked over to talk with him.

"I thought you were going backwards," she said. "This is two hours later."

"It is? What is going on here?" The gorilla scratched his head with his foot. "I read the manual twice this time. I'm sure I got everything set right."

"Maybe you should let Brian help," Clara suggested. "He's really good with that kind of thing. Reading manuals, I mean." Brian stuck his head in the passenger window; DK handed him a small leather-bound book. Soon Brian and DK were immersed in discussion over the DeLorean control panel, while Fox simultaneously scanned the crowd and nibbled Crystal's ears.

"Oh, okay, I got it," said Brian finally. "It's this little thing here."

"What, that? A dash?" said DK.

"No, no, it's a minus sign. It means this number is negative."

"Is what-a-tive?"

"It's less than zero. Minus. You have to put in a negative number to go backwards in time."

"I don't get it," said DK. "Numbers count things. How can there be numbers less than zero? How can you count things that aren't there?"

"Trust me," said Brian. "It's really simple. Just stick this little minus sign -- it's right here on the keyboard -- put that in before the delta time setting."

"Okay, okay, right, I got it, I can handle this," said DK, waving Brian out of the car. The gorilla punched numbers in as he hurriedly gunned the engine. "I gotta get back, or I'm gonna be in real trouble! Thanks, Brian! Thanks, Clara! See ya!"

"Oh, geeze, I promised DK tickets to Cymballine's," said Clara. "Can we go back to get something for him?" she said to Fox. "Do we have time?"

"But you can just change the delta number!" shouted Brian to DK. "You got all the time in the--" he cried as the silver sportscar leapt back into the air and streaked away -- "world," he finished quietly.

Just then a pack of banner-bearing canines rushed into view from a stairway and headed straight towards the kids. "Well, we don't," said Fox. The Great Fox had settled onto a clear grassy spot. "Looks like they're onto you, Saturn ol' buddy," said the smaller, animate and now animated Fox. "I told you not to use augmented fourths, did you listen?" He turned to the kids as blaster bolts whistled by his head. "Training starts now, and your first order is to get your butts onto that ship before I kick them! Move it, move it, move it!"

Chapter 14: Thoughts in Flight

It was a really strange experience to be continually running uphill and returning to the same place. The kids were jogging within a huge wheel-like cylinder that spun, creating a sort of artificial gravity that definitely left something to be desired relative to the real thing. Slippy, a big happy toad-like creature, was leading the little troupe; he would sing a line and the kids would repeat it as they ran:

I don't know but I've been told
I don't know but I've been told!
Streets of Ark are paved with gold
Streets of Ark are paved with gold!
If I don't suck up that gut
If I don't suck up that gut
Peppy's gonna' kick my butt
Peppy's gonna kick my butt!

Clara was in the lead, pacing the toad with a fluid, effortless stroke. Brian puffed behind her, with Erin and Tennyson sweating to keep up. Nicholas and Cane were vying for last place and trying to prevent Slippy from lapping them. The workout seemed to be lasting much longer than their energy level on no breakfast. They welcomed any interruption at all, and this one was an absurdly calm voice, seemingly speaking from everywhere: "Dave, the time requirement for morning calisthenics has been completed. You may stop now."

"Dave's not here! How many times do I have to tell you?" Slippy pulled a very long wrench from his belt and whacked a blinking plastic box on the wall as he ran by.

"Dave. What are you doing, Dave? My mind is going. I can feel it, Dave. I can feel it."

"Your mind went last Tuesday! Next time don't let it come back! Stupidest dang computer I ever met. Too consarned idiotic to put on navigation; we stuck him in here where he can't do too much damage. Okay, we can stop," and he did. Cane, who was not paying attention, plowed into Nicholas, who had been listening most attentively for anything with the word "stop" in it. Clara drew deep slow breaths while the others panted and coughed.

"Daisy, daisy, give me your answer, do," sang the computer. Slippy walked over to the box and yanked a cable out of a socket in the wall. "I'm half crazy all for the love of you," it continued, more and more slowly.

"Night, night, computer," said Tennyson.

"Gooooood nnniiigghhhhtttt....." it slurred to a stop.

"Well, that's that," said Slippy. "Okay, lard butts -- and Clara, too -- breakfast time!" said Slippy. "Up the ladder and out the center tube, first one there gets the first eats. Oh, one more thing: I'll just give this little knob a twist here --" as he did so. The kids felt a sudden sideways jerk as a whining noise began to permeate the room. "That's gonna' make the centrifuge speed ramp up at 2 rpm per minute. The longer you take climbing the heavier a job it's going to be. Let's go, people! I'm behind the slowest with a ray gun aimed at your butt!" He snapped off a shot at Erin, who was actually third onto the ladder but thereby momentarily at the bottom.

"Trial and privation could not break his spirit," said Erin. "This unjust and unwarranted punishment, when clearly he was not the last climber, was just another obstacle on the road to vindication, for Alfred Dreyfuss knew with perfect certainty that he was innocent, condemned by a corrupt and vindictive administration to the horror of Devil's Station for a crime he had not committed."

"Stop calling this Devil's Station!" said Nicholas as he mounted the ladder below Erin. "We asked these guys to help us out. What kind of attitude is that?"

"The Trusties, of course, had been brainwashed by the vicious prison staff, to the point where they truly believed they suffered these horrors of their own free will," Erin replied (sort of). "Dreyfuss knew it was pointless to explain the true nature of the situation to them; let them find refuge in their twisted fantasy world in which the guards were good and prisoners volunteers. Dreyfuss could face the truth straight on; he was ready to endure what had to be endured, trusting to Providence, knowing that some day Justice would triumph over Evil."

"I think he's finally cracked," said Tennyson, jumping on next. "Too many ray gun blasts to the rear." He was beginning to feel much heavier than usual. "I'm putting on weight and I haven't even eaten yet. Move it up there, people!"

"Dreyfuss had had nothing to eat all that day, and his hands shook with hunger and fatigue," said Erin. "The ordeal seemed endless. Yet, as he climbed, a curious lightness came over him, as if his soul was ascending past his too-solid flesh."

"You get lighter as you go up, Erin!" said Nicholas. "Centrifugal force. We saw that on Bill Nye the Science Guy last month."

"Don't eat all the ice cream cake before I get there!" said Cane to Clara, who was already maneuvering into the zero-G entrance to the center tube.

"Ice cream cake at training breakfast?" wondered Brian aloud. "And I thought Erin was off the deep end."

At the end of the zero-gravity exit tube you had to leap out into the main area of the ship, where the artificial gravity field took effect. Cane practically landed on Crystal, who was finishing up a large dish of ice cream cake. The galley was a modest-sized room with one long table down the middle. There was no kitchen: the food was all prefabricated and reheated, with everything packaged in identical plastic boxes labeled in an informative but dull fashion across the top. In one corner Slippy was flinging some quite repulsive large-eyed dead insects in the air and snagging them with his extendable tongue. "Ice cream cake for breakfast and dead flies flying," said Tennyson as he grabbed himself a tray of reconstituted pancakes. "Almost like home, eh?"

"You got it," said Cane. "This is way better than home. I can eat all I want and skip all the broccoli dishes." He was on his second tray of something vaguely similar to scrambled eggs. "Of course, the food here is terrible," he added, spooning the last bit out of the tray, "and the portions are way too small too, hand me that tray over there, Brian, the blue one, it's probably apple pie."

"Nope, oatmeal with peanut butter," said Brian, reading the label.

"Ah, that sounds good, pass it over," Cane replied.

"Hey, look at this," said Nicholas, spooning from a tray of applesauce-like slop as he stood by a display screen. "Fox made a training schedule for us."

"EXCUSE me," interrupted Crystal. "Fox probably isn't even awake yet, not that he's more organized awake than asleep."

"Yep," said Slippy between flies. "Crystal's the project manager type around here. Damn good one, too." He speared another insect. "Ummm, cinnamon!"

"Oh, sorry, ma'am," said Nicholas. "Anyway it looks like a really thorough schedule. A lot of stuff."

"Well, you've got a lot to learn in a very short time, young man." Crystal tossed her plate in the chute marked RECYCLING: DIRECT TO STAR WOLF and stood. "Speaking of short times, I have a deadline to meet on my Stringed Instruments as Assault Weapons article. I'll see you youngsters at lunch." She made her way expertly into the zero-G tube and disappeared.

While Nicholas was being upbraided, Clara and Brian came over to take a look. The schedule went like this:

DAY 1

6:30 conditioning

7:15 breakfast

8:00 PILOTS: flight training I
 GUNNERS: armaments I
 10:30 break
 10:45 FT I / AR I continued
 11:45 lunch
 12:30 Simulator practice
 2:00 break
 2:15 Combat weapons and tactics I
 3:45 Team competition
 4:30 losers punishment
 winners break
 5:30 cleanup
 6:00 dinner
 7:00 COMMAND TEAM: strategy
 ASSAULT TEAM: tactics
 8:30 day 1 debrief
 9:00 lights out
 and so on through day 7.

“Wow,” said Brian. “This is like three school days in one day!”

“You’re a wimp,” said Clara. “My track and field days are longer than that.” The brisk morning exercise had invigorated rather than exhausted her. Her interest had already been piqued; who was on the command team? would she be a pilot or a gunner? She felt a sort of keen anticipation for the day’s endeavors that school days did not engender.

Nicholas’ pride had taken a beating the previous day, and he was in no mood to be accommodating. “We’ll just see who’s tired tonight. I’m going to sign up for pilot.”

“You don’t sign up, you get assigned!” said Cane between mouthfulls of cake.

“How do you know?” said Tennyson. “You haven’t even looked at the schedule, you’re just eating.”

“At mealtimes, Dreyfuss could almost forget his captivity,” recited Erin. “He fantasized that the inedible slop was his mother’s blintzes with raspberries and cream.”

“That is blintzes, it says so on the box,” said Tennyson. “Whatever a blintz is.”

Erin laughed condescendingly. “The elementary ruses of the guards, labeling this kitchen refuse as if it were cuisine, were sufficient to deceive his simple-minded fellow prisoners. Venal though it was, appreciation of his intellectual superiority to his fellow travellers provided support to his spirit, and Dreyfuss knew he would need every resource to survive his captivity with his soul intact.”

“You know, I think I liked you better with Mister Saturn around,” said Tennyson. “Maybe he was a good influence after all. Where is he, anyway?”

Suddenly a door at the other end of the room hissed open and Fox bustled in, followed by a big cuddly bunny rabbit in a jumpsuit carrying a computer tablet. “Okay, okay, you’ve had enough stuffing your faces, let’s get to work. Pilot team with me, gunners with Peppy, move it!”

The kids looked at him with blank faces. “Didn’t Crystal give you your assignments?” said Fox. The kids shook their heads, except for Cane who continued his foray into foods that rhyme with ‘bakes’. Fox’s big ears twisted as if listening to the sky as he grabbed the tablet out of Peppy’s hands and read from a list on the screen: “Pilot crew Nicholas, Tennyson, Brian, with me, Clara, Cane, Erin to gunnery!”

“Is that the same as the command and assault teams?” asked Brian.

“Nope, command team is Nicholas, Clara, Brian--that is, you. You’ll see why, be patient, but then again that’s what I am not! We’ve got a space station to put in peril, let’s move those larded behinds, my overambitious would-be juvenile delinquents!” He led the way through another door whose existence had not been apparent until it opened. Nicholas and Tennyson glanced at each other and

jumped to their feet, leaving their half-eaten breakfast on the table. Brian took an extra two counts to dump the trays down the recycling chute and followed at a trot.

Nicholas had been expecting some sort of really dull lecture with incomprehensible drawings of wing cross-sections and flow vortexes, but the pilot group found themselves inside a curious bare room with no desks, boards, or books. The kids looked around, puzzled. Instead of explaining, Fox said “Okay, just stay there,” and disappeared through a small port which closed seamlessly behind him. Nicholas turned to Tennyson to ask what was going on when Fox’s voice came out of nowhere apparent:

“This is the realizer room. Learning by doing is best, so here we go.” Nicholas heard a roaring in his ears and felt like someone was grabbing him from both sides: he could move his toes and fingers but not his arms or legs. The room seemed much bigger than before. He tried to look around to see what was going on and realized that his head was stuck too. He twisted his view as far as he could to his right and saw that Tennyson had disappeared; in his place was a spiffy race-striped airplane with a Flying Tiger smile and blinking eyes. Ooops, he realized, that’s what I must look like too.

“Right, let’s do some flying,” said Fox’s disembodied voice. “To fly, an airplane needs lift.” Nicholas felt himself floating gently upwards away from the floor. “You need lift in order to conquer gravity!” Suddenly Nicholas plummeted to the floor and landed with a crack. It felt like someone had whacked him in the stomach. “In flight, lift and gravity need to be in balance,” and he felt himself once again rising, but this time just a bit off the ground, “unless of course you’re climbing,” and Nicholas felt himself pulled upwards, “or descending,” and he headed back down towards the floor, pulling up in the nick of time.

“To get anywhere,” Fox continued, “you need thrust!” Nicholas flew forward until he banged into the wall in front of him. It felt like his nose was broken. “Thrust is required to overcome drag,” and the kid-plane felt himself pulled back away from the wall, falling backwards until bang! his feet -- well, really his tail but that’s the way it felt -- whacked into the opposite wall. “When all four forces are in equilibrium -- that means in balance, you bird-brains -- and only then, the airplane can fly on a stable heading.”

Nicholas had to admit that this was one heck of a way to learn something new. Fox taught them how to wiggle their toes -- elevators -- to adjust pitch, and how to use their fingers (ailerons) to control bank angle. They felt the difference between a skidding turn and a properly coordinated turn (in which the rudder and ailerons worked together) as the difference between a nauseating stomach-twisting distortion and a comfortable heaviness in the chest. Every lesson was carried home in a literally visceral fashion. When he pulled up too hard on landing and porpoised into a stall the resulting crash hurt like a sock in the mouth. A properly executed wingover felt like he’d taken the playground swing over the top.

It was exhilarating and exhausting at the same time; the hour-and-a-half training period went by like morning recess. A bell went off and the simulated images on the walls disappeared. Another roaring sound and the three kids were standing again in the empty room, clothes wrinkled, soaked and sweating. Fox reappeared and patted them on the behind with his computer tablet. “Good job, runts, you’ve earned your break. Fifteen minutes and it’s back to work, no slackers! Bathroom across the hall, drinks in the galley, be back on time or you get turned into a hot air balloon and popped!”

Clara and Fox were sipping from tall glasses of cool Aquastar water, looking through the picture window (or display screen, Clara wasn’t sure) in the crew lounge at the stars. She, Erin, and Cane had handily defeated Nicholas, Brian and Tennyson in the team marksmanship competition, and now they had a precious hour of free time while the losers cleaned and stowed the target rifles.

“This sounds like one of those silly ghost stories the kids tell where everyone asks what happened next, and they say ‘I died!’,” said Clara. “I think you’re pulling my leg.”

Fox chuckled. “It was too damnably close, I’ll agree with that. If I hadn’t hidden a bomblet behind the stairs I would have been toast. Even at that I barely escaped intact; her armor is so tough that the explosion didn’t even dent it -- just knocked her off her feet and raised enough dust to cover my exit.”

“Why didn’t you just work together and split the bounty?”

"With Aran? Fat chance. I figured I could take out Satauros before she got there and I told everyone so -- after that I couldn't exactly back out. Seems to me you've already seen the trouble I get myself into through forgetting to engage my brain before putting my mouth in gear. I certainly learned my lesson; I'll never tangle with Samus again if I can help it."

"Why did you do it, anyway? Just for the money?"

"Money certainly helps, but I think it's the challenge that matters." He looked askance at Clara. "Don't tell Crystal, okay? She relies on me being purely mercenary and unwilling to actually risk my skin. She'd worry too much."

"What do you really think?" asked Clara. "I mean, about us, about Ark. Why are you helping? What's in it for you?"

"Well, like I said, the money certainly helps. Having enough stashed away makes life more -- pleasant, you'll realize that when you're older. It lets you get on with what you're interested in without being distracted." The fox lapped up the last of his water. "But bucks are really just the enabler. I'm afraid, Clara. I'm afraid of what we'll lose if we take control of our future. I like anarchy. I like uncertainty. If any of us had the power to ensure our future you can be sure that soon there wouldn't be any future, just the past extended endlessly."

Clara was in much deeper waters than she had been prepared for. "That -- sounds like something Mr. Saturn said at dinner. Back with Princess Zelda."

Fox laughed. "He would have. Saturn is so devious he ends up being honest despite himself. He can tell you 'good morning' with seven different simultaneous meanings and forget to tie his shoes."

"So you knew him before this? I can't say I ever liked him much but he does seem to know his way around."

"I would say so. There's not much he doesn't have a finger in, even though he pretends to be nothing more than a bum. When Mr. Saturn says jump, I ask how high. He always makes it worth my while, too. And of course things happen to people stupid enough to cross him -- not that he would ever admit to having anything to do with that."

"Are you sure we're talking about the same creature? I mean, he's certainly obnoxious and self-centered and irresponsible and all that stuff, but he's harmless."

That remark drew another long guffaw. "Maybe to you he is. Remember you're on his side, or he's on yours, or at least so it seems for the moment. Besides, there aren't that many folks in the game worlds who would tangle with you, Clara -- and there'll be a lot fewer once I get finished with you."

"What does that mean?"

"I mean you're a warrior born and bred. I see it in everything you do. If I had six months to train you instead of three weeks, the Metroid bounty hunters would be asking you for permission before they took a job. Your dad must be one hard sonufagun."

Clara was warmed by the praise and taken aback all at once. "He's not at all! I mean, he's never hit me even once. He never even yells at me."

"That's not what I meant. You know it. Never forgives, never forgets, right? I see him in you." Fox paused. "None of my business but of course I have a big nose and I poke it in everywhere. You shouldn't be too quick to write off the poet kid. A general must be both the harshest and the most humane -- you need a heart, and he's got one. Of course he's gonna' have affections for other foxes -- I mean, girls -- and some will fall for him too, that's his nature. Loyalty can't be bought, it has to be inspired -- that's something you need to learn from him. And he is gonna be one helluva pilot."

Clara was absorbed in working out how to respond to Fox's unanticipated importunement when she noticed something out of whack in the corner of the window. "Hey, Fox, that star is moving. Or at least I think it is. It's not where it was a moment ago."

Fox opened a panel below the window and withdrew a tiny object like a pen; he pointed it at the offending dot of light. A little colored box grew around it, and within a second several numbers and an arrow surrounded the box. "I told you you were good," said Fox. He nudged the communicator panel on the wall next to the port. "Hey, Crystal, what you doin' up there, watching TV? The Wolf is at the door and you're snoring!"

Crystal's face appeared in the panel. She looked sanguine enough. "About time you noticed. The meeting was scheduled at 0435 sharp. Since you were too busy flirting with your student to attend to your duties I completed the arrangements as per the task list and talked him down a hundred coins while I was at it." She flipped a switch and turned to another conversation with someone out of sight. "That's fine, then, we have the northeast quadrant reserved from 0900 to 1300 hours, you'll have one hour for setup, contest begins at 1000 hours and ends at 1230 hours, 30 minutes for cleanup. Payment to follow within three days on satisfactory completion by wire transfer. Have a rotten week, Wolfie old boy. Out." She turned back. "He says you're fat and scant of breath. I told him that he's right and I should know! He'll be there. He certainly wouldn't miss a chance to humiliate your students." A smile bared her canine teeth: "And how are doing on your first day, Clara, dear? I know it's a demanding schedule." The point of light grew suddenly brighter and began to move more rapidly against the field of stars, growing fainter as it did.

"Oh, I'm doing very well, thank you, Ms. Crystal," Clara replied. "It's been very interesting. Is it okay if I ask what that conversation you were having was about, or is that private?"

"Certainly not to you. We've arranged for you kids to face Wolfie O'Donnell and a few of his would-be toughs in a bit of a space battle when you've had a few more days to sharpen up. Very good test for you, good payday for them. A suggestion from my sweetie -- he's really quite clever, he's just too lazy to follow through."

"Ouch," said Fox. "Don't you ever get tired of nipping chunks of flesh off of me?"

"Oooh, that sounds exciting," replied Crystal. "But I haven't got time for anything more, there's a strategy presentation to finish and I notice you haven't done a paragraph yet. It'll have to wait, darling. Ciao." The panel went blank.

Just as Clara was prepared to renew her inquisition into Fox's motives and history, Nicholas and Brian came in through the rear entry door. "Wow, that was a lot of work," said Nicholas. They had spend the last hour stripping all the blast rifles to their component parts and reassembled them, checking alignment and memory consistency at each step of the process. "I liked it better when you just fire off the edge of the screen to recharge your gun. Where'd you get that water, Clara? Can we have some?"

"I thought it was pretty interesting," said Brian. "You sure learn about how a gun works when you put it all together again. But water sounds like a good idea." Peppy and the other kids followed a minute later; by the time everyone had finished getting their complaints out and refreshments in, Fox had managed to sneak out unseen.

"Just when things were getting interesting he's off to something else," said Clara to herself.

"He's like that," said Crystal, who had just entered the break room. "Better get used to it, honey."

"So we're going to blow our own ships up?" said Cane incredulously, bits of partly-chewed snackbar spewing out onto the table. "I knew I should've stayed at the mansion! That's the dumbest idea I've heard since Tennyson talked us into going to Fourside!" The kids were enjoying a final late-night snack before lights-out, exchanging notes on their respective team briefings.

"Wait a minute, you're the one who liked Fourside!" said Brian. "I thought you wanted to go back to watch TV. Besides, nobody made you leave the mansion, you did that on your own."

"You just don't get it, do you?" said Clara, contemptuously. "Deception is the essence of warfare," she continued (reciting verbatim the beginning of the briefing she, Nicholas and Brian had received from Crystal). "We need to ensure that our opponent misconstrues our identity, our goals, and our results."

"Misconwhat?" said Cane. "You're just trying to use big words to frighten me, like Emily Lu in reading lab. Well I beat her in dodgeball and I can beat you, too, and it isn't gonna' work! It's a stupid idea!"

"The grandiose escape plans and consequent petty arguments that consumed his fellow prisoners were an endless source of both pathos and humor," said Erin. "Their endless capacity for belief was exceeded only by their unlimited ability to forget past failures." Everyone ignored him.

"Actually, I'm a little confused, too," said Tennyson. "Just why would we plan to blow up our ships? Who exactly are we deceiving about what?"

"Really there are two reasons," said Nicholas, his face a mask of concentration as he tried to not just recall Crystal's remarks but ensure that he understood them. "One reason is to try to make the guards at Ark think that they've successfully repelled our attack and don't have to worry about us. If we just landed our ships on the surface, even if they didn't catch us right away they'd know someone was there, and they'd come looking for us."

"Okay, that sort of makes sense," replied Tennyson. "What's the second reason?"

"So we can't turn back," interrupted Brian. "If we kept our ships we'd always be tempted to retreat in them and try again every time we ran into a problem. This way we have no choice but to go forward. It's like putting your army with its back to a river, that's what Crystal said."

"What river?" said Cane. "Is there a river on Ark? I didn't bring my mud shoes! Rivers are too cold! And I did not either eat my orange, it was broken when I got it."

"Geeze, Cane, are you still complaining about that field trip?" said Clara, referring to their expedition to the San Lorenzo river the previous month. The class had split up into teams and dropped oranges into the water in an attempt to measure the speed of the current, except for Cane, who had tried to consume his test instrument.

"No, no, it's a metaphor," said Brian. "It's not a real river."

Erin meandered: "'I remember a river', thought Dreyfuss to himself, 'bright in the sunlight, the cool water chilling my feet'. There was no cool pure water at the prison, nor would there ever be." Clara wasted a glare at him, though to no effect.

"Brian is right," said Nicholas. "Crystal said that the biggest danger of all is being unsure, especially that the commander hasn't made up his mind."

"No, that wasn't it," said Clara. "She said that the ultimate object of every battle is to break the nerve of the enemy commander."

"That's what I said," said Nicholas. "Same thing, anyway."

"So we have to blow up our own ships so you won't turn chicken?" said Cane.

"That's the first time you agreed that Nicholas was in command," said Tennyson. "About time, too." Clara looked displeased and was about to complain, but then remembered her conversation with Fox. Nicholas spared Tennyson a grateful glance. He hadn't realized how gratifying loyalty was until he experienced it.

"Fox doesn't think we have any chance of getting in through the bottom of the station, too many guns and robot guards," said Nicholas. "The whole attack there is just a fake, like Brian said. The top part of the station is all abandoned so we should be able to find a manual entry port, but then we have to get through the old agricultural areas. Nobody is guarding that area because it was all sealed off years ago, but if the Harvest Moon people are living there they would know how to get around."

"Wait a minute?" said Tennyson. "You mean we're depending on help from people we don't know, and we don't even know for sure if they can help us, even assuming they will?"

"Come on," said Nicholas, "I'll bet they know everything about the station."

"Would you bet your life on it?" said Clara. "That's what we're doing. Tennyson is right; if our plan is going to depend on their help getting through the abandoned parts, we need to get in contact with them somehow and make sure it's going to work."

"You're right," said Brian. "We should have asked Crystal about that."

"Even if escape were possible," sighed Erin, "the prisoners, mired in unending petty rivalries and disputes over trivialities, would be unable to take advantage of the opportunity."

"Erin, give it a rest!" said Clara. "Ever since Mr. Saturn took off again, you do nothing but gripe and pretend that it's one of your stupid fantasies. If you're so lonely go ask Fox where he went!"

"You're right, I will," said Erin, brightening. "Better yet, I'll call him. He forgot to take back his gear bag so I still have his phone."

"How is he going to answer if you've got his phone?" asked Tennyson.

"Oh," said Erin, crestfallen. "Yeah. Well, I'll go ask Fox anyway."

He started towards the galley door, but hadn't taken more than a step before the portal hissed open, and Fox charged in. "Okay, enough yakking, my diminutive destroyers! Into the sack, lights out! I don't want to hear a peep from you until 9:00 tomorrow!"

"But tomorrow's schedule starts at 6:30," said Brian.

"Yeah but I ain't gonna be up that early, that's Slippy's problem," replied Fox. "Alright, no back talk, move your little butts before I blast 'em! Now, now, now!"

It was day 3. The pilot training group was meeting, this time in the conference room with the holographic projector. The intense pace was beginning to wear on Nicholas and Brian, but Tennyson was unaffected, at least during flying sessions.

Fox rapped on the table to call the meeting to order. "Okay, after this morning you ought to be pretty familiar with the Arwing control configurations, we're not gonna go over that again, since we'll do some flying in the full simulator this evening. I'll bet all of you have played some of the space battle simulator games -- Rogue Squadron, maybe even Starfox 64, right?" The boys nodded. "Well, forget everything you saw! Those games are nothing but a load of garbage when it comes to how you fly and fight in a vacuum!" This remark was sufficient to regain full attention from Brian and Nicholas. "They are cooked to make flying in space look like flying in air. I bitched and moaned for years, but nobody was ever willing to do it right. Knowing the right way to fly is the key to kicking butt on all the incompetent space pilots out there sucking at the teat of convention. So listen up!" Fox pressed a key and a little diagram appeared in the holo display: a boy swinging a weight held by a string around in a circle. "To make an object turn you need a force directed towards the center of the turn. Here that force is provided by the string pulling inward. A string can only exert a force along its length, right? The string keeps turning as the weight spins: the force has to turn constantly so that it is always directed towards the center of the circle. Okay, let's see if you featherbrains have learned anything: we've been drilling on flying in the atmosphere. Does an Arwing have a string attached to it?" Tennyson raised his hand. Fox laughed. "This is the twenty-seventh time I've said it: if you got something to say, spit it out! Don't wait for me to give you permission."

"The turning force comes from the wings," said Tennyson.

"Right you are! Reward to the student in the worn smelly tee shirt -- oops, you're all like that, the worn smelly blue NASA tee shirt." Fox tossed a dried dead rat at Tennyson. Tennyson tried to pretend to be pleased. Fox laughed, took the rat back, and ate it in one gulp. "Ah, you punks got no taste for the finer things in life. Tennyson is right! When you bank an Arwing or any airplane in the air, the lift that the wings are providing is tilted; part of it pulls you to one side, acting just like that string to turn the airplane." A diagram of an airplane floated above the table, with little arrows showing the forces acting on it. As Fox twisted a joystick the plane tilted; a blue arrow showed the part of the lift that was directed inwards. "That means we're ready for exercise number two: what happens to lift from the wings when you get into space?"

"There's no air in space," said Brian, "so -- there's no lift?"

"Give that boy a dead rat!" said Fox, whipping another of the dubious rewards from the drawer. "Aaah, never mind, I'll have one in your honor (chomp), ah, rattus tanezumi, nutty aroma with round fruitiness and just a hint of raspberries." BURP. "There is no lift in space! So it don't do diddly squat to bank a spaceship. Furthermore, there's no drag in space, so it doesn't matter if you're flying forwards, backwards, sideways or upside down!" Fox typed a bit, and the little model airplane was now a spaceship. "So how do you turn in space?"

"You need a force to be like the string," said Nicholas.

"We're plum out of rats, son, I'll put it on your tab," said Fox. "We need a force directed towards the center of the turn, just like always. To get a force on the ship you can use either your main engines or your attitude thrusters. Which one is better for sharp turns?"

"The main engines are -- um -- maybe thirty times more powerful?" said Tennyson.

"Well, more or less. Each individual thruster has only about one percent of the thrust of the main engines, but there are a lot of them. If you turned them on cleverly you could get about a tenth of the main engine thrust driving a turn. That means that using the main engines will allow you to turn ten times sharper than some turkey who's trying to fly a spaceship like it was an airplane. To execute a minimum-radius turn in space, you orient the ship pointing towards the center of the turn and kick your main engines on full." Fox typed and the little ship demonstrated. The engines glowed, and a blue arrow stuck out of the nose, as the ship turned about a glowing red dot in space. "During the turn you are flying sideways. If you're in a dogfight you have to be aware of problems and opportunities for your gunner attacking your opponent as well as yourself. It is often desirable to make your enemy the center of your turn: that makes it possible to point your nose right at the scum during the whole maneuver, so your gunner can be firing the whole time. If you have an axial velocity component, you'll be executing a helical maneuver -- like the threads of a screw -- which he will have one heckuva time dealing with if he's dumb enough to be pointing in the direction he is flying in." The spaceship traced out a complex path across the desk, leaving a faint red screw-thread line floating in the air. Tennyson nodded and tapped himself on the head; Nicholas and Brian looked puzzled.

Fox continued. "Now if you do the math you find out that the turning radius goes as the square of the velocity you enter the turn with -- that means if you want to turn sharp you can't be going too fast going in."

"Are we going to have to calculate all this stuff in our heads?" asked Nicholas, worried. "We just learned about square roots and stuff this year."

"No, no, it's not that bad. The computer will plot out your projected course line in real time as you fly," and as he said this a little gridded display, like that on the Arwing control panel, popped up with a bright red curve passing thru it, and a little blue image showing the ship traveling along the curve, "but you need to understand what's going on. Computer's don't think for you! You need to have an intuitive grasp of how to maneuver in zero G if you want to blow little holes in Wolfie's ships a couple days from now. By the time I finish with you you're not just going to fly circles around those scum, but ellipsoids, helices, and hyperbolae."

"I thought that means 'to exaggerate'," said Brian.

"Yep, you're right, and it's no hyperbole to say that when you learn to lock him on the axis of your helix, ol' Wolfie is gonna' be one screwed-up dogfighter!"

Clara tweaked the transparency control on her visor and carefully stuck her head out from behind the rock again. Nicholas and Brian crouched behind her, concealed behind a pile of boulders. Their space suits, save the visors, were almost completed coated with sticky black dust. Nicholas had laughed when Clara suggested it -- "just like The 101 Dalmatians!" -- but it worked very well. They could barely see Clara just in front of them.

They were pitted against the other three kids in a stalking contest. The kids were armed with ray guns, projectile launchers, and ghost bombs. Crystal had landed the two teams on different parts of the asteroid surface, and then pulled back: the Great Fox was a barely visible dot far above them. A beacon was hidden in one of the crags near the "north pole" of the irregular former comet nucleus. The first team to reach the beacon and trigger it would get the rest of the afternoon off; losers would have to clean all the spacesuits.

Clara retreated and the three put their helmets together. This enabled sound to be conducted directly from one to another, obviating the need to use the radio and thus possibly be overheard. "It's them, all right. Or at least Tennyson is there. How the heck did they get here so fast?"

"Maybe they knew where to go," replied Brian. "We spent a lot of time wandering around before you spotted the beacon flag."

"How? Oh, never mind. Tennyson is moving really slowly -- he's not that good in the low-G drills. I could get to the beacon first if I sprinted."

"I don't like it," said Nicholas. "You said Tennyson's suit is clean and he's moving in plain sight, and we don't see Cane or Erin. It just isn't like Tennyson to desert his friends. I think it's a trap. They're

trying to smoke us out." The beacon was surrounded by an anomalously flat area about 100 meters in diameter; anyone going for the beacon would be completely exposed for the last few seconds, an easy target for a concealed marksman.

"Come on, Cane couldn't hit the broad side of a barn," said Clara. "He certainly won't hit me. And Erin is probably sitting in a gully making up a story about a popcorn salesman who grows up to rule the world. We've got this in the bag, let's go for it."

"If Tennyson is moving so slowly," said Brian, "they must have known where to go in order to get here first. That means they could have had a lot of time to find good hiding places."

"Two can play at this game," said Nicholas. "Clara, Brian and I will set up the projectile launcher behind that little rise. That way we should be able to cover all the spots where someone could hide. Then you can just sprint towards the beacon; if there is someone in hiding waiting for you, we'll take him out with the launcher and get the beacon. Of course you might get hit with some ray gun bolts -- that's okay?"

"I'm not afraid of a little sting -- besides there's no one there, you guys are too cautious."

"Okay, we'll set up and give you the signal when we're ready." Nicholas and Brian knelt on the rough ground and assembled the pieces that made up the frame of the launcher. The projectile launcher fired bomblets that would stun anyone within twenty or thirty meters of the point of impact. Each kid carried one bomb. Clara handed hers to the boys; Nicholas loaded one in the slot and placed the other two on the ground nearby. Brian positioned himself at the aiming scope and Nicholas stuck his head out just past the edge of the rock to direct Brian. Then he waved to Clara.

She confidently slid out past the outcropping and headed straight for the beacon, about two hundred meters away. Care was needed in moving on the asteroid; gravity was so small that an incautiously firm step could launch a traveler into a long uncontrollable parabolic arc. The suits had no jets, so once launched the traveler could only wait patiently for the slow return to the surface. The proper technique was a sort of sliding step used to propel and direct but not to lift; Clara had mastered the trick neatly and traveled like a gazelle to Tennyson's turtle.

The motion must have attracted Tennyson's gaze, as there was no sound in the airless world. Nicholas could see him turn his helmet, though no expression was visible behind the half-silvered surface. Rather than either trying to accelerate his pace or draw his ray gun, Tennyson simply flattened himself to the ground. Clara paid no heed and proceeded straight on, but Nicholas' suspicions were aroused. He scanned the surroundings fruitlessly until his eyes were abruptly drawn to an incautious movement. He pointed and Brian quickly shifted the scope-- the magnified view revealed Cane's blackened helmet and arm reaching around a jumbled wall of stones.

It was time to forget about radio silence. "Clara, it's Cane, to your right, about 2 o'clock!" said Nicholas, as he helped Brian lift the end of the frame up so as to center Cane's image in the sight. As they did so, Clara jerked suddenly, and a loud "ow!" came over the communication speaker. The complaint was repeated several times as Clara's formerly smooth progress was completely interrupted -- Cane was apparently firing very accurately at each foot as Clara tried to maneuver. Clara quickly adapted to the novel circumstance by flattening herself behind a small rock and returning Cane's fire: she was able to force Cane to keep his head down but could not proceed towards the beacon.

Brian signaled down with his hand; Nicholas lowered the frame a hair. Brian's hand went flat, and he squeezed the firing trigger. The bomb flew forwards along the magnetic track, straight towards Cane's hiding place, where it struck on the boulder next to him and exploded. Unfortunately, in twisting the frame to point it Nicholas had dislodged the improvised anchorages for the feet: it flew backwards (and thus away from the asteroid surface), carrying the two boys with it.

"Clara, we're stuck!" Nicholas transmitted as they floated off into space. "You're going to have to do this on your own." There was no reply. It was awkward and difficult to turn in zero G, but by using the projectile launcher as an anchor, and tossing a couple of assembly wrenches in order to stop rotating, the boys managed to turn themselves back towards the beacon. Nicholas could see that Clara had been too close to Cane's hiding place when the bomb went off; she was probably still recovering her senses.

Meanwhile a sudden motion caught his eye: a darkened figure was rising out of a hole or cave on the far side of the clearing. "Hey, Brian, who's that? Erin?"

Brian, who was still positioned near the sight, managed to detach it from the frame so that he could point it without having to move the larger object. "Yep, that's Erin, all right, and he's got a clear path to the beacon. Clara, can you see him? Get him quick! It's our only chance." Nicholas could see Clara struggling to turn, her head probably still ringing from the explosion, but the trap had been well-thought-out: Erin was approaching the beacon from the opposite side, shielded by the beacon and the little rise it sat on, so that she couldn't get a clear shot.

The distant Erin figure gathered itself and executed a curious but effective horizontal leap, covering the last 20 meters or so. As he neared the beacon, a clicking sound followed by a burst of fake static came over their headphones. "That's one small step for Erin (brshshshs) one giant leap (ssshhrrrg) for Erin kind." Erin stood on top of the beacon and waved to Cane and Tennyson, who was pulling himself up now that the contest was over.

By this time Clara had recovered herself. "You guys set us up! How did you get here so fast? Lucky guess, I'll bet."

"Luck is preparation and opportunity," said Erin pompously. "We followed the stars, of course."

"The what?"

"The stars. The constellations. The bright star in the eye of the constellation Sonic the Hedgehog is almost exactly true north; I just found it and we followed it to the beacon."

"Oh, the book!" said Nicholas. "Geeze, Erin, how did you remember all that?"

"What book?" said Clara.

"The constellation book in the Observatory in Luigi's mansion," Nicholas replied. "When we were cleaning up. I mean, when I was cleaning up, Erin was wasting his time reading that book."

"I guess it wasn't such a waste," said Brian.

"Hey, what about me?" interjected Cane. "How about that deadeye shooting? I popped Clara right in the nose, both feet, and one in the behind just for fun. You better watch it when Cane's armed!"

"Yeah, that was pretty good," said Tennyson. Even through a spacesuit it was apparent that Clara was upset. "You have to admit you made it easy for him, Clara. You weren't doing any of the evasive stuff Slippery taught us."

"So what?!" interrupted Cane. "Emily Lu tried to dodge from me and look what it got her! No way was Clara getting to that beacon, I don't care if she danced the hula all the way!"

"Where did you learn about the hula?" asked Brian.

"Lilo and Stitch, I love that movie," said Cane.

"Hey, Brian, are we starting to come down now?" asked Nicholas.

"Hmm. Yep, definitely, you're right." Brian twisted over his shoulder to see. "Looks like we're going to land in that gravel pit behind the boulder."

"Should we come to get you?" asked Tennyson.

"Naw, Fox can probably pick us up there as well as anywhere," said Nicholas. "Well, I have to say you guys did sucker us pretty good. Who's idea was it?"

"Probably Cane's, really," said Tennyson. "Leastways he was the one who wanted to hide until you guys showed up and shoot somebody. Erin was the one who figured out what direction you would come from. I just volunteered to be the decoy."

"Oh, okay. Erin, did you set off the beacon yet?"

"Not yet -- I'm waiting for the right moment."

"When is that?" said Nicholas. Then he felt a gentle crunching as he and Brian plowed butts-first into the loosely-conglomerated pit: fine dust and small stones flew slowly up as they sunk into the soft gravelly junk until only their visors were showing.

Another burst of faked static filled the speaker. "Houston (ssshhrrrt) the Eagle has landed (brrrrssrrr)," said Erin as he pulled the red beacon lever down.

"So I guess Erin always wanted to be the fifty-third man on the moon. Geeze, Brian, I can't see a thing," said Nicholas. His visor was covered with black sticky dust.

"Wait a minute, there's a little wipe in the utility belt," said Brian.

"How do you find it when you can't see anything? Oh, never mind, there it is," Nicholas replied as he felt along his belt.

"Fifty-third? Of course not!" said Erin. "I wanted to be number two hundred seventy nine; that way there would be three fast-food outlets and a game arcade by the time I got there."

"I don't understand why you'd want to go to the moon to play video games," said Tennyson.

"Because he's a dufus," said Clara. She was still in a bad mood about having lost the contest and been wrong at the same time.

"All right, skip the game arcade," added Erin. "But you still have to eat."

"I thought astronauts carried all those freeze-dried things in plastic bags," said Cane. "You know, shrunken monkey brains with horseradish sauce and stuff, except it just all tastes like mashed potatoes without the gravy."

"I hate freeze-dried food, that's what we eat on campouts, it stinks," said Erin.

"I thought the beef stroganoff was pretty good," said Brian. "When we went to Point Reyes. You remember?"

"I didn't eat that, it looked like it was already digested," said Erin.

"You guys are crazy," said Tennyson. He was sitting on the beacon platform looking up at the sky. "I mean, here we are in outer space! It's incredible. And beautiful, look at the stars. And all you can talk about is fast food."

"You know, Tennyson is right," said Nicholas. He and Brian had managed to get their visors clean enough to see again, and having nothing else to do were making their way slowly across the rough asteroid surface to rejoin the group. "I wish I'd looked at that book in the Observatory with Erin. I mean, at home I can at least recognize Orion and the Big Dipper, but this is, it's really pretty but I'm kinda' lost."

"Who cares?" said Clara. "Where's the Great Fox? They're supposed to pick us up."

"Come on, Clara, why don't you sit up here with me?" said Tennyson. "Erin can teach us the constellations here. We might need to know that stuff getting through the asteroids or something."

"I thought Erin was just here to eat," said Clara, but after an obvious hesitation she turned back towards the beacon. By this time Nicholas and Brian had rejoined the others at the beacon. They had left the projectile frame behind in the gravel, though Nicholas had salvaged the sighting scope and was peering through it at the stars.

"You know, Nicholas, Tennyson is right!" said Cane. "I mean, look at this asteroid. You could poop right on the ground and no one would notice."

"CANE!" said Clara, Tennyson, and Nicholas simultaneously. "That is gross," continued Clara. "You would think of something like that. Besides, we're in vacuum. Your butt would get sucked out of your space suit."

"Yuuuck," said Tennyson. "Now you're being gross."

"Oh, sorry, I guess you're right," said Clara. "So, Erin, what's that bright one over there at the end of the three bluish sort of stars?"

"Well, let's see, the hook-shaped thing to the left is Paragoomba, then there's Pikachu and Raichu... I think that one must be Pop Star. It's not really Kirby's Pop Star, which is a planet anyway, it's just named after it."

"Oh, look, that one just moved," said Clara, pointing towards a dim light near the horizon. "It's about time they got over here to pick us up."

"That's not the Great Fox," said Erin. "The Fox is up near Nook's Foot, right there," and he pointed to a different part of the sky.

"Oh, okay, never mind, but I wonder what's taking them?" said Clara.

"Wait a minute," said Nicholas. He grabbed the sighting scope off the projectile launcher and peered at the unidentified spot of light. "Holy moly. Cane, Erin, Tennyson, assemble your launcher, Clara get Tennyson's bomb, Brian set the anchor legs for straight up! go! go! go!"

"What?" said Clara. "It's over there, why do want to shoot straight up?" she said, pointing at the spot, which was now brighter. Nicholas didn't wait to argue but strode immediately if awkwardly

towards where Tennyson had left his bomblet at the edge of the clearing. By the time he had grabbed it and returned the other boys had gotten the second projectile launcher put together, and Brian had commandeered Clara's help to set the anchor points.

Nicholas tossed the bomb at the kids from about 20 meters away. "Stick that in the slot! Cane, Tennyson, Erin, hook your belt lines onto the bomb thingies, the latch ports. We hook onto their utility belts, Brian with Cane, Clara with Tennyson, I'm with Erin. Come on! Move it!"

"What are you talking about?" said Clara. "That's stupid. We'll launch ourselves when the bomb goes off and why do you want to shoot at whatever that is and you're pointing the wrong direction anyway. What's wrong with you, Nicholas?"

Nicholas was wrapping his belt line around the latch on Erin's space suit. He spoke without looking at her in a tone Clara had never heard him use before: "Dumont, shut up and latch up, that's not a request." Clara wasn't sure whether to be angry or not, but ripped out her line and skillfully snugged it to Tennyson's back. Nicholas looked up nervously at the now-bright spot. "Brian, fire!"

Brian kicked the launching lever with his foot. The bomb flew soundlessly upward, jerking the kids along with it to the accompaniment of grunts and whooshes. The kids, tied together, drifted rapidly away from the surface of the asteroid.

"Okay, what the heck was that for?" said Cane.

Nicholas drew his finger across his throat, very obviously reached to his chest to turn the comm radio switch, and pulled Cane towards him so their helmets could touch. "Shut up! Radios off." He gestured and the kids pulled their helmets into contact.

"What are we doing, Nicholas?" said Tennyson.

"It's the Flying Classen!" said Erin. "Yes, the kids from Mr. Classen's fifth grade class have improvised their own space ship from bits of string and wire, and are pointlessly zooming through the universe to deliver a bomb to nowhere in particular. Kindof like the playground, but darker."

"Yeah, what was wrong?" said Brian. "I mean, I assumed this must be important, but what is going on?"

"Oh oh," said Nicholas. "Look." The kids followed his extended arm: a second, dimmer spot of light had just separated from the larger one and seemed to grow brighter rapidly.

"What's that? Is it heading towards us?" said Tennyson.

"I think it's heading towards the beacon," said Nicholas. "Yep, there it goes. Close your eyes!" There was a very bright flash, visible even through their eyelids, though of course no sound. A few seconds later they were buffeted by a cloud of flying debris, but fortunately nothing large enough to penetrate their space suits struck. Nicholas opened his eyes: he could see the distant glimmer growing dim and moving laterally.

"Whoah," said Clara. "Look at that." She drew the others' gaze downwards. The asteroid, tenuously held together to begin with, had practically split in half, a yawning chasm opening up where the beacon had been.

"Well, looks like a good call by Nicholas," said Tennyson.

"Yeah, way to go!" said Brian.

"I -- guess you're right, Tennyson," said Clara reluctantly. "Good job, Nicholas."

"Thanks, Clara. Thanks, everybody. Wow."

"What do you mean, good call!" said Cane. "We're floating out here in the middle of nowhere! What do we do now?"

"Wait a minute," said Brian. "I think it's okay. The blast knocked us sideways -- looks like we're heading right for the Great Fox."

"You're kidding," said Tennyson. "I mean, there's no way we could just accidentally be on the right course. That's ridiculous."

"Maybe it's ridiculous but I think he's right," said Nicholas, looking through the sighting scope. "The Fox is definitely getting bigger."

After a few minutes, it was apparent to everyone that they were at least heading close to the ship. "But what if we miss it?" said Brian. "We'd still just be floating in space."

"Oh come on, they can't have not noticed that the asteroid was just blown half to pieces!" said Clara. "They'll be looking for us. Besides, looks like we're going to pass so close that even these little radios should reach them."

"Yeah, I think whoever shot at us is gone now, we can use our radios once we get close," said Nicholas.

"What kind of respect is that for our lovely and capable craft?" said Erin. "Why, if we can't steer right onto the landing deck of the Fox I'll turn in my Classen piloting certificate! Just hand me those ray guns, folks, and let me do the navigating."

"Just ignore him," said Clara.

"No, no, I think he's onto something," said Brian, passing his ray gun over to Erin. The others, except Clara, reluctantly followed his example.

"Now, let's see," said Erin, grabbing the sighting scope from Nicholas. "I'd say oh, half way between that red one and the little guy, let's count one two three four five... moving left and up! Everyone hold on, we need to be rigid." He carefully chose a direction and fired the ray gun repeatedly. The group started to rotate. "Ooops, not on center. Here, Cane, take this one and, uh, point it over there towards that red star, fire when I tell you. Now! three times! good." By repeated improvisations, Erin used the tiny kicks generated by the ray gun blasts to direct their course. By the time the guns were exhausted, the Great Fox had grown large, and it was obvious that they would either run into it or pass by so closely they could throw something at the windows.

Clara tried for the fifth time to contact the Fox. "Great Fox, come in! Crystal, Slippy, anybody! I can't believe this, what could be happening over there?"

"Looks to me like you're gonna lose that certificate," said Tennyson. "We aren't heading towards the lock, I think we're going to bang right into the nose. Any ray gun shots left?"

"We're too close, wouldn't do any good at this point anyway," said Brian.

"Oh, the shame of it," said Erin. "I shall be tossed from the Corps, robbed of my medals, forced to live in infamy. All for the lack of a lock."

"Oh, shut up!" said Clara.

"Hey, Erin, what do we do to stop?" asked Nicholas. "Won't we just bounce off and go flying away into space again?"

"Why ask me? I'm in exile. I've failed in my self-appointed task! Ask Tennyson," lamented Erin.

"You guys are so dumb. We can just snag the antenna there with our rope!" said Cane.

"Hey, who are you calling dumb, you're dumb!" said Clara.

"No, wait a minute, he's right," said Nicholas. "We're going to strike just aft of the cockpit windows. If we stretch out the center rope here, between the bomb and Erin and Cane, it should snag the long antenna that sticks out below the port there, before we actually hit. Maybe."

"Oh, yeah, what about that bomb?" said Erin. "That's not my responsibility, of course, I'm the pilot, not the armaments officer, but wouldn't it go off when we hit?"

"I thought you were the former pilot," said Nicholas. "But you're right, I forgot about that. No, wait, it can help. Erin, Cane, Tennyson, untie yourselves from the bomb -- carefully, we don't want to lose you!-- and tie onto each other, leave as much slack as you can. When I say, Cane pushes the bomb towards the tail of the Fox. That should push us all towards the antenna and stretch the ropes taught so one of them will catch."

"Insane, totally crazy, but entertaining," said Erin. "Why not? Death by hanging or death by freezing, not a choice for just any fifth grader!" In a moment the lines had been retied without incident, and none too soon, as the ship loomed above them.

"Okay, here we go -- NOW!" said Nicholas. Cane gave a shove to the bomb and rebounded the other way. The lines stretched taught, but of course thus exerted a restoring force, causing Cane to bounce back towards the others. It was clear that the rope was not going to intersect the antenna pole. Thinking quickly, Nicholas called out: "Cane, reach up and grab the antenna, pull yourself around it -- NOW!"

With Cane as a fulcrum, all the other kids flew around in circles, securely attaching him to the antenna mast with a tangle of ropes. "Great job, Cane!" said Nicholas.

"Get off me!" said Cane.

"Okay, let's get untangled, but carefully!" said Nicholas. "Cane, whatever you do, don't let go of that pole!" It took some time, but eventually the kids were dangling once again at the ends of their ropes. "Clara, if you bounce off of Tennyson, can you get to that little ladder thing over there?"

"I think so," she replied. "Looks like I can get over to the windows and get their attention! I hope. I can't imagine how they haven't noticed us, we must've made a racket here banging against the side of the ship." She paid out her safety line and then, planting a foot on Tennyson's visor, gently pushed towards the hull of the ship and snagged it. "Got it!" In a moment she was out of sight around the edge of the ship's nose.

Inside the cabin, Crystal saw Clara's visor peek around the edge of the window. She gasped. Fox misinterpreted this reaction until Crystal grabbed him by his snout and pointed his head at the now visible space-suited kid floating outside the window.

"Oh," said Fox. "Oh, my. The kids. I forgot about them. Wasn't the beacon supposed to sound?"

"Well, uh, I -- muted it," said Crystal, pulling her blouse back on. "So we wouldn't be disturbed." She waved to Clara. "Sorry! Sorry! We'll be right out to get you!" And then turning back to Fox: "Fox McCloud, you get out there and get those kids back in the ship!"

"Just a minute, lemme get my pants on--"

Crystal delivered a kick to Fox's backside. "No! you don't need pants to fly the shuttle, get going!"

"Clara? Clara! What's going on? Is anyone there?" asked Nicholas.

"Um. Yeah."

"What's wrong? Did you figure out why they didn't come to get us?"

"Um. Yeah."

"Well?"

"You don't want to know. Trust me on this."

Is this what I want? thought Clara. Everyone else wants to go back. Is there something wrong with me?

She had time for reflection as she floated apparently motionless and alone in the silence of interplanetary space. According to the plan she was flying at about 150 kilometers per hour relative to the Wedge Antilles Memorial Asteroid Field and Recreation Area; her orbit was supposed to enter the asteroid field in about 55 minutes. At the moment there was no indication whatsoever of motion. It was very hard to believe that anything was happening or would ever happen, except perhaps on some grand scale of millions of years. If I was here for a million years how long would I have been dead? Let's see, that's a million years minus twelve hours, a year is three-hundred sixty-five times twenty-four... The suit time display had a calculator function but she found it impossible to press the buttons in the ungainly deep-space gloves. She pressed the timer button again -- just manageable -- and found that she had been out for fifteen minutes. That's impossible. It's been hours. They've already won the battle and forgotten about me. Tennyson's with some older girl at the rec center. Fox and Wolf are laughing at how stupid Cane is. Oh, get real, Fox and Wolf are laughing at all of us. They're laughing at me. I hate him. He's not right. I'm not a murderer. I'm just in fifth grade. I'm nice.

Are you really? said her other half. What about that wolf?

That was an accident. I wouldn't really have shot him if Erin hadn't hit me in the back with that stupid whatever it was.

Oh really. Right. Why did you take the two thousand coins? And what if you had known what a Superscope can do before that? You were ready to waste Tennyson, weren't you?

I was not! Besides, boys are gross. He was touching her just like -- like he was a grownup.

You liked it just fine when he held you. You're just jealous.

Of course I am! People should be loyal.

Oh. To who? Mr. Classen would say, to whom? But nobody really says that anymore. You don't want to go back. You'd really rather stay here. You don't care about the others.

Well, they're stupid. We're going to get ourselves killed and who have we got on our side? A shifty fox who's more interested in his girlfriend than in us, and a stupid big-nosed bookworm bum. If Tennyson had any sense he would come with me to live with Princess Zelda. That's who we should be following, not Fox. Fox is sneaky and lazy. Zelda is brave and tough and smart. And loyal. She wouldn't forget about us just to kiss some guy.

Oh? Remember what Erin said about her big book.

That's Erin. He makes everything up. It's not true.

Besides Zelda as much as told you that she would sacrifice anybody if she needed to. She'd cut your head right off. Of course she'd feel bad about it. Maybe Fox is sneaky and lazy. On the other hand, maybe he's cunning. Maybe he likes people to think he's lazy and shifty and dishonest. You know we're really not paying him enough to make up for all the time he's spending on us. Crystal said that just the rental on the asteroid field was five hundred coins. And think of all the time he's spent teaching you all those different guns. You see the bags under his eyes. He's not really sleeping late, he's been searching for information on Ark, you remember Crystal said she never sees him.

I don't care, I don't like him. Father would never approve of him.

If you stay here Father would never know. You know what he looks like when Mother's name comes up. That would be you. Worse: gone without a trace. You'll break his heart.

He hasn't got a heart to break. Besides this is what he wanted. Fox is right, I'm a warrior, I'm good at it, I'm going to be great at it. This is so much better than school or track. And I don't have to practice piano if I don't want to. And if I don't like someone I'll just blow them away.

Okay, great warrior. Check for bogeys lately? Up on your oxygen, water, and fuel supplies? check your position recently?

Sheepish even though she knew no one could see her, Clara brought up the heads-up display and surveyed her situation: no nearby thermal emissions or communications signals, water 85%, air 11.2 hours remaining. The coordinate numbers meant nothing to her but the little dot on the trajectory display showed that she was right on course. Only twenty-two minutes had passed so far.

Let's review the plan again. At fifty minutes the first asteroids come within range. Wait for passive ID and check to make sure I'm on course. The rec area was composed of several million asteroids, varying in size from a few meters to about 100 meters, spaced roughly 1 kilometer apart. If left to themselves, gravity and tidal forces would completely disperse them within months. Thus every rock was equipped with a tiny maintenance pod containing a solar power panel, ion propulsion unit, navigation gear, and a little transponder that beamed its position and status to the control at the Interpretive Center every five minutes. By receiving one of the transponder bursts Clara could identify the asteroid without emitting any signals herself. Make sure I'm heading right for K366UM; one-second course correction burst if I need it at five kilometers, then one 10-second burn just before impact, don't hit the surface with my jet blast or it'll boil off the junk and everyone will know I'm here. K366UM was a poorly-conglomerated carbonaceous chondrite -- that is, a planetesimal composed most of tarry organic junk and ice, about 70 meters long and 50 meters wide. Clara's job was to place a charge in the center of the lump and then blow it to smithereens (which would cost them another 200 coins in fines). The Arwings, after hiding behind K722GR, a nearby almost pure-iron asteroid, would tuck themselves in behind the shockwave and thereby hopefully evade detection until it was too late for Wolf's ships to halt their sprint to the dock.

Gee, I haven't heard anything. I wonder how they're doing? While Clara secretly floated above it all, the other kids would be negotiating the fixed defenses that Wolf had presumably hidden on outlying rocks. Tennyson, lacking a gunner, would be doing decoy work, drawing fire and thus exposing the emplacements to his teammates. Fox was sure that Wolf would keep his fleet of eight Wolfen cruisers back within fifty kilometers or so of the Center; no need to risk a dogfight if the outer defenses were

sufficient. The Arwings were using short-range encrypted directional communications to make it harder for Wolf to listen in; Clara couldn't expect to hear anything way out here. Floating in space, not allowed to use thrusters to adjust her attitude, she couldn't really control where she was looking; as she tumbled slowly head-over-heels the tiny glints of the asteroid field would enter her field of view and leave a few minutes later. Occasionally she fancied she could see a sudden bright flash that might be a laser cannon glinting off a rock.

What if all the Arwings are knocked out before they get to me? Will they remember to pick me up? I'll be stuck out here forever and suffocate and die. Then they'll feel bad.

That's silly. It's a nature preserve. You just need to use the emergency channel and call the docent to come pick you up. Fox told us. Of course the docent probably won't be very happy to hear about a charge ready to blow up one of his meteors. Maybe I shouldn't tell him; if I don't set it off, no harm done.

She checked her timepiece again. Still twenty-eight minutes to go. Was ever idleness like this? Where did I learn that? Oh, yeah, some poem we did in reading circles. Emily Dickinson, that was it. She lived her whole life in one stupid house looking after her father or something like that. I don't want to be like her. I want to do important things. I don't want to grow up like Erin, making everything up so he can ignore whatever he doesn't like. I don't need him. I don't need Tennyson either.

Remember what Fox said. A general has to have a heart, too. He's right. Tennyson has a way with people. Kids like him. Grownups like him. Kids don't like me. Fox is right, it's not enough for people to be afraid of you. Fear doesn't make people loyal, just afraid.

Okay, let's keep Tennyson and lose the rest of them. Though I have to admit Nicholas has really surprised me. I thought he was a stupid big-mouthed jerk but he is determined and brave, and he keeps at it on a lot of the drills and stuff even though he's not naturally good at them like I am. And he worries about all of us all the time. He really feels responsible to get everyone home. He's a good commander. Much better than I would have been.

I guess Tennyson isn't responsible to fall in love with me even if I like him. I'm not sure I'm ready to fall in love with him, anyway. Maybe he should get to know some other girls first so we can be sure. Me too.

A glint brighter than starlight interrupted her reverie. She switched the visor to magnified view. No question about it, that's the edge of the preserve. Here we go. A subtle thrill of excitement coursed through her weightless torso. She felt as if the world was suddenly sharper. She saw this little plan unfolding, with success and victory at the end. She could see herself battling through to Ark, outsmarting the stupid Professor and the Star Spirits and that idiot Bowser and whoever else gets in my way. What was I thinking? I'm a warrior and Ark is my battle. Crystal is right, blow the ships up, victory or death! And it isn't going to be death.

Chapter 15: Jingle's Bells

The kids bundled into the snack bar, laughing and talking excitedly.

"Was that last one awesome or what?" said Cane. "We blew Wolfie's nose right off!"

"Yes, well, we weren't really supposed to do that much damage to their ships," said Fox. "What do you guys want?"

"Anything that's not alcoholic!" shouted Nicholas. "I'm dying of thirst!"

"It wasn't my fault, that's what happens when everybody hits the target at the same time," added Cane.

"Yeah, who would've thought Erin could make that shot?" said Clara. "I figured I would have to do it by myself."

"T'was the Captain that sliced through their defenses like cheap sailcloth," said Erin. "A master of the sea of stars! The devil incarnate! Three cheers for Captain Blood!"

"Captain Blood? who's that?" whispered Cane to Tennyson.

"Nicholas, of course!" Tennyson replied. "Can't you keep Erin's fantasy worlds straight?"

"Uh-- no, not really."

Clara joined in Erin's Hip Hip Hooray!, silly though it was. She preferred Erin the Buccaneer to the self-pitying Dreyfuss. Besides, Nicholas had really done a wonderful job of managing the final dash to the dock, albeit following the outline Slippery had drilled them on the evening before. After making as much use as they could of the blast debris from Clara's explosives, the Arwings had used the tight turning techniques Fox had taught them to literally fly a circle around the pursuing fleet. Only Wolf O'Donnell himself, lightning quick, had figured out what they were doing and adopted their techniques on the fly: but this left him one against three two kilometers out from the dock. Nicholas had formed the kids into a pyramid with Wolf at the apex so that if he turned to target any one of the three the other two would have a clear shot at his vulnerable rear thrusters: realizing his predicament, Wolf had accelerated and tried to squeeze himself through the gauntlet before the kids could react. It hadn't worked very well: by targeting the same spot on the Wolfen cruiser, Clara, Cane and Erin had almost melted the nose off even at the low laser setting used in war games.

"Alright, alright, you deserve it," said Fox, handing out refreshments. "You did good, I'm proud of you all. Except for that little whack at the end, Cane, that was gratuitous."

"That was what?" Clara asked.

"A bit much, that's what it was." Wolf and his gunner, Flaherty, had been forced to abandon their damaged cruiser, and use their suit thrusters to regain the docks to get a tow rocket. Cane had taken advantage of the opportunity to pop a few judiciously aimed low-power shots onto Wolf's space-suited behind. "Whip 'em to make 'em afraid is good, not so great to humiliate them."

"You do dumb things like that all the time!" said Cane defensively.

"Yes, and I would've hoped you could learn from my mistakes," said Fox, sighing. "Do what I say, not what I do. You get enough enemies in life without adding to them."

"Hypocritical but true," added Crystal, sipping a glass of Moon Mountain '02. "Anyway, now Wolfie is really ticked off, not least since you all got through and so now he gets nothing."

"What?" said Nicholas. "I thought you were paying him and his squadron a lot of money for practicing with us."

"We were," said Crystal. "But then my honey went and got ol' Wolfie a little drunk last night. Wolfie gets boastful when he's loaded, you know. He bet double-or-nothing that not one of you would get to the dock with any life points left, so he not only got his butt warmed over, his wallet got cooked at the same time."

"Come on, Crystal, I'm not gonna' hold him to that," said Fox. "I'm not following Cane's example here, I'm trying to reform."

"I don't know -- you know how proud he is. He didn't even stay to get paid. I'm glad the kids didn't hear what he was saying to his pilots!"

"Yeah, maybe," agreed Fox. "Well, that's in the future. Raise your glasses, lads and lasses! A toast to Fox's Freeloaders!"

"I thought we were Nick's Ninjas," said Brian.

"No way, Cane's Crushers!" added Cane.

"I would've said Cane's Catastrophes," added Crystal. "How about Dumont's Destroyers? It was Clara that did the camouflage blast and knocked out Willoughby and McDiarmid with three shots each."

"Blood's Buccaneers!" said Erin. "Doesn't make sense but it alliterates. Maybe Nicholas could change his name."

"Tennyson's Terrors?" said Brian tentatively.

"Leave me out of this, I just fly," said Tennyson.

"Slippy's Slimeballs?" suggested Slippy, turning away from the Snack Bar window with his bag of Snugasa Bug Nuggets.

"Enough!" said Fox. "Sorry I brought it up. I'll give you guys oh, an hour break as a reward, take a look around, it's kind of fun. Then you can get back in the ship and we'll debrief on the battle while we make the trip to our next training area."

"Next training area?" asked Nicholas. "What's that?"

"We're pretty much done with zero-G stuff, we need a place with some weight!" replied Fox, finishing the last bit of grilled rodent from his rat kebab. "Gotta get tougher, too, you guys are having it too soft. You're gonna think it's easy to win a battle, especially after today, we gotta find some good character-building experiences for you -- that means you get your butt whipped, teaches you humility!" He tossed the little wooden stick in the recycling bin and stood up. "Well, great job, I'm heading back to the Fox. Remember, be back on the ship in an hour or get left with the tourists!"

"Oh, I'd better go too, I've got to do the flight plan," said Crystal.

"Where do you think this new training site is gonna be?" Clara asked Nicholas.

"Gee, I don't know, Fox hadn't said anything about this until just now. He made it sound sort of scary, didn't he? Maybe we're going to go out in the desert somewhere?"

"That's not scary!" said Cane. "I'll bet he's taking us to the spice mines of Kessel! We'll be roasted alive by overheated protocol droids!"

"Aww, Kessel's kind of nice," said a uniformed Storm Trooper sitting at the next table. "I was assigned there a coupla years back. It's sort of spartan, desolate, but beautiful in its own way."

"If you don't mind my asking," said Brian, "what are you doing here at the Interpretive Center? Guard duty?"

The storm trooper laughed -- a somewhat incongruous experience -- and took off his helmet, revealing a lined, graying face with short-cropped hair. "Naw, some of my squad are in the Storm Trooper Folk Dance exhibition. In the auditorium." He pointed down one of the corridors. "They do two shows today and another one tomorrow, you ought to drop by. It's a lot of fun. Many of the guys have brought their families along, quite a few kids will be there."

"I don't think we have time for that," said Nicholas. "We've got to be back on our ship in -- oh -- fifty-five minutes. But thanks." He finished his Aquastar and got up. "I'm going to go look at the exhibits before we have to leave, anyone want to come?"

Brian, Erin, and Cane joined Nicholas, leaving Clara and Tennyson at the huge picture window looking out onto the asteroid field. The next room was divided by low partitions into a number of topical areas. Muted narrations could be heard from the nearest displays, and tourists of various species and types were scattered through the exhibits: a father dryite shepherded his two children through the EXIT door as an armored storm trooper chatted with a penguin about the deplorable pay and working conditions for qualified navigators. Placards in several languages hung from the ceiling to guide the visitors. Nicholas read through Origins of Planetary Systems, Comets and Oort Cloud Objects, Planetesimals, and Rings, Belts and Braids, before settling on Antilles Asteroids: a History of Dedication. Brian and Erin

joined him, while Cane, seeing nothing in the least bit interesting, proceeded on through the door marked Planetary Bombardment Room Interactive Exhibit.

A holographic movie was already running when they entered the little cubicle. A smiling young man dressed in a red flight suit was climbing into an X-wing fighter as the narration droned on in the background: ... star pilot, warrior, writer, and scientist, Wedge was a rebel only against injustice. Already well-known for his studies of naturally-occurring planetesimal formations in the Hoth and Malastare systems, Wedge became a leader in the field with his classic treatment of the early re-aggregation of the fragments of Alderaan...

A meowth dressed in striped trousers was talking with a small creature mostly hidden behind a sizable stony meteorite mounted on a stand. "I always had an ethical problem with that work, you know. Making your reputation out of the destruction of an inhabited planet -- shady, don't you think?"

"Grist for the mill of science, my friend," replied a familiar voice. "Are doctors wrong for perfecting their art on the victims of a battle?"

"Mr. Saturn!" exclaimed Erin, forgetting his piratical mannerisms. "Wow, this is great! Where have you been?"

"Learning things, of course, as usual," replied Mr. Saturn. "This display is rather self-serving, but they did a very nice job on impact-induced mass extinctions. Did you know that a cometary collision was the real cause behind the destruction of the Dreamcast worlds?"

"You mean you've been at the interpretive center all week?" said Erin.

"Hardly. Let's make our way back to the Fox and I'll tell you about it." Mr. Saturn turned to Nicholas. "I understand your team did very well against the Star Wolf group today. You've come a long way from struggling against a couple of Yoshies on a watch tower."

"So have you," said Nicholas.

"Good point. Who's journey has been more enlightening, I wonder?" There was a loud BOOM from the next room. "I see Cane has figured out the high-power meteorite gun controls. You might want to keep an eye on him -- the gun is fairly harmless as long as you shoot at the big imitation planets, but there's a sizable fine for blowing a hole through the walls."

"Gee, the bombardment room is on the outside of the station. Wouldn't a break in the wall let all the air out and kill everyone who wasn't wearing a space suit?" said Brian.

"Only the rear partition," said Mr. Saturn. "He'd have to turn the gun all the way around for that. Which unfortunately you can do if you know the cheat code."

"Oh - oh," said Nicholas. Cane still had his copy of Skolar's Ultimate Cheat Code guide; he had been using it for bathroom reading on the Fox. "I'll go check on him."

"So, Mister Saturn," said Erin, "what the heck is up? I mean, I'm still waiting to hear about the train ride, and then you go and disappear for days. And you've got a singing career, you never told me about that. And all this training stuff is incredibly boring and there's no time to read anything and the Fox doesn't have any library anyway and--"

"You made your point, Erin," said Mr. Saturn. "What shall I address first? There is an excellent library in the Great Fox; you just have to know how to find it. Concealment was, of course, quite intentional. It was obvious to Crystal that you, at least, would accomplish absolutely nothing if she didn't hide the reading material."

"That's one of Erin's questions," said Brian. "What about the others? Where have you been? I've been starting to think that nothing you do is quite as accidental as it seems."

"All right, all right -- let's wander this way, there's an asteroid mining display in the next room that piqued my curiosity. Yes, I certainly made use of my time on the Toy Train, and no, Zelda's Minister of Finance has not yet detected the leakage from her bank account." The three had entered a smaller hall occupied by placards depicting asteroid cross-sections, metals assays, and schemes for collecting and refining planetesimals en masse. They were for the moment the only occupants. Mr. Saturn lowered his voice. "As you should be aware, a key aspect of Crystal's tactical plan depends on being able to enter Ark through the old recreational access ports, but she probably didn't tell you that we don't actually know how to accomplish this. It is well-known that there was a security code system in

place to allow inhabitants to come and go without permitting general access -- but as the years passed and the colonization resources of the station went unused, the details of the scheme were lost. Crystal asked me to find out what I could. I was not able to discover the entry codes for the Ark external access ports - but I did find out who knows and where to meet him."

Just then a family of Storm Troopers entered through the rear door. Both parents wore full armor but had hung their helmets from a hook on the utility belt. The two children, girls of perhaps 5 and 8 years, were dressed in conservative white uniforms; they were both carrying model tie fighters and immediately entered into a pretend attack upon the cutaway meteorite hanging in the center of the room. Behind them was a group of Stormtroopers (and what looked like Starwomen and Starkids), telling each other what appeared to be jokes in an unrecognizable language and generally much better behaved than their cousins at Fourside.

"So that's why palladium is relatively rare in second-generation objects even though it is an important constituent of later generation meteorites," said Mister Saturn loudly.

Erin looked confused and started to ask a question, interrupted when Brian stepped on his foot. "Oh, okay, I never understood that before," replied Brian. "Well, let's go see what Cane is up to."

In the Planetary Bombardment Room, Nicholas was meticulously placing tiny toy dinosaurs, pterosaurs, crocodiles, ferns, and trees onto a large sandbox-like diorama while Cane waited impatiently seated at what were obviously the controls of a sizable rail gun. "Are you done yet?" asked Cane. "I want to blow something up!"

Nicholas ignored him as he recited a story to himself. "Are you crazy? You can't go out onto the plain by yourself. Why, there are tyrannosaurs out there just waiting for to have a nice meal of protoceratops delivered on a platter. Oh, I'm not afraid of carnivores. You're not afraid? There's nothing in the whole world more dangerous than a saurapod with an appetite! I don't know, what about giant rocks falling from the sky? Giant rocks? You're crazier than crazy! Rocks don't fall from the sky, that's the stupidest thing I ever -- aaaaah!" Nicholas backed away and signaled to Cane. "Okay, now!"

"About time!" There was a big chuff! BOOM! and instant dusty chaos replaced Nicholas' elaborate scene, as the model asteroid bounced off the dirt and was harmlessly collected in a rebound chute. On the wall, a huge monitor showed a slow-motion replay of the catastrophic event; the bolide leapt off the track and plunged into the soft ground, the blast wave sending toy creatures flying, as dirt splashed up from the impact point.

"We're all gonna' die!" said Nicholas, obviously continuing his dramatic rendition. "We're not! Who are you? We're mammals! Little is better, nyaa nyaa nyaa nyaa nyaa! Stop chanting, we'll eat their carcasses later, now we need to hide in the burrow! Awww, mom, you never let me have any fun."

"Boy, if museums had guns like this back home Dad wouldn't even have to bribe me with game time to go!" said Cane. "What can we destroy next?"

"Mine!" said Brian to Nicholas, and snapped off a shot with his rifle that caught the target placard right in the center. It flipped back into the wall.

"Nice shot!" said Clara, waiting behind the pair for her turn. "You're getting a lot better, Brian." Debriefing done, Fox had assigned the kids a marksmanship exercise while they made their way to the still-mysterious new training ground. The kids worked in pairs, shooting from prone or kneeling positions, one armed with a standard-issue ray gun and the other a projectile weapon. As each target placard popped out of the walls of the little room, they had to identify what type of opponent it represented and whether it was most vulnerable to a ray or bullet, assign the shot appropriately, and knock it out. This had been a difficult task on the second day of training, but by now was so routine the kids could converse as they practiced.

"I think it's gotta be Tallon four," said Tennyson. "They've got monsters everywhere, traps, nasty liquid junk that mutates you, extreme temperatures -- it's really a tough place!"

"No way," said Nicholas. "Mine! (BLAM) Darn it. (BLAM) That's better. This is Fox, he just spent a bunch of time on Dinosaur Planet, that's where he's going to take us for sure. There's all kinds of

nasty dinosaurs to fight with. There's super hot places with lava, and the ice fields, and all kinds of obstacles. Yours! Good shot. Besides they use bugs instead of money, it's totally disgusting!"

"I was thinking Dark Star," said Cane, who was using his rifle to blow holes in the paper copy of the firing range rules posted on the entry wall. "I mean, there's all these places where you can fall thousands of feet and get splashed flat dead (BLAM sping sping sping)."

"Would you stop that!" said Clara. "It's dangerous."

"Oh come on, the bullets usually stick into the wall," replied Cane. "And you know the sky is really dark so you can't see when you're going to come to the end of one of these hexa -- hexa -- honeycomb thingies you walk on (BLAM!). Besides there are monsters everywhere. And Kirby. I mean, he really sucks. Ha!"

"Not funny," said Erin. "You know, I still have a soft spot in my heart for the spice mines of Kessel. They've got everything: rotten prison guards, toxic atmosphere, bounty hunters galore, forcefields. I can't imagine what that storm trooper guy saw in it."

"We can't go there, then you'll be doing your stupid Dreyfuss stuff again," said Nicholas. "Sorry to tell you this, Erin, but the rest of us are really sick of that character. Okay, that's ten, we're done! Nice shooting, Brian. Clara, Cane, you're up next."

The door hissed open and Fox barged in. "What the heck are you doing in here? Time to drop everything and drop, my middlin' marksmen!"

"We're just doing what you told us to do!" said Nicholas.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot about that," Fox replied. "Never mind, back to barracks and grab your stuff, standard-issue weaponry, meet me in egress lock 2A in two minutes, go, go, go!"

"Wait a minute," said Nicholas. "Aren't you even going to tell us what we're dropping into? Why can't we at least take a look?"

"No time for such dilly dallying. You want to do research, get a government grant. Move!" the last as he swung his clipboard at Nicholas' behind. Fortunately everyone had packed up in anticipation of a new site; the kids had merely to grab their assembled fighting packs (stocked with all sorts of essentials, and much more capacious but quite a bit heavier than their school backpacks) and latch up the standard set of ray gun, rifle, and bomb launcher. In less than the stated two minutes they were all gathered in the little room behind the air lock door, in a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Slippy was at the lock control panel and Fox walked down the line of kids, checking their gear.

"Dark Star!" said Cane.

"Kessel!" said Erin.

"Dinosaur!" said Nicholas.

"What?" said Fox. He looked at a little display that the kids couldn't see. The room door hissed and Crystal entered, dressed in a rather revealing skirt that didn't look at all appropriate to a combat training assignment. "Oh, never mind, we're there," said Fox, nodding to Slippy.

The lock door flew open, revealing a chubby colorfully-dressed fellow with a big nose and sunglasses, sitting on a very comfortable-looking lounge chair and sipping a drink with a little umbrella sticking out of it. In the background lovely palm trees swayed in a gentle breeze before a tall brick-and-tile building.

The creature stood up smiling: "Welcome to the Hotel Delfino! Parking is twenty-two coins per day; guests at the hotel park free with a validated stub. The lobby is right up the stairs if you're checking in! Rudolfo and Alexander" (at this point delivering a sharp kick to one of a pair of similarly-dressed folks happily asleep in recliners next to him) "will be happy to help with your luggage; just leave the keys in the ignition or equivalent for valet parking. If there's anything you need to make your stay more enjoyable, just let us know."

The kids, even Cane, were shocked into speechlessness for a moment. "Come on, come on, let's roll!" said Fox, shepherding the amazed kids down the ramp and up the walkway. "Peppy will get the Fox parked, you kids can carry your stuff, you need the work. Go! go! go!"

"What's the big hurry?" said Nicholas. "I mean, I thought we were sneaking past some guards or something like that, what's the problem?"

“The problem?” said Fox, not slowing. “A dinner reservation at six fifteen, that’s the problem! Four minutes from now, to be exact.”

“Wow, that’s great, I’m starved,” said Cane.

“Not you! This is a private affair, just Crystal and me and a very large plate of grilled rat. You can get whatever you want from room service once you get checked in. Over there.” They had entered the elegantly-appointed lobby, sporting comfortable chairs and tables interspersed between flower-filled pools filled by bubbling streams. Here and there people and creatures of various descriptions sat or stood talking, sipping drinks, or watching one of the various large-screen television displays scattered throughout the room. Fox pointed at a large desk staffed with a number of the colorful folks (Piantas, Brian noted) across the room. “You got three rooms, reservations under ‘Bulwer-Lytton’, see ya!”

Fox took Crystal’s arm and they proceeded towards a lovely stained-glass-covered door off to the right. As they left Crystal called over her shoulder, “Meet in the lobby at seven o’clock tomorrow morning! I’ll send the schedule to you tonight. Everything’s taken care of, have fun!” The two foxes were ushered through the door by another cheerful pianta and disappeared.

A moment of awed silence ensued as the kids reset their expectations for the evening. “Don’t you think,” said Erin, “we should consider the possibility that this luxurious display is merely a facade behind which lurks an evil conspiracy of demon androids using drugged room service food to capture orphaned kids for the spice mines?”

“Why don’t you stay down here and check it out?” said Nicholas. “The rest of us are going up to our rooms to get some rest.”

“And something to eat!” added Cane.

“I will, thanks. So how long have you been on the job here?” asked Mr. Saturn, taking a seat on top of a pile of empty fruit boxes. The Security office was located in the basement of the hotel. Two diminutive blue-tinged fellows sat at control panels; the walls were covered with television monitors depicting divers scenes in the building and grounds. Bits of wrapping paper and dust swirled in the blasts of frigid air entering the little room from the ceiling vents; icicles were growing from the faucet of the small sink set into the wall in the back corner. Both of the men wore gray flannel coveralls with “Iceman National” stenciled across the back, and an arm patch that bore a round logo with “I.N. Security” emblazoned across it. The guy on the left, to whom Mr. Saturn’s remarks had been addressed, removed his thick glasses to rub his eyes, and then pointlessly straightened his thinning brown hair with his hand, before answering.

“Well, uh, I ‘been here three weeks yesterday, yeah, you know I’m just getting to learn my way around, the boss don’t say much about it, I hope he’s not mad at me. Do you think the boss is mad at me, George?”

George was angular and slim and incessantly active, sitting up in his seat, leaning back, picking up a snack from the tray leaning precariously against the joystick, spitting gum into the wastebasket. He took a long drink from a can marked Canopus Cola and coughed. “I don’t know what the boss is thinking, how would I know what he thinks? He doesn’t talk to me, I can’t read his mind. What are you always asking me about things for, do you think I’m hiding something from you, are you trying to say you don’t trust me, why don’t you just come out with it, I don’t think I can work in these conditions, it’s very stressful, there’s a limit to what a person can adapt to, what with all the heat and humidity in here it’s a wonder anybody can survive, did you want a drink?” (the last directed to Mr. Saturn).

“No, thank you,” replied Mr. Saturn. “So you’re responsible for security for the whole facility? It seems like a lot to keep track of.”

“Well, we’ve got the most advanced equipment, we’ve got everything you could think of, cameras everywhere, we see everything, it’s all stored away on the disks, nobody can get away with anything around Hotel Delfino, you better believe it,” said George, meticulously unwrapping a little chocolate frog and tossing the foil into a pile of similar packaging materials lying just short of the wastebasket under his desk. “No matter what you’re up to, we’re keeping an eye on you! We’ve got

everything under control, we sure have, you can rely on it. Under control, that's us. Have you seen the key to the vault, Phil?"

"Ah, I see," said Mr. Saturn, abandoning his perch to indicate one of the smaller monitors near the bottom of the wall with his nose. "So you have a bomberman working for you, or is he freelance?" The image depicted a humanoid with a scuba-mask-like visage, unloading a number of round objects from a cart and placing them in a hole dug into the grass next to one of the decorative columns of the hotel facade.

"Oh my gosh, he's back," said Phil. "That citation didn't work, did it?" He turned to Mr. Saturn. "I told George that a citation wasn't going to work, those bomber people are crazy, I read about it in my magazine," indicating a messy pile of colorful trade publications lying on one of the shelves: Your IN Security. "We should send the patrol guy to get him, don't you think, George? I think so. Can we do it now? I think we shouldn't wait, he might set off the bombs this time."

"Naw, it's under control, trust me, I talked to the boss, he told me they never set anything off 'cause they're trying to get the perfect explosion, they want to destroy the whole hotel in one blast, takes them weeks to get everything, all you have to do is dig up the bombs they plant every night, we send 'em back to Bomberman Recycling for credit, where do you think we get the money for all this food?" George waved his hand at the cardboard boxes containing a couple of very cold pizzas and donuts that appeared to have the consistency of construction materials. "I'm not paying for all this food, not on my salary, here I'm teaching you how to do this and suffering in the heat, does the boss give me a raise? Under control, that's what it is, under control. Did I ask if you know where the vault key is?"

"Well, that's very reassuring," said Mr. Saturn. "You know, I get worried sometimes when I visit places. You never know when bad guys might be after you. But you certainly seem to have the resources to protect all of us guests at the hotel."

"Yeah, now you get the picture," said George. Then he lowered his voice and leaned close to Mr. Saturn. "Could you, like, put in a good word for us with the management? The boss, I don't know, he's been cool to me lately, I'm not sure what he thinks, did he stick me with a rookie to get rid of me? If the hotel knew what a good job we do here, if those pinata fellows spoke up for us, maybe they'd treat us a little better, like maybe we could get some decent air conditioning, a little time off, maybe some hot icegirls, hubba hubba, yeah?"

"Hmm," replied Mr. Saturn. "The Facilities manager does owe me a bit of a favor. A little sanitation problem I helped him with a few years back." He paused in obvious thought. "Tell you what, let me check out what you've got here a bit, maybe I can help you out. Do you mind?" indicating the banks of monitors.

"No, no, you go ahead, here's a headset, you just turn the knob to listen in on whatever monitor you want, there's the number there, if you can't hear right you can use the joystick here to move the directional microphone, this other blue one moves the cameras, you call if you need help, I gotta finish this report here or the boss will get mad, hey George how'd'ya spell 'delinquent'?"

While the two icemen argued over how to obtain authority over the hotel maintenance staff without accepting responsibility for the result, Mr. Saturn settled himself onto the top of the video control box, whose vents exuded a pleasant warmth, and selected monitor 124 on his dial. Penguin waiters bustled from table to table, their formal attire and mannerisms incongruous amongst the friendly pianta hostess and colorful guests. A tweak or two served to center the images of Fox and Crystal, sitting at an isolated table in a corner behind a dwarf palm.

"I'm not so sure," said Crystal. "It's not the way they're brought up, you know. Especially the girls. It's a conflict for her."

"But she needs the encouragement," replied Fox, holding a rat glazed in some sort of reddish sauce on a stick for Crystal to nibble on. "She's got the talent and she's got the guts. That sort of crazy take-no-prisoners single-mindedness. If she stayed she could be another Samus. Tougher, even. I know that she's not completely comfortable with it, but she's going to have to deal with that whether she stays or goes. I'm not making her into something she's not. I think it's best for her to plunge right in, especially given the circumstances. She has to learn this with her stomach not with her brain, you know."

If she runs away from what she is, it'll come out in fear or hatred and she'll become a murderer without ever becoming a warrior."

Crystal sighed and passed the rat back to Fox. "She does belong here, doesn't she? I've been tempted to suggest it to her, did you know that?"

"Crystal, hon, you need your own kids," said Fox, ruffling the fur under her chin. "You shouldn't make Clara into the daughter you don't have. Wrong species, anyway."

"It's not just that. I feel awful about this even though I know it's the optimal tactical solution. Just throwing them into that place and running away. Fox, I've never run away from a fight in my life. You know we haven't closed on anything, we haven't made contact yet with the colony, we're practically throwing them to the wolves."

"Saturn will take care of it, honey, don't worry so much. Besides, they have to go in themselves. They'll never grow if they rely on us for everything. And the last time we threw them to the wolves, the wolves got eaten for lunch."

"Now you're sounding like a frustrated parent. They're pretty young, are they ready to handle all this on their own?"

"I think they are. Clara doesn't need help, of course, and I think by the time we get there Nicholas is going to be ready to lead the rest of them. Just enough guts, just enough smarts, a little bit of caution -- the makings of a good commanding officer. Kindof the opposite of me, you know?"

Mr. Saturn switched to monitor 74: the lounge of a suitably luxurious two-room minisuite. The camera was looking at a very large flat-panel television display, showing a road race; off to one side two other smaller TV screens glowed with what appeared to be a documentary about Pikmin agriculture and a fashion show for turtles, respectively. The back of Cane's head could be seen as he spoke to someone on the picture phone. "Don't you have anything else? I mean, anything that's not fruit! I mean, this is crazy! Where's the beef?"

"The what, sir? Beets? Those can be found after bananas and before berries, bush, pages eleven through fourteen of volume one of the evening room service menu, sir."

"Page what? what? I hate volume! I never even understood area, don't talk to me about volume, that's what Emily Lu tried to do, I had to hit her with the dodge ball! All right, all right, just give me some of everything, let's see, how about Pianta pineapple pudding, red pepper roast, dorian grated, whipped watermelon, pickled pear, one order of everything."

Erin's voice could be heard from somewhere else in the room: "And I want some apple pie too, I'm hungry!"

"Right, okay, two plates of apple pie with apple, um, compost, I guess that'll be enough for now. I can't believe I have to live on fruit. Eating all this awful healthy stuff, it's gonna kill me!"

Monitor 33 showed one of the hotel's numerous bars and lounges, this one outside on the veranda. At an unilluminated table under a silhouetted umbrella, an indistinct figure could be seen, wrapped in a coat so absurdly heavy for the warm Isle Delfino evening that Mr. Saturn was a bit envious, talking to a fellow wearing epaulets and braid under a military cap. The voice was that of Wolf O'Donnell: "Tomorrow, then? The whole squadron, I won't pay for less."

A gravelly brogue replied. "Don't be grindin' your molars, doggie. It's a wee bit too peaceful here, the boys have had enough of beach football. Nothing like a little donnybrook to build a bit of team spirit. Did you want your heavy weapons now, or just a bit o' small arms and a grenade or three, what d'you think, son?"

Two tables to the right, partly hidden by a large cycad, the back of an armored suit could be seen, talking with another suited figure hidden in the evening dim, but whose silhouette revealed short bouncing bangs and round glasses. A touch of the smaller joystick brought the second conversation into focus: "This one and this one. A hundred coins each. Dead is fine but not desintegrated; clients need proof, you understand?"

"Oh, what about the other ones on the list?" replied an absurdly cheerful voice. "Can I look for them, too?"

“You keep your nose clean and do your own work. When you’ve made a few captures you can take the top of the list.”

“But I’ve read almost all the bounty hunting manual and I even started on the commentaries!” said the happy voice. “Pleeease?”

“You listen to your mentor, rookie. These guys have a rep. The word on the street is they’re moving with a bodyguard, swordsman, did Andross’ wolf bud and Conker and his five bodyguards without even breaking a sweat. New guy, ‘Pickles’? No, ‘Nickles’, which is probably how much your life would be worth if you went up against him. You’d best leave him to me.”

By this time Wolf and his companion had finished their drinks and departed; a pianta waiter was noisily complaining about the tip (or lack of it) as he cleaned the table. In monitor 153, Nicholas and Brian could be seen leaning over a small box placed on the writing desk in their hotel bedroom: Mr. Saturn could tell from the repetitive slicing that they were reviewing the plans of Ark again, even though the image was too small to resolve clearly. Brian was making notes in a book of some sort as Nicholas pointed at something near the top of the hologram.

Monitor 29 showed Clara snuggled under Tennyson’s chin as they perched on the side of one of the two twin beds. Clara’s cheeks glistened wetly. “I missed you, you know,” she said.

Tennyson chuckled. “You weren’t showing it! There were a couple of times I thought you were going to blow me away for sure. Just checking how my permanent absence would feel?”

“Don’t say that, don’t say that!” Clara said urgently, pressing against his side. “It’s not true, I don’t want you to go!”

“I’m sorry, really,” Tennyson said, stroking her hair. “I don’t want you to go either. I’m really glad you’re coming with us. Not to mention that we wouldn’t stand a chance without you.”

“Is that all you want me for? Just to blow things up for you again?”

“I want you to be with me, whether we’re blowing things up or not,” replied Tennyson, taking Clara by the shoulders and turning her to face him. He leaned over and Clara turned her head upwards; their lips neared. Just then there was a boing! sound, and a large hinged panel in the floor next to the bed flew upwards. The head of a boy of perhaps six or seven years popped into the room through the opening left by the cover, hung suspended briefly staring at the amorous pair, and disappeared again.

Tennyson and Clara stood in surprise. A quick tweak of the microphone made other voices audible: “Yeah, there were two, like, teenagers almost, and they were kissing!” “Oooh, I wanna see, I wanna see, my turn!” Boing! A red-haired girl’s head, perhaps a bit older than the boy’s, popped into the room and disappeared just as quickly. “They are not neither kissing, they’re just standing there!” “They were! Let me see!” and the boy popped through the panel again.

“Stop that!” said Clara, and then as the boy disappeared she leaned over to shout into the floor. “This is our room, you shouldn’t just barge in!”

Boing! the girl’s head appeared. “Aren’t you gonna smooch?” the girl said quickly, before she disappeared again.

“Not while you’re watching!” shouted Clara. Tennyson tapped her on the shoulder and glanced towards the bed. Clara nodded assent; the two kids hopped over to the other side and began to shove the bed towards the movable opening.

B oing! The girl’s head reappeared, seeing them shoulder-to-shoulder: “Oh, that’s so romantic!”

“Hey, that’s two for you, it’s my turn!” said the boy’s voice as Tennyson gave a last shove to the bedframe, placing one of the legs squarely on top of the panel.

Boing! Thump! “Ow!” Boing! Thump! “Ow!” Boing! Thump! “Ow!” Boing! Thump! “Ow!”

Clara turned to Tennyson. “Not too bright, is he?”

“He won’t be if he keeps this up for long,” Tennyson replied. Then putting his arm somewhat awkwardly around her shoulders: “Now that we have some privacy, where were we?” Boing! Thump! “Ow!” Boing! Thump! “Ow!” Mr. Saturn redirected the camera to a view of the snack cabinet list and turned the sound down.

George and Phil were still struggling with grammatical issues in their report. “Hey, Uranus, would you say ‘we should take their Privacy Policy and shove it down their throats’ or ‘the Privacy Policy should be eaten by the policymakers, with or without their consent’?”

“The former, of course. Never use the passive voice in an incitement to action, however vile or reprehensible. It’s Saturn, incidentally. I take it you would prefer to employ this unconstrained access to the guests’ private rooms that I noticed here as you see fit?”

“Well, you see, it’s like this,” said Phil. “We don’t really want to look, you know we don’t, but then again we can’t help ourselves, the job gets very dull and we’re so hot all the time in this miserable room, and if one of them was a bad guy we need to know about it, and besides if we don’t watch what people are doing when they think no one is watching we’d have nothing to tell the other guys about in the break room.”

“Holy avalanche, Phil, that’s not the point! Geeze, how we gonna’ make ends meet if’n we can’t sell some of these here funny pictures? I mean, it’s not like we’d just send this info anywhere, we’re only passing the best stuff on to our official secret affiliates, like the Candid Cable Channel, fifty-four on most gameworld networks (eleven in Freedom and eighty-seven in the Metroid worlds). What do you think pays for the thermal underwear here?” George pulled the elastic band out from under his shirt to demonstrate.

“It seems, gentlemen, that you have both social and fiduciary responsibilities that compel you to advocate free and unrestrained exploitation of the guests’ private activities. Perhaps you could make your case more effectively if you simply took it to the people; I’m sure they’d understand that your intrusions are not merely necessary but advantageous. A modest marketing campaign, conducted behind a phony organization named something like Citizens for Rehabilitation of Abnormal People, ought to do the trick. Although some folks might want a cut of the take. Call me if you decide to go that route. My card.” A little card floated out of Mr. Saturn’s pocket into George’s hand. It said:

Roche’s, Ltd.

Cassini Division

Mr. Saturn, Proprietor

Research - Sanitation - Public Relations

“Phone and mail are on the back, gents. I shall certainly speak to Mr. Zamboni on your behalf if I see him, though as he’s often very busy administering the black market in termite food that might be only cold comfort.”

“I wish!” sighed George, wiping his brow. “Well, thanks for stopping by, don’t be a stranger, I wish we’d called you before even though I can’t imagine why, that’s just cause I ain’t got much imagination. Should you capitalize the ‘y’ in ‘Up yours’ or should we just say ‘maybe you oughtta shove it up your--’” SLAM. The big insulated door of the security room sealed tight, protecting its occupants once again from any physical intrusions from the outside world. Mr. Saturn took a deep breath of pleasantly warm air and waddled towards the elevator.

Clara had slowed to chat with Cane as the kids jogged along the beach behind Slippy and Fox. “How the heck did you do that? I mean, that was amazing. Twenty of twenty. You did better than I did! Where did you learn to shoot like that?” Fox had dragged the kids to Pinna Park, a huge theme park near the hotel, early in the morning, before it was open to the public, to do marksmanship practice. The drill required the kids to puncture balloons suspended near the tracks with rifle shots, as the cars whirled, dropped, and twisted through the roller coaster course.

Cane replied with more difficulty: he was in much better shape than a week ago but still struggling in the soft sand. “Geeze, Clara, I’ve been shooting (pant) rabbits with my beebee gun since I was, like, four or something! (pant) I mean, those balloons were (pant) huge! Nothing to it.”

“Well, but, upside down and spinning! I mean on the fourth balloon, that one under the twisty part of the track, that was hard! I missed it both laps, you got it first time.”

“Come on (pant) Clara, that coaster is hardly even, like, Top Gun!” said Cane. “I’ve been on (pant) a lot faster coasters than that!”

“Tell that to Nicholas! I’ll bet he has a different opinion.” Nicholas had survived the two laps of the shooting practice by sheer force of will: as soon as he had gotten off the car, he had retreated to a corner of the platform and involuntarily recycled his breakfast. The sincere solicitude offered by the other kids -- even Cane -- while demonstrating their growing respect for their leader, did not make him feel better. He was not a fan of roller coasters.

“Well, I’ll have to (pant) take him on the kids coasters (pant) when we get back. He needs to start somewhere (pant), geeze! Hey, Clara, do you wanna’ carry this pack for me? You’re not tired, how ‘bout it since I like out-shot you and stuff?”

“No way, Cane, I don’t like that much!” laughed Clara.

“Glad to hear it,” puffed Tennyson from ahead of them.

“Hey, look at that!” said Nicholas. “Isn’t that just like the digging machine you found at the treasure island, Brian?” The putative excavator had been left at the high-wafer edge of the beach, where the paved road ran.

“Another excuse to run on the road, eh, Nicholas?” puffed Tennyson.

“That’s okay, we need to get to the road anyway,” said Slippy, pointing ahead to where the beach sand ended in a broken, rocky stretch extending several hundred meters. He led the kids up into the sandy scrub near the road and Clara stretched her stride and made her way back to the front of the line with Fox.

The other kids labored behind Fox’s effortless lope. “Watch it, they’ve been trenching up ahead! Don’t fall in!” said Fox, pointing to the left.

As Clara’s eyes followed his gesture, she noted a tiny glint from the forested slope above their path. She couldn’t have said what it was -- the terrain, the scent, some tiny noise -- but without a further thought she screamed “Into the trench!” and dived.

Fox followed instantly. The others stopped in puzzlement but only for a moment; as soon as Nicholas could draw a breath he shouted “Follow Clara, move it!” and made towards the gap at full speed, pushing Erin ahead of him. It was none too soon. The harrowing whistling of high-velocity bullets all around announced the ambush just as Slippy dragged Cane’s behind down into the trench.

“Everybody okay?” shouted Nicholas, as soon as he regained his feet. The trench was deep enough to provide excellent cover to a crouching child; Fox and Slippy had to kneel.

“My arm hurts!” said Cane.

“Are you shot?” said Nicholas, apprehensively.

“Naw, Slippy pulled too hard!”

“Geeze, never mind, get your guns out and wait for my orders! Clara, what’s the deal? Can you see anything?”

“Just a minute!” She twisted off her pack and pulled the Superscope sight from a side pocket. A high-pitched whine forced them all to duck low as Fox shouted “Incoming!”. After the explosion of the mortar shell, fortunately long by about thirty meters, Clara carefully inched the scope over the edge of the trench as bullets continued to whine and skip around her. A brief examination, interrupted by another mortar round, sufficed. “It’s a bunch of uniformed soldiers! And -- wait a minute -- that’s Wolf! He’s over at the back, with some guy that looks like the commander. Boy, what a sore loser!”

Fox borrowed the scope. “Yep, that’s him all right. Can’t say I’m surprised. Oh, oh-- they’re moving up. Well, I wanted some hard work for you kids, here it is. Cane left flank, Clara right, you’re our sharpshooters! They’re moving out of cover -- you need to make them regret it! And keep your heads down while you’re at it! Incoming!”

“What about the rest of us?” said Nicholas.

“They’re still pretty far out,” replied Fox. “You guys would just be wasting bullets. Keep your heads down for the moment.”

"Sounds good to me!" said Brian. He tried to keep his voice calm but he was shaking from something other than the cold. "Who are these guys, anyway?"

"Probably the black hole army," replied Fox. "There was a squadron of 'em hanging around the hotel. Supposedly on vacation but they never miss a chance to cause trouble. Nice shooting!" the latter directed to Clara and Cane. Four soldiers of the attacking party had jumped out from behind their camouflaged sandbag pile dragging some large heavy weapon behind them, but before they could gain the cover of the huge Sequoia-like tree trunk they were headed for, Clara had wounded one man and Cane had put two shots into the mystery box, causing it to emit smoke and sparks. The three others abandoned their load and helped the wounded man back to cover. Meanwhile, Fox pulled a communicator box from his belt, pressed a pair of buttons, and then shook his head. "They're jamming us, I can't reach the Great Fox. We're gonna' have to do this on our own."

"Fox, what if the rest of us move over there?" said Nicholas, pointing down the trench. About 20 meters away there was a place where the trench walls had been dug out sideways to allow for some sort of access point. "We could set up a bomb launcher. We don't have to go over the trees on that side."

Fox nodded. "Good idea. Stay low so they can't see you moving. We'll arrange a little diversion over here." While Nicholas led Tennyson, Brian and Erin crouching low down the trench, Fox shouted to Clara. "Clara, entrainment gun, knife beam, 250 meter focus! Clip the top of that Douglas fir behind them! We'll lay smoke!" She nodded. He moved down the trench to tap Cane on the shoulder. "Smoke grenades out, son! Over there towards that clump of bushes, okay?"

Cane snapped off a shot that winged an advancing black-clad soldier who had unwisely deserted the protection of the sandbags, forcing him to limp back to cover, and then nodded. "Those guys can't hit the broad side of a barn!" he said as he turned to grab the smoke grenades from his pack. Just as he did so, a bullet spanged off the stock of his rifle an inch from his arm, knocking the weapon to the ground. Fox raised an eyebrow. "Lucky shot!" said Cane, grabbing two smoke grenades. Clara was poised behind the boulder she had been using for cover with a curious pretzel-like contraption that didn't look at all like a weapon. She nodded. Fox and Cane jumped out of the trench just for a moment to toss their grenades. The sudden activity drew a hail of bullets, leaving Clara free to leap on top of the boulder with a clear line of fire. A pencil-thin intensely bright beam leapt from the tip of her weapon to intercept a large pine above the main concentration of the ambushing force; she slid the aiming point ever so slightly down and to the right, making a diagonal cut across the trunk. The huge mass of bushes slid free and plummeted downwards towards the soldiers, who were forced to dive for cover. Clara instantly switched back to her ray gun and stung two of the exposed opponents as Cane and Fox jumped back up and fired through the smoke.

This little escapade had seriously deranged the Black Hole army's tactical position, but had not been without cost: Clara had received three gashes from the sharp edges of the boulder, Fox now had a pierced ear that was not a fashion statement, and Cane looked down as he dropped back into the trench to discover two widening red patches on his shirt. "This really sucks!" said Cane. "I actually washed this shirt! Why did I bother?"

"I'd love to care but not right now," replied Fox. "Can you still shoot?"

"Yeah, it ain't nothin'," Cane replied. The bullet had glanced off his ribs and done little damage.

The enemy forces were not idle, and quickly reassembled themselves to continue the assault. Fortunately, neither were Nicholas' group, who had constructed their bomb launcher in the trench and started to fire on a high trajectory that carried the bombs over the intervening foliage. It looked like the attackers might be forced to retreat. A group of them seemed to be doing just that, fleeing up the hill pursued by fire from both groups of kids, but instead they collected around a lumpy apparatus of some sort consisting of a central pedestal with four orthogonal horns or beams sticking out from the top, which they dragged down the hill towards the front of their position. "Stop those men!" said Fox. Clara and Cane from the left and Erin and Tennyson from the right all fired towards them, but to little effect. A crouching figure twisted something on the pedestal and leapt away: four brilliant red beams burst out at right angles to the four points of the compass. One of the beams passed along the ground right between the two groups of kids, separating Clara, Cane and Fox from the rest.

"It's a death ray!" screamed Fox. "Don't cross it!"

"What do we do now?" said Nicholas.

Fox shrugged. "I'm working on it! Keep up your fire!"

Before Nicholas could reply, there was a loud POP!, audible over the sound of the battle, and the crimson beam was interrupted by a battered DeLorean sportster, whose brilliantly polished stainless steel surface sent the deadly radiation glancing sideways back up the hill. Instantly seizing the opportunity, Fox led Clara and Crystal back to rejoin the others, while Brian shouted over the noise of the conflict: "What did you do now?"

The gull wing facing away from the Black Hole army popped open and DK stuck his head out. "What do you mean? (POW! BLAM! ROAR!) I did what you told me to do!" he shouted.

"Read the numbers on the (RAT A TAT BOOM!) displays!"

"Thirty two point one (KAPOW) nine!" Brian nodded. "Seven four three five one!" DK disappeared for a moment and then popped out again. "And dash dash three one for two five seven!"

"Dash dash, you said?"

"Yeah, I put two of 'em in to make sure!" screamed DK, ducking as a bullet ricocheted off the door of the car.

"No, no, that's not right!" screamed Brian. "Two minus make a plus! You have to use only one! (SCREECH! 'Incoming! Duck!' BOOM!) Try it again!"

"Okay!" said DK, closing the door. The DeLorean rose up off the ground and zipped off towards the beach.

"Brian, why didn't you ask him to rescue us!" screamed Cane.

"Oh, yeah, sorry!" said Brian.

While Fox and Tennyson took rifleman positions and Brian and Erin lobbed bombs, Nicholas dug in his pack for the megavitamins. "You're supposed to take these with water, okay?" he said to Clara, handing her two of the pills. "And don't do anything stupid afterwards!" he added, recalling his escapades on the Winstar Hotel roof.

A shout came from down the trench: it was Erin. "A pox on their hides, they've sold their souls to the devil to summon a monster from Hell, Cap'n!" Nicholas followed his gesture: a strange multilegged armored creature or conveyance, somewhat resembling a giant pig, was making its way down the steep drop to the right, seemingly undisturbed by the bullets, bombs, and ray blasts the kids immediately devoted to it.

"What the heck is that?" shouted Nicholas.

"A neotank!" replied Fox. "It's moving to take us in enfilade!" Nicholas followed his gaze: if the tank continued on its course it would gain a position from which it could fire down the length of the trench, 'rendering their position untenable' to quote from Crystal's lecture on siege tactics.

"Hey, what about me?" said Cane, who was still waiting for his megavitamin dose. "I want more than Clara had! I got shot! she only got cut!"

"Doctor Mario said you can only have two, and besides if we don't figure out what to do about that tank we're all hosed anyway!" shouted Nicholas in reply. Then he stopped short: "Dr. Mario -- that's it! THE PARTY BALL!"

"The what?" said Clara, squeezing off another shot from above and to his right. Nicholas ignored her and rummaged in the bottom of his pack. "Come on, come on, where did I -- all right!" He withdrew a fist-sized shiny object, screamed "CLOSE YOUR EYES!", and tossed it into the air.

There was an incredibly bright flash, even through their closed eyelids (except of course for Cane who had ignored the command and was staring right at the party ball when it went off). The shooting and sounds of battle stopped immediately.

When they could see again, a remarkable sight met their eyes: half the hillside had been instantly flattened, and in the place of the scrub and forest was now an elaborate maze of tables laden with food and drink, racks of dart boards and video games, a huge glistening bandstand before a wooden parquet dance floor, a water slide, a swimming pool and sauna, a row of card tables and roulette wheels, an arcade with Pokemon Puzzles and Pokemon Pinball, pool tables, balloons, bubble baths, and confetti, all

populated by a number of penguin servitors and a larger number of very attractive females and handsome males of various species in stylish black-and-silver outfits. Above it all floated a huge sparkling mirror ball, glistening as it rotated in the sun, spewing rainbow streaks across the implausible scene.

A group of the girls, all garbed in short slit skirts and halter tops, backed by a line of their male compatriots in smart striped uniforms, had moved to the hill-facing side of the dance floor and were waving towards the erstwhile combatants. The Black Hole warriors, who were after all on vacation, didn't need too much convincing: they began to file down the hill, apparently led by their officers to judge from their elaborate epaulets and decorated helmets. In the rear, the kids could see Wolf O'Donnell, jumping up and down and screaming ineffectually at the soldiers as they made their way towards the party.

The kids weren't much more reluctant: combat, after all, is thirsty work, and, as Cane loudly proclaimed, he needed a good big drink to go with his megavitamins. Soon the former adversaries were mixing happily with each other and the party staff. Only Wolf was left out, though even he succumbed to the extent of consuming hors d'oeuvres provided by white-hatted Toads carrying trays in between rants at his mercenary allies. Finally four of the soldiers grabbed the angry wolf, knocked him unconscious with a rifle stock, and dumped him into a huge bubbling punch bowl. While the soldiers returned to getting acquainted with a similar number of the scantily-clad ladies, staff members hauled the sodden carnivore out and put up a big sign over the bowl. Cane looked up from filling his glass with punch and asked Brian, "Hey, what does 'non-potable' mean?"

Fox was talking with the Black Hole squadron commander, a fellow named Stock, and his adjutant, Barrel. "It's no hard feelings, now, Fox my lad," said Stock. "The lads need a wee bit o' shootin' to get up proper in the morning, eh?"

"If you'll take the same attitude towards your wounded," replied Fox, gesturing towards a number of soldiers lying on improvised field cots amongst a veritable meadow of wildflower bouquets interspersed with an assortment of food and drink probably not appropriate for consumption by convalescents, served by an adoring crew of female acolytes in return for which the sufferers regaled them with the harrowing story of the battle, already rather embroidered over actual recent events.

"What are you, barmy?" replied Barrel. "A Purple Heart and a bonnie lassie, all for a wee mornin's fun? It's a line they'll be makin' to be wounded like this, the lads. Now, if the lads were not on leave it's a mite less conciliatin' we might be, seein' as there's a fancy price on some of the heads I'm seein' here."

"I didn't think you fellows did bounty work," said Fox, handing Stock another foaming glass.

"Right you are, lad, the squadron takes only proper honorable military activities, squashin' upstarts and suppressin' popular rebellion and such, but it's a poor commander who wouldn't wink at a little freelancin', you get me' drift?"

Brian, Tennyson, and Erin were guzzling slightly-enhanced fruit punch while being regaled by a tall, muscular sergeant, incongruously named 'Pin', who wore a huge emerald ear ring that glistened against his smoke-black skin and battle-gray uniform. "It was touch and go, lads, whether we'd ever see the light o' day! Cannon to the right of us, cannon to the left of us, cannon in front us, volleyin' and thunderin'! Onward into the valley o' death we rode, but no longer six hundred!"

"I'm sure it happened exactly that way. In fact, I'll bet Tennyson and Nostradamus played video games together in those student cafes and stuff in Vienna, Australia," said Erin. "I saw it in a PBS show a couple of weeks ago."

"I did what?" asked Tennyson.

"Not you, the other Tennyson," said Brian.

Cane, having finished his punch, was sampling the ice cream and pie sections of the dessert tables. "Ummm, vanilla cinnamon banana peanut butter crunch, my favorite!" he remarked between mouthfuls. Clara ignored him, as she was helping Wolf to recover his dignity. "Fox was going to pay you anyway, if you'd just asked," she said as she towed off the fur on his back. "Crystal wouldn't let him cheat you out of your money."

"Child, perhaps you're right, though you should have gathered that McCloud isn't called Fox just because of his ears," grumbled Wolf. "It's a weakness of mine, I admit, that my judgment is often

overmastered by passion. I'll not deny being surprised by the skill and cleverness of your friends and your self, lass. I've no liking for humiliation, I've got my pride, now."

"And I guess we're still just kids, you know -- we're not very -- um"

"Gracious?"

"Yeah, that's what I meant. Thoughtless. We still need to learn to think out the consequences of our actions." A pause. "I certainly do."

"Lass, age comes to many, wisdom to few. Still, there's always hope. You're right, my responsibility to my lads comes first. Where has that Fox gotten to?"

Nicholas was trying to remember something important, but he kept getting distracted. Partly it was his own fault: he had succumbed to the temptation to recite his favorite jokes to the coterie of admiring young ladies and smartly-dressed gentlemen who surrounded each of the party guests. "You see, these three guys went to heaven, and--"

"What's heaven?"

"Umm, oh, never mind, Star Haven." Nods of understanding. "And the, um, the boss there says 'Welcome to star haven, you can do whatever you want but just don't step on a duck!'"

"A what?"

"Oh, geeze, don't worry, it's just something you step on. So everybody starts going out and having fun, and then the next day one of the guys shows up with a really ugly girlfriend, and the other two guys say 'What happened?' 'I stepped on a duck.' But they all go off dancing and eating and stuff and then the next day the second guy has a really ugly girlfriend and they ask what happened and he says, 'I stepped on a duck', and then the third day the last guy shows up with a really gorgeous girl, and the other two guys ask 'What happened to you?' and the girl says 'I stepped on a duck!' Ha ha! Get it? She stepped on the duck." Blank faces. Distinct lack of laughter. That didn't go well, he thought. What was it I was trying to remember again? Just as it was on the tip of his mental tongue, there was a loud bashing chord and a wild drumset cadenza. Up on the bandstand, he could see a group of bearded, long-haired, slightly transparent ghostly figures: two guitarists, a bass, a ghost on keyboards and a spirit drummer.

"Oh, wow, it's a -- a live dead band," said Nicholas.

"No, it's a dead live band!" said Cane from behind him.

"And the way they look, I'm grateful they are dead," said Brian.

The guitarist stepped up to a microphone. "Isle Delfino, are you ready to rock?"

"Yes!" replied much of the crowd. Nicholas and Brian both looked dubious.

"Stand by to shake your bodies while we bend your heads!" screamed the guitarist. "We are glad to be bad, sad, and mad! You gotta be riven while you're living, cause once you're dead there's a paucity of sin and debauchery!" He slapped out a series of painfully loud and distorted chords as the band launched into something that was presumably their first song.

"Debauchery?" mumbled Nicholas to himself. "Ohmigosh! Debauchery! We gotta go!" He grabbed Tennyson, who was about to join a brunette named Mindy on the dance floor, and yelled over the music: "We gotta get out of here! Now! Get Clara! Get Erin! I'll find Cane and Fox!"

"What?" shouted Tennyson.

"It's the debauchery thing!" said Nicholas.

"Butchery?" replied Tennyson.

"No, no, it's different. Never mind, run!!" Nicholas jogged off to find the others. Something about his urgency penetrated Tennyson's chord-sotted brain: after a brief confused pause, he begged off the dance and went to look for Clara by the citrus and bubblegum punch fountain.

The band was still meandering through the first, very long number as Nicholas and Brian dragged Cane, an ice cream pot pie in each hand, bodily down the hill. Slippy was offering a continuous stream of suggestions as they marched, but no physical assistance. The others, having left with varying degrees of reluctance, were loudly demanding an explanation from Nicholas. "Wait, wait, where's Fox? We've got to go back and find him!" said Nicholas desperately, and then "Not you!" as Cane immediately volunteered to look for Fox under the dessert tables.

A familiar muzzle stuck out from behind a tree: "What now?" said Fox, leading a very fetching female fox, apparently wearing even less than her compatriots on the dance floor, out of the concealment of a patch of mesquite.

"Great, there you are," Nicholas sighed. "We have to get as far from the party as we can, quick!"

"I'm, a little busy here," said Fox dubiously.

"Geeze, Fox, it can wait!" said Nicholas. "I mean -- oh, never mind, let's go!" He dragged the kids down the hill and Fox and his new companion followed reluctantly. They had scrambled almost back to the road as the band's cacophony rose to a crescendo. There was a rumbling noise that didn't sound quite like the drums. Nicholas shouted "Get DOWN!" and threw himself behind a lovely old fir tree, dragging Tennyson with him. The others took his suggestion, and just in time: there was an intolerably bright flash and a strange wailing noise, followed by an unearthly silence. Nicholas poked his nose out from behind the tree. Where the huge party field had been, there was a perfectly flat rocky plateau, with no sign of the festivities that had filled the space a moment ago.

"Are they all dead?" wondered Brian.

"Dead or gone," said Clara. "Wow."

"Thank you, Doctor Mario!" said Nicholas.

"Nicholas, you certainly have style," said Fox, brushing pine needles from his fur. His companion had vanished along with the rest of the party folk, though rather less violently. "And I suppose you saved me from myself, again. Seems to me we were on the way back to the hotel, crew. Clara, would you like to lead the way?"

As they regained the road, the sound of a truck induced another bout of caution. Rounding a curve they saw a big slow platform rig carrying a load of concrete pipe. It screeched loudly to a stop just in front of Clara, and the door swung open. Mr. Saturn jumped down to the ground from the cab, turned back, and shouted "Thanks, fellas! Call me if you need help with the grading!"

A voice from the truck replied: "No problem, bud, we will." A grinding and clashing of gears and the big rig trundled slowly down the road again.

Mr. Saturn waddled over to Slippy and Fox. "You know, I was going to warn you about the Black Hole Army last night, but I found a really useful monograph on chlorination and I just lost track of the time. Sorry about that. Still, seems you dealt with them pretty summarily on your own."

"No thanks to you!" said Fox. "You're supposed to be watching out for these things! We could've all been fried in that firefight if Nicholas hadn't come through. Crystal is gonna be furious."

"Yeah, well, then I guess I won't bother to tell you about the bounty hunters," replied Mr. Saturn.

"Boss, calm down," said Slippy, interposing himself between the two while snagging a couple of flies that were foolishly circling in a patch of sunlight between boughs. "If Crystal found out about that little foxlet you were about to go off with you'd be alot worse off than a little neotank attack. Remember what happened at Mute City."

Fox cringed. "That wasn't my fault! Oh, never mind. You're right as usual. Let's get back to the hotel before something else goes wrong."

"Don't stop attacking, dang it! I dun' tol'dja and told'dja, I want you to attack like a dern fool madman! If y'aint gonna' listen what's the point fer me to waste my valuable time tryin' to fill yer brain up with wisdom 'stead a' slapdash halfbaked silliness." By now Nicholas was accustomed to Peppy's ranting. They had been working on fencing every afternoon since shortly after the start of training. Fox was completely opposed to wasting time with short-range weaponry like the beamsword, but it appeared that anything a bit old-fashioned was fine by Peppy; he had agreed at once to provide Nicholas with assistance, though in general he spent more time and effort complaining, telling the same story repeatedly, and indulging in short unpredictable naps in the middle of the lesson, than teaching. Actually fencing would have considerably exceeded the physical energy Peppy was willing to devote to the endeavor; Nicholas' opponent was a worn and beaten-up practice robot, with a limited repertoire of stereotyped maneuvers which Peppy called up through a wireless controller in his computer tablet. Clara, after a refreshing dip in the pool, was watching the proceedings from a lounge chair to the side.

This particular rant had been initiated by Nicholas' ill-advised attempt to employ a parry to block the simplistic head-thrust from the robot. It was Peppy's contention that a novice fencer like Nicholas could not hope to learn enough to sustain any sort of defence against an experienced combatant. The only approach that offered any promise was for Nicholas to practice a single attack tactic and employ this as his sole recourse against all the exigencies of actual combat: in this particular case, the attack consisted of unlimited repetition of a head thrust (beating the opponent's blade if the thrust was parried was okay) followed by a cut to the torso area. Needless to say, Nicholas found this single-minded approach dull and of dubious utility. He had practiced the parries that Marth taught him at Fourside in his free time, and even worked privately with Clara to improve his defensive abilities. He was sure that he could do more than Peppy gave him credit for.

"I just don't see why I shouldn't try to block an attack if I see an opening," complained Nicholas, backing away from the robot and opening his protective face mask. "I've been working a lot on all the basic parries. I can do this if you'll just give me a chance."

"'Cause yer' gonna get your tail cut raht off, that's why! Anybody with a bit o' seasoning, they's gonna feel ya out with a coupla' whacks, and then they's gonna sucker ya' into a useless parry and knock yer' head offa' yer shoulders. Why, I once saw Princess Peach -- back in the days when she was a'fahtin and a'duelin, y'understand -- go up agin' some dang fool buddy o' Link's, an within one minute there wasn't a piece o' him left big enough to choke a hawg."

"You're just saying that to scare me. I mean, we met Princess Peach, and she was really nice to us. She's the one who gave me the beam sword, for cryin' out loud!"

"You know, Nicholas is really doing a lot better," added Clara, putting down her smoothie. "I'm better than the boys in just about everything else, but he beat me yesterday four to one and my one touch was just luck."

"You keep out o' this, young lady, it's 'tween me 'n mah student!" Before she could reply, the mobile phone on Peppy's belt started to play an old StarFox theme song. Peppy sniffed and looked distant for a moment. "Allus' brings a tear to mah eye, it does," he mumbled, as he flipped the phone open. "Peppy here, what can I do ya for? Oh, yeah, we're out in the field raht behind the tennis courts, y'all come on out." He turned back to Nicholas. "I've had just about enuf of yer dern sass 'n nonsense on this topic, young fella. Me 'n my ol' buddy Falco dun' arranged a little deminstrashun fer to teach ya' a little manners. Yep, yer gonna' listen to yer ol' instructor after this, ya will, I tell ya!"

A crunching sound of boots on gravel caused them both to turn back towards the hotel. The familiar figure of the birdlike Falco appeared from behind the wind-screened fence surrounding the tennis courts. Behind him Nicholas could see a pair of legs engulfed in swirling robes beneath the windscreen; who the heck was that? He retracted the beam sword and replaced the hilts in his belt as the mystery figure moved into the open: he or she was hooded and wrapped in a brown and gray angle-length robe from which only the hands protruded. Nicholas waited, puzzled, as the two approached across the long grass.

Falco trilled a greeting to Peppy and then said "Just as promised! Let me tell you, this was not easy! I had to break more than a few rules, but the barrier that can keep Falco from getting what he wants once he puts his mind to it, that hasn't been built and never will be! Why, this is nothing compared to when I stood single-handed against Wario's whole squadron of --"

"Yeah, yeah, I heard about that namby pamby pillow faht twenny, thirty times already. Ya got him, let's put 'im to work, ah ain't had my afternoon nap yet." Peppy turned to Nicholas. "You'd better put yer mask back on, son. Ah got ya a real opponent fer to teach ya just how dumb yer dern fool ideas are. Now you just go ahead 'n let me know when you've had enuf, I told'em not to cut off too much o' ya but he maht forget in the heat o' battle."

The robed figure laughed and turned to Nicholas, doffing the hood to reveal a tall handsome man with flecks of gray in his short-cropped hair. "I shan't forget, though a little pain in the interest of instruction is sometimes the course of wisdom," he said. He bowed his head slightly. "Obi-wan is my name, though you may call me Ben."

Nicholas gasped, and then managed "Uh-- wow -- uh, pleased to meet you, sir, I'm Nicholas."

“Shall we fight, then, young Padawan?” replied Obi-wan. He shrugged the robe off and dropped it behind him on the grass, revealing a huge white stylized X on his shirt.

It was Clara’s turn to gasp: “He’s gone over to the Dark Side!”

Ben smiled as he pressed the button that extended his light saber. “Reprehensible, I agree, but lucrative. If you only knew the power of the X-box, girl. Still, for now I have another task to attend to.” He turned to Nicholas and nodded.

Nicholas extended his beam sword. Peppy nodded: “Go ‘head, in a faht ya’ ain’t a gonna wait fer anybody to say fer ya to start, get on with it!” Nicholas drew a deep breath and then charged towards Obi-wan: feint to the head, cut at the torso, do it again. The Jedi effortlessly parried the blows, not retreating a step, waiting for Nicholas to tire. After ten or so repetitions, Obi-wan launched a series of lightning-fast attacks: a thrust to Nicholas’ belly, a head cut, a roundhouse stroke at the legs, each easily evading Nicholas’ belated attempts at deflection and delivering a painful burn through the protective fencing suit. The damage could of course have been far more drastic had Kenobee desired, as the suit represented no obstacle to the blade of the energy weapon; but this was little consolation to Nicholas as his claims of defensive ability were rapidly and authoritatively demolished. He tried to retreat, but as they had only practiced footwork for the attack, he stumbled and fell onto one knee. Obi-wan’s hissing blade flashed straight towards his face, promising Nicholas the gift of a very unpleasant traditional dueling scar, when suddenly he stopped completely in mid-strike.

For a moment only Nicholas’ panting attempt to catch his breath could be heard. “Uh -- Mr. Kenobee? Sir?” said Nicholas. “Are you okay?”

Falco grabbed a little box from his belt and pressed a button. Nothing happened. “You know, everything worked perfectly before. Hung up again! This always happens when we come out for a demo. Reset, you stupid Microsoft junk, reset!” He jabbed the button futilely a few more times, sighed, and walked over to the frozen figure of the Jedi Knight. After retracting the light saber, Falco pushed Kenobee on the chest; he fell backwards, stiff as a statue, onto the ground with his feet sticking into the air. Falco signaled to Peppy: “Well, are you going to give me a hand here? Come on.” He reached down and tugged hard on Ben’s left boot, slowly working it off. While Peppy explained in great detail about the misery in his back, Clara shook her head and walked over to help with the other shoe.

“I have to say I’m not much more impressed with you than the last time we met,” she remarked to Falco as she pulled. “What are we doing, anyway?”

“What do you think? We’re rebooting!”

“What’s the end of time and the beginning of eternity, the --” Nicholas began.

“E!” interrupted Brian. “Geeze, that’s too easy.”

“Okay, okay, um -- okay, I got another one: what do you call a blind dinosaur?”

“Doyouthinkhesaurus!” shouted Erin. “Jurassic Park. Duh.”

“All right, fine, how about this one,” said Nicholas, undeterred. “There are these three guys trapped on a desert island and they find an old pirate stash, and there’s like an oil lamp. So they rub the lamp and out pops a Genie! ‘In return for freeing me from the prison of the lamp, I will grant each of you one wish,’ says the Genie, and the first guy says, ‘I wish to be returned to my wife and family right now’ - - POOF! he’s gone. The second guy says ‘I wish to be home again, too!’ -- POOF! he’s gone. The third guy says, ‘Gee, I’m lonely. I wish my friends were back.’”

A burst of laughter from the table behind Nicholas overwhelmed the modest response of the other kids. Nicholas turned to check out his new fan: an unidentifiable figure, completely encased in white plastic armor, sat at the table sipping a tall smoothie through a helmet-mating straw. A female voice said: “That’s a good one! ‘I wish my friends were here!’ That’s funny!” she said, collapsing into another burst of mirth. Apparently she had unwisely tried to drink and laugh simultaneously, judging by the burbling sounds that followed. She pulled the straw out and twisted her helmet off, revealing a teenage girl with round glasses, bobbed brown hair and bright smiling eyes. She grabbed a napkin and wiped the excess smoothie from her mouth and chin.

"Would you like to join us?" said Nicholas, who thought a fan of his jokes, even one wearing a number of deadly weapons on her belt, would be a welcome addition to the group. Nicholas, Erin, Clara, and Brian were taking a break before dinner at one of the outdoor bars to be found in various spots on the hotel grounds. Wooden tables with brightly-colored umbrellas, wicker chairs, and padded recliners surrounded a cheerful little bamboo-and-wood kiosk peopled by two equally cheerful piantas. A gentle sea breeze and the distant greedy honks of gulls complemented a sunset whose glowing oranges and yellows would have fascinated van Gore. It was not an environment that encouraged cautious dealings with strangers.

"Thank you, I'd love to," the girl said. She pulled her chair over to the big round table. "I just started being a bounty hunter, you see, and I didn't realize that it's kind of a lonely profession. When you tell people you get paid to kill them they don't want to talk to you anymore!" Her expression fell. "Oh, I shouldn't have told you that, now you're going to run away, aren't you?"

"No, no, it's okay," said Clara. "That's really interesting. How did you come to be a bounty hunter? Have you been doing it very long? Is it as dangerous as -- oh, I'm sorry, I'm Clara and this is Erin, Brian, and Nicholas is the one who thinks he's funny."

"Hi, I'm Wendy! And I think Nicholas is really funny!" She released another flood of giggles. "I wish my friends were here. Ohmigosh that's good."

Clara (who did not share her appreciation of this particular bit of humor) was not deterred. "So, what's it like being a bounty hunter? Who are you hunting? How did you get started?"

"Oh, I just started, like I said, I guess I don't really know what it's like very much," Wendy replied. "You know, I was a snowboard kid, it was so much fun -- but our game didn't do very well, and people just didn't come to the resort, I guess it's the economic precession or something like that. So after a while they just let us go! We had to get jobs. All of us! Mister Doggie took up painting snowboards. Slash is running a snowmaking machine last I heard. Let's see... Jan tried to be a lyric writer. Nancy almost got on the graphics team for Super Mario Sunshine! I think she got some work on Metroid Prime. But anyway I thought it would be fun to be a bounty hunter, and I read some books and bought this suit, and Slash knew this guy who knew a woman at the MBHL, and like, there I was!" Wendy removed two photographs from a pouch on her belt and showed them to Nicholas. "I'm on my first assignment, it's really exciting. I get to go after, um, Stick, he's worth two hundred coins!" It was a photograph of Cane, obviously taken at Luigi's place. "And this other guy, Teasy Eliot I think, he's not very scary at all, I'll bet I can take him! Two hundred fifty coins!" It was Tennyson. "Have you seen either of these guys anywhere? I could really use some help, I want to find them! I've been all over the island here, a whole day's work and not a sign of them."

Nicholas took the photographs from Wendy. "Ugly looking guys. Probably pretty mean. I haven't got a clue where you could find 'em though." He turned to Clara. "Oh, Clara, why don't you go upstairs and make sure Bill and Ralph stay in their rooms. They need to finish their studying, you know."

"Who?" said Clara, mystified.

"Bill and Ralph," said Nicholas, shoving the photographs in her face.

"Oh -- Bill and Ralph -- oh, yeah, they sure do need to study a lot or they'll never pass their exams, all right." She stood to leave, spilling her tall glass of papaya punch. "Oh, gosh, I'm sorry, I got punch all over your pictures," she said to Wendy. "Let me just go clean these up, I'll be right back!"

"Okay," said Wendy. "Who are Bill and Ralph?"

"Uh, nobody you know, just some friends of ours," said Nicholas. "So, two hundred coins, that doesn't really sound like much money for such a dangerous job. Are you sure you can make a living doing this?"

"Oh, I've still got lots of money left over from my inventions," Wendy responded.

"Inventions? What were those?" interrupted Erin, abandoning his previous mumbled reverie concerning the intricate diplomacy surrounding the meeting of Babar the elephant and George of the Jungle.

"Oh, there was my personal robot, and the low-pollution rocket engine, those were good, but my best one was the UFO tractor beam." She turned to Erin with an earnestness that revealed that inventing

held even more fascination than bounty hunting. Clara noticed that Erin's eyes were already glazing over in a Princess-Zelda fashion and decided it was an excellent time to make a quiet exit. "The old tractor beam was, like, the color of barf and, it made you barf, it was terrible, it felt like your stomach was being turned inside out! So, like, it was all just because of the mismatch between the in-phase and quadrature reality generators, you just had to add a closed-loop control to adjust them. It works a lot better than the old one -- why, people even like being captured now! I even had an offer from Pinna Park to make a UFO tractor beam ride!"

"We were just over there this morning," said Erin, looking puzzled. "I didn't see a tractor beam ride. Where is it?"

"No, no, I didn't take the job. At least not yet. They want me to be the product manager. I have to be responsible for all this testing and focus groups and safety standards and marketing collateral materials and, then, like, they wanted to pay me in stock options! I mean, where's the money, honey? That's what I said to her, too. I mean, the manager there. I think it was a she. It's hard to tell with gryphons, you know."

"Oh, that's too bad," said Erin, rather too loudly. "Designing them park rides is so neat! I mean, I can play Roller Coaster Tycoon for hours and hours!"

Sudden silence enveloped the bar. The barkeep was staring at him. Brian kicked Erin under the table and whispered, "You don't talk about those games here!"

"What, just because it runs under Windows ME?" said Erin. A penguin at the next table spat her margarita into the face of her companion. Two ghosts at the bar turned pale. The bouncer (a dinosaur that looked like an overweight version of General Scales) withdrew a large wooden club from his belt.

Wendy grabbed her helmet and slammed it on. "All right, you're coming with me, you scumbag Friend of Bill!" she declared loudly. She grabbed Erin by the arm and dragged him roughly away from the bar in the general direction of the parking lot. "I'd blow your head off right here but I'd make less money on a partial corpse!"

"What? Leggo!" said Erin, struggling futilely.

"Quiet!" hissed Wendy. "Let's get out of here quick before you get yourself into even more trouble!"

Erin's eyes widened. "Oh." He began to flail his legs in a fashion that looked frantic but did not impede Wendy's progress. "Ow, let me go!" he cried, with rather less conviction than before. "Save me, save me! I am innocent!"

"No Dreyfuss!" yelled Brian.

"Write if you find work!" shouted Nicholas. "I mean Wendy!"

Once they were out of sight in the parking lot elevator Wendy released Erin, who fell on his back on the floor. "Gee, you were great!" said Erin. "That was really quick thinking."

"Well, it would be better if you could just keep your mouth shut," replied Wendy, still in her bounty hunter role. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that," she said, taking her helmet off. "Are you okay? I didn't hurt your arm, did I?"

"No, thanks, I'm fine," said Erin, getting up. "What do we do now?"

"I guess we'd better get out of here until things cool down. We can take my shuttle up to my UFO! I could show you the tractor beam. Would you like to see that?"

"Yeah, wow, that would be so cool! I always wanted to ride in a space shuttle. Does it have huge solid-rocket boosters with big clouds of poisonous smoke and stuff? Oh, I forgot, that's your invention, isn't it, non-polluting rockets? No smoke?"

"Wait a minute, um, it's not exactly like that," said Wendy, leading Erin out of the elevator. "This is my shuttle. I had to borrow it from Jingletown after my rocket shuttle was banned by the Air Pollution Enhancement Board." She pointed to what was unmistakably a sleigh, about the size of a large automobile, albeit the skids were equipped with supplementary wheels. Six pairs of rocket-powered snowman robots waited patiently in the traces. At the front of the passenger compartment a diminutive humanoid, dressed in a sort of green velour with huge red buttons and a floppy velvety purple pointed hat

with a white cloth flower dangling from the top, slept contentedly on the padded bench behind the instrument panel.

"Dave! Wake up, Dave, we gotta go!" shouted Wendy.

The little guy bounced up, looking as if he regretted the fact. "Wake up!" he said in a tremulous tenor. "I was working on my song lyrics. We can't go yet, anyway. This uniform still isn't right. I don't like red and green, it makes me look short."

"You don't just look short, Dave, you are short," said Wendy. "To my UFO please. You didn't lose the orbital parameters again, did you?"

Dave tried to ignore her. "Bang the drum slowly, little drummer boy, the streets of Laredo are covered with joy!" he sang. "What do you think? Too maudlin? Do you think it's corny? I don't know, maybe I should use a theme of redemption from evil, or overbooking airline reservations, or something like that. I'm not sure."

"Dave, do you want me to call Jingle?" said Wendy.

"No, no, you don't have to do that, I'm on it, we're getting going right now! Just a little RA and declination conversion, it's nothing, an impulse estimate, we'll be off, step right on in! Do you like the upholstery? I redid it in cream and mauve, you know, with felted yak hide trim." He turned back to the control panel, while singing off key: "Jingle leases, rents and sells, as long as you pay, oh what fun it is to ride in a rocket powered sleigh!"

Erin couldn't decide if the dizzy floating feeling was the exhilaration of driving in a rocket-powered sled through the narrow lanes and helical access tunnels of the parking lot, or the effect of Wendy sharing that exhilaration right next to him. She had shed her top body armor and wrapped him up in an embrace, whooping and hollering as they paid their parking fee in less than 10 milliseconds and burst into the air over Isle Delfino. The wild whipping wind of their initial passage was replaced by the scent of Wendy's hair as Dave extended the protective bubble over the passenger compartment in preparation for altitude; the fake snowflakes that filled the compartment from a little dispenser on top of the bubble completed his disorientation. Erin was definitely weightless long before they reached orbit.

It took about an hour to match velocities with the orbiting UFO, ample time for Erin to reaccustom himself to zero-G maneuvering. Outside of arguments about fuel reserves, maximum safe velocities, shell temperature limits, whether to use mean or actual anomaly to find the osculating parameters of their orbit, and interminable disputes over unanswerable questions about unfashionable articles of clothing, Dave and Wendy got along just fine. While the two squabbled about approach velocities, Erin, who after the asteroid adventure considered himself a certified master of seat-of-the-pants space navigation, took the controls and guided them towards the only feature on the silvery-smooth surface of the saucer that could be a mating hatch.

"Okay, what do we do now?" asked Erin as he damped the approach velocity down in preparation for contact.

"I can't possibly arrange a successful rendezvous with this -- this -- kid distracting me!" replied Dave. "I'm under a lot of stress, you know. It's not easy being responsible for a rental sleigh." BUMP! Erin gently slid the bottom of the sleigh onto the pyramidal collar of the hatch and heard a hissing sound as a seal was established. "There's that big deposit, I have to refund it if I don't -- what was that?"

"We're here," said Erin. "What do we do now?"

"Oh, we're here!" exclaimed Wendy. "You're so smart!" She wrapped Erin in an enthusiastic embrace, causing them to bounce weightlessly back and forth between the ceiling bubble and the seats a couple of times. "That was great!" She released Erin and grabbed a handle next to the control panel to drag herself towards the displays. "Well, let's see, now we need to verify mating lock here -- yep -- and seal integrity -- okay -- and re-pressurize the lock side there -- coming up, there we are, forty thousand, fifty thousand Pascals, equalize--" there was another loud rushing hiss as the port on the bottom of the sleigh cracked open, making Erin's ears pop -- "okay! Out we go."

"I'll -- uh -- I'll stay with the -- sleigh, okay?" said Dave. "You never know what might happen to it. Somebody might steal the radio or something."

"Dave, the sleigh is going to be in our cargo compartment," Wendy sighed.

“Well, you know how it is. I think I’d better keep watch just in case. I’ll be fine. Could you bring me something to eat in the cargo compartment? Just a sandwich. My appetite is elfin, you know. And a drink. And maybe a cookie. Do you have strawberry chocolate chip? Just a little one. Or two. I’d better work on my damage report. And some hot soup?”

“Fine, fine, I’ll pull you in with the tractor beam,” Wendy said, tugging at Erin’s pant leg as she floated towards the exit port. “Hey, you wanna’ see some of my inventions? The tractor beam is here, obviously, and I’m still working on the robot, I’ve got it stashed in my bedroom.”

They floated into the lock. Wendy twisted a handle to close the hatch behind them and then pressed another button to restore gravity to the lock without warning Erin: the direction of the restored weight was such as to land him face-down on top of Wendy, literally face-to-face. “Ooops, sorry,” he mumbled.

“Oh, that’s okay,” Wendy said, mussing Erin’s hair affectionately. “Come on, let’s go in!” A bit of untangling later, the two bounced through the low-level artificial gravity into the UFO.

From the lock they entered a short corridor opening into the control room. The view was truly breathtaking: before them in the huge wraparound viewpanels the cloud-covered ocean glistened blue and white in the afternoon sun. Erin could see the dots of cumulus-topped islands, an archipelago guarding the edge of a continent just rolling into view as they skimmed towards the rim of the world. While Erin admired the view, Wendy swung herself into a swiveling chair before one of the numerous panels and donned a headset.

“Okay, Dave,” she said, “release the mating collar and I’ll bring you in with the tractor beam.” The other half of the conversation was only just audible as a Dave-esque buzzing over the hisses and beeps of the controls. “No, I don’t want you to just fly it into the hold,” said Wendy, presumably responding to a complaint. “Remember what happened last time you tried that.” A pause. “Good, yes, now just give it a little burst of thrust, just like a hundred newtons is all you need, just to get some clearance so I can steer the beam -- okay, great, that’s it.” After a few seconds, Erin could see the back of the sleigh drift into view at the bottom edge of the center panel as it slowly moved away from the UFO. Dave was just visible inside the swirling fake snowflakes: apparently his protests had been accompanied by emphatic and quite pointless gestures.

Wendy mumbled to herself as she made adjustments at the control panel, and then said, “Okay, here we go!” A brilliant orange-yellow beam leapt from the saucer and enveloped the sleigh, causing the latter to abruptly halt its slow drift towards the top of Erin’s field of view. The saucer shimmered and wavered for a moment; Erin could see Dave suddenly hunch over face down with his mouth wide open, after which he disappeared from view behind the snowshower induced by his sudden movement. The sleigh shook and then zipped almost instantly toward the bottom of the panel; moments after it disappeared from Erin’s view, there was a loud thumping and a mechanical whine, followed by what sounded like door clamps closing.

“Well, that went just fine, didn’t it,” said Wendy cheerfully. There was a loud extended buzz in reply; Wendy’s expression turned quizzical as she listened. “Gee, it hardly ever causes that kind of nausea any more. I guess I must have gotten the phase match a little bit wrong. Yes, I agree you sound awful. Yes, I know you have to clean it up. It’s a rental sleigh, yeah, yeah. Did you want your sandwich?” The reply to that question was clearly audible even to Erin. Wendy pulled the headphones off and rubbed her ears as she turned back to Erin. “Oh well, it almost always works. Anyway, you wanna’ see some of my other inventions?”

“Sure, that would be great.”

Pneumatic doors hissed open as Wendy led him into the workshop. The remainder of the ship was quite modest by comparison with the Great Fox, but exuded a comfortable lived-in ambiance that the impersonal environment of the Fox could not match. Erin meandered his way through an obstacle course of cushions, chairs, boxes and shelves, the latter often ornamented with a few flowers in a vase or an embroidered bit of cloth in a frame. Erin stopped for a closer inspection of one. Gold letters at the bottom proclaimed it to be Turtle Island, and a pair of little splotches of thread seemed to represent a snowboarder careening down the fish-laden edge of a reef.

"Oh, do you like that one?" asked Wendy, poking her head out of the door ahead. "I've done much better since, you can have that one if you want!" Her head disappeared again, but her voice continued from inside the room: "Where is that robot?" There was a loud crashing noise. "Oh, yeah, I'd forgotten these! Look, Erin, this is neat: I made special narrow snowboards so you can wear one on each foot! I call them Wizowskis after that one-eyed monster, or maybe just owskis for short."

She held up a long rounded board, turned up at both ends, with a simple belt-and-clasp binding attached at the center, for Erin to admire. "Yep," he said, remembering a long embarrassing roll down hill at Northstar a couple of winters back, "ow! skis, that's an apt name all right. Cool! What else you got?"

As Wendy turned back to rummage through a disorderly pile of assorted mechanical contrivances, Erin's ears were suddenly assaulted with a very loud trumpet note, followed by the fifth and an octave, also fortissimo. By the time the kettle drums pounded his ears through his skull, he recognized Also Sprach Zarathustra. The music cut suddenly short as Wendy pressed a button next to a panel on the wall, which lit up to show a little strike-thru logo and a placard saying IMAGE ACCESS DENIED. "Oh - - ring tones," muttered Erin to himself.

"Board Couriers, how can I help you?" Wendy recited cheerfully at the panel.

"Pikachu tingles the tip of your tongue," said a tinny voice from the other end.

"Oh -- oh - I know this one -- oh, yeah, 'but Raichu rips out your nose, mouth and lungs!'"

"Good, fine. This is Lyghar again. We've decided to hire you after all, if you can be here for a pickup in one hour or less. We talked with Redd; he agreed to a ten percent transport commission as you proposed. The coordinates were provided yesterday. Yes or no?"

"Oh, that's great!" said Wendy. "One hour, no problem, we'll be there! Thanks for your business!"

"What was that about?" asked Erin. "Or maybe I shouldn't know?"

"It's a courier job I was working on last week. Wow! I thought they'd changed their minds, that's why I took the bounty hunting job. This is great! Ten percent, too! All we have to do is go to Star Haven to pick up the shipment and then deliver it to Crazy Redd's black market without being detected by anyone."

"Hmm. How long is this going to take?" asked Erin. "I suppose I ought to at least let the guys know I'm gone."

"Gee, it shouldn't be but a couple of hours," Wendy replied. She looked at a clock display on the wall above. "Oooh, it will be evening there by the time we're finished, we could stop for some dinner afterwards, there's a really nice spot where you can eat out under the stars."

"Wait a minute. Black market. No detection. Is this job illegal or something?"

"Oh, probably, I think it's smuggling. Legal shippers hardly ever hire high-speed low-cross-section saucers with tiny cargo capacities like this one; I read that in last month's Journal of Piracy and Illegal Occupations."

"So you want to go smuggle illegal contraband stuff and then have dinner afterwards?"

"Yeah, sure," Wendy took Erin's hands in hers and broadcast her smile at him: "Oh, come on, it'll be fun! Wait 'till you see Star Haven, it's gorgeous! Besides, I can't bring you back until everybody's forgotten about all that stuff you said; you've just got to come, it'll be so much better that me doing alone. And you can take my other ray gun and watch my back and stuff. Okay?"

"Well, I guess so."

"Great!" Wendy hugged him and delivered a quick kiss on his cheek, and then ran off to the control room while Erin wondered if his face looked as hot as it felt.

"So this display here just finds the possible transformations of the Kalabi-Yau manifold," said Wendy brightly, pointing to an incomprehensible holographic image floating above the main control panel in front of her. "If you get the right eleven-brane you almost always come out of the warp just where you meant to. I think the chances of disappearing in a burst of subatomic particles are, like, only one or two percent."

“Never tell me the odds!” said Erin, punching the EXIT JUMP button. The tunnel de-streaked into a starlit sky broken in the distance by the silhouettes of pine trees. To the left, the sky was red with the memory of the recently-departed sun. The saucer was floating a few hundred meters above a town of some sort. They descended to land on a round pad just big enough for the craft, in what was obviously a parking area occupied by several other craft of various descriptions. The scene visible through the panoramic windows of the cockpit was inviting: they were at the edge of a plaza dotted with lighted, elegantly sculpted fountains. The long grass rustled in a gentle breeze. Here and there groups of brilliantly glowing Star Spirits drifted, accompanied by representatives of numerous other species, dressed in a ravishing array of colors and styles. Through the plaza were what looked like shops and cafes, each one a unique work of architectural inspiration, tastefully lit and arranged so as to complement its neighbors. As Wendy led the way down the ramp, lovely music that seemed to come from nowhere in particular and a hypnotic blend of aromas were added to the sensual mix. Erin, still dressed in his usual tee-shirt and jeans, felt like a country hick at an expensive party, but Wendy charged blithely across the grass, and Erin, still nominally in his Han Solo adventure mode, was not going to let himself be outdone by a girl.

The aromas of coffee and chocolate greeted them at the StarCoins cafe; Wendy sat down at a contrivance that resembled an elaborated computer desk, and motioned for Erin to join her. At first, he found it disconcerting when the seat molded itself in response to his presence, but that was less bizarre than the perfectly white sphere, emblazoned with a glowing blue numeral ‘1’, that appeared above their table.

“Welcome back to StarCoins, Wendy,” it said. “We’re sorry to see that you stepped on a duck. Your double latte will be out momentarily.”

“There is no duck!” Wendy replied heatedly. “Besides, I think he’s cute.”

“In Star Haven, courtesy is not a barrier to the truth,” replied the sphere. “Here is your latte. A hot chocolate has been provided for your companion. He is not sufficiently mature to be a viable soul mate. You stepped on a duck; it is possible that you did not notice at the time. Your adaptation to this regrettable circumstance is admirable if it is not founded in self-deception. We will debit your account as we find appropriate. I’ll be back when you’re ready for something else,” said the sphere, and popped into nothing.

“Star Haven is gorgeous but the service here is terrible,” said Wendy.

“Every one is entitled to their opinion,” replied Erin, taking a sip from the astonishingly-perfect steaming drink. “So just exactly who are we supposed to be meeting here?”

“I don’t really know. Do you think Lyghar himself will come? I don’t know who does the dropoff. We just have a recognition code.”

“Oh, you mean like the Pikachu thing?”

“Yeah. Let’s see, this one is, um...oh-oh, I don’t remember which one I’m supposed to use.”

The sphere reappeared, and said enigmatically: “I’ve been asked to tell you that no one would be so crazy as to fly into an asteroid field.”

Erin replied immediately, “They’d be crazy to follow us, wouldn’t they?”

“I agree completely. Would you be so kind as to follow me, please?” The sphere floated slowly towards a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY.

Erin stood (reluctantly; he’d already gotten spoiled by the absurdly comfortable chair) and followed; Wendy whispered in his ear, “How did you know? That was great!” and squeezed his hand. The door faded away as the sphere neared it, and reassembled itself behind them as the three entered what was presumably the kitchen. Enticing aromas competed with addictive scents; streams of what was presumably coffee leapt across the room from invisible nozzles to be collected by half-seen drains, the caffeinated liquids interwoven with turbulent cascades of milk and bubbling geysers of steaming tea. Avoiding a scalding if tasty drenching was a bit like river rafting; quiet hints from the sphere told them where and when to move as they navigated towards the back of the room.

The sphere popped away as the two humans came around a partition. A Star Spirit, its glow dimmed to tolerability, was tucked into an alcove surrounded by abstract patterns of rainbow lights, their

distribution suggesting a completion by many hues invisible to the human eye. A clock face arose suspended in the air before the Spirit, turning from 11:59 to 12:00 as they watched, then faded away like the door.

“Wonderful, precisely an hour minus one minute,” said the Star Spirit in a voice matching that of the phone conversation. “You are as good as your word. It is always a pleasure to find good help in these troubled times. We all appreciate your forbearance in agreeing to meet in such a run-down, decrepit, disreputable neighborhood. You may be assured that when we have the position that is our due, you will be entertained in the finest establishments in Star Haven.”

Wendy’s eyes went wide, but fortunately Erin was still in his Han Solo smuggler mode. “You’re right, this place is a dump, but we’ve seen a lot worse. Where’s the stuff?”

While you couldn’t really tell where a Star Spirit was looking, Erin had the distinct impression that Lyghar was checking around the room before he responded. “Under the counter,” the Star Spirit said after a delay. Erin and Wendy pulled out a large box marked POWDERED MILK in large block letters. “You should get this to your craft forthwith,” said the Star Spirit. “It would be -- inconvenient -- if we were detected.”

“Right away, sir,” said Wendy cheerfully.

“Wait a minute,” interrupted Erin. “Let’s make sure it’s a full shipment.” He lifted the top of the box away. The box was full of metal-capped jars; Erin pulled one out to inspect the contents. Even in the flickering multicolored lights he immediately recognized the repulsive shape: “Ah, sinoglyphygus obnoxious.”

The Star Spirit flickered blue and then pink. “How did you know that? I wasn’t aware our agreement included disclosure of the contents of the shipment.”

“In this business you have know a lot of strange stuff if you want to survive,” Erin replied. He counted the jars, trying to look as if he knew what number to expect. “Eight by seven by four, hmm, that’s, uh--”

“Two hundred twenty four!” said Wendy.

“Perfect,” replied Erin, replacing the top on the box. “All right, looks fine, we’ll take it from here.” Erin was trying to figure out how to lift the heavy box without looking stupid when Wendy pulled a little wiry contraption from her belt: it extended filamentary feet towards the corners of the box and pulled itself onto the box cover like a button; Wendy grabbed on with two fingers and effortlessly hefted the bulky cargo into the air.

“Ah, glad you remembered to bring that along,” bluffed Erin.

“Oh, you should see my big lifting spider!” she replied. Erin, being unneeded for cargo removal, pulled his ray gun from its holster and pretentiously threatened the streams of flying refreshments as they made their way out of the kitchen, while Wendy waved back to Lyghar and brightly chanted, “Thanks for your business! Call us again any time! We’re here to help.”

Erin forced himself to maintain his armed watch as they traversed the plaza, though it was difficult to maintain a high level of paranoia in the soothing environment of Star Haven.

“Wow, how did you learn to do that?” said Wendy as soon as they were away from the cafe. “You were perfect! You made it sound like you were doing Lyghar a favor to let him hire us, and like you knew all about everything without revealing anything. That was amazing!”

“I’ve been around the block with these Star fellows before,” Erin replied. “The sinoglyphygus -- that was just luck that I’d seen one. Though I didn’t think so at the time.”

“Well you sure fooled him! And me, for that matter. Do you know what they’re used for?”

“Afraid I haven’t the slightest idea.” Erin was distracted by the temptation to turn into Sherlock to tackle the mystery of the alien specimen jars, and disconcerted by the unabashed admiration of such an attractive older girl. “We’d better get inside the saucer before anyone changes their mind,” he said gruffly.

"Hambo, you can't be serious. That's absolutely disgusting!" The two pigs were staring at a display of stuffed wolf heads mounted on the temporary wall above them.

"I know, Lucy," the other pig replied. "Isn't it cool? Boris is going to die! No one is going to care about his coelacanth now! He can go eat his arowana for dinner."

"Excuse me," said Wendy, "could you tell us where to find Crazy Redd?"

"Probably in the police station!" replied Hambo. "You know this stuff is all completely illegal! If you get caught in here you're in big trouble!"

"Hambo, you are so mean!" said the second pig. She turned to Wendy: "He's just being a jerk, he's like that sometimes even though he's so cute! You'd never get in trouble here. Why, Officer Copper comes here all the time to buy his aerobics supplies at half price. Or double price? I forgot which."

"Quadruple, Lucy!" said Hambo. "Okay, okay, I think he's over in the stolen furniture room. I saw him setting out the fake Luigi trophy box over the stereo. It's over there through that hall."

Wendy led the way, lugging the heavy box effortlessly with her spider, while Erin trailed behind her waving his ray gun, trying to be cool and threatening at the same time.

It wasn't hard to find Crazy Redd; he was audible from two rooms away. The fox was shaking hands or paws, chatting loudly with every customer, fawning over cubs and sniffing female canines. "How y'all doin' today, Mr. Pecan, long time no see, how's little Sally? I've got some wonderful nut logs in the snack room, don't forget they're free with any purchase over five hundred bells!"

"Excuse me, Mr. Redd," said Wendy, jumping in before he could start on another squirrel. "I'm Wendy from Board Couriers. We have a shipment for you."

"Ain't that just dandy! Glad you could make it. 'Scuse me, folks, I just have a little administration stuff to do with these fine couriers here, you go ahead and browse, and remember anything you can't afford, we can finance!"

Redd led Wendy and Erin into his private office in the back of his temporary shop and quietly shut the door. Crazy Redd, Erin decided, was a lot cagier than he looked. As soon as the door closed behind him, the glad-handing know-nothing salesman was replaced by a hard-nosed business animal. "Shipping manifest," he demanded coldly of Wendy, without so much as a greeting or thanks.

"Oh, is that this record disk here?" Wendy replied, flashing a winning smile and handing over a tiny slip of plastic. Redd was not impressed. He slid the disk into a reader and mumbled to himself as he reviewed the supposed contents of the shipment. Without a word he popped the box open, carefully removing each jar and placing them organized in groups of five on a brightly-lit white table equipped with a scale, a microscope, ruler and calipers, and several instruments Erin didn't recognize. Redd weighed and inspected each jar. He opened two jars, apparently at random, and removed a sample of the hideous creature inside with a syringe-like tool, inserting the bit of fluid in some sort of analysis tool. A few indecipherable symbols appeared after a good bit of whirring and hissing. Only then did he seem satisfied.

"Excellent. Everything is in perfect order as promised. Here's your fee as agreed, ten percent, thirty-five hundred fifty." He handed Wendy something that looked rather like Zelda's credit card and shook her hand. "You are one of the few couriers who have made no attempt to cheat on shipment quantities or adulterate the materials. Needless to say, none of their attempts escaped detection. We'll move you to the provisional approved supplier list for all my vendors at the next supply chain review."

"Thanks! We appreciate your business!" said Wendy, smiling.

"Do you have any interest in moving up the food chain?" asked Redd. "I can always use reliable interfaces to the manufacturing side."

Wendy started to deflect the inquiry but Erin, who had heretofore kept his peace playing the gunsel, stepped in front of her to introduce himself. "I'm Erin Hollin, the new director of business development for Board. We're always looking for new areas to expand the business, but you understand we need to qualify our opportunities carefully to manage our limited development resources."

"Of course." Redd nodded. "We at Redd's feel that the unique characteristics of the zombie entertainment market can provide superior returns; that's why we've invested so much time and effort developing our channels. Since zombies are already dead they don't die off, so you can expect to keep a

satisfied customer indefinitely. They have very regular habits, as their imagination has generally rotted away with much of the midbrain. This also makes them relatively undemanding consumers. For example, our customer surveys for the liqueur we prepare from this eel venom are uniformly positive, even though our assays show that the venom concentration varies by over thirty percent from one eel to another. We have achieved over seventy percent brand recognition for our Death Wish line even though we've only run the one 'you'll feel like you just died!' marketing campaign. We have distribution arrangements in more than eighty percent of zombie bars and nightclubs in dead and moribund urban areas."

"I see your point," Erin replied. "In an early stage business like this vertical integration makes a lot of sense. If we provide an integrated transport function with your marketing and sales prowess, you can own the whole value chain. Except for the little matter of raw materials; I didn't get the impression those Star Spirits understood the value proposition here." Ten minutes later he and Redd shook hands on a preliminary deal to provide couriers on call at reduced rates, excepting weekends and holidays. "Course we'll have to review all this with top management when we get back to headquarters. Good doing business with you."

"Okay, let me know if you want to go ahead and I'll send a contract over for your legal staff to look at," replied Redd. "Meanwhile here's a couple of vouchers for the snack shop. I'd better get back on the floor before those raccoons steal me blind."

Redd led them back out to the retail area, and instantly transformed back into the amiable salesfox. Erin (who was getting very hungry by now) located a sign indicating the way to the snack room, and started along the corridor. As they walked Wendy leaned (intoxically) close and whispered: "How the heck did you know all that stuff about market segmentation and value chains? I never heard of things like that and I'm really smart!"

"Well, I'm not sure smart people would know any of that stuff," Erin replied. "I certainly didn't have the slightest idea what I was talking about! My cousin is some kind of marketing mismanager or something at a startup company. He sat next to me at Thanksgiving dinner last year and spent the whole time blabbing stuff like that -- it was really boring! Anyway I just kept using silly stuff I remembered from him, and Redd kept nodding. It was easy."

"Well, whatever it was, I could sure make a lot of money doing all that extra work for Redd. Do you realize that he paid us thirty-five hundred bells? That's -- like -- ten times more than I thought we were going to make on this job. With more work for Redd I could even hire Slash to work for me doing courier runs. Hmm -- maybe that's not such a good idea."

As Wendy reflected on the potential reliability of her friend as an employee, she rounded the corner in front of Erin and suddenly disappeared from view with a surprised cry and a thump! Erin reflexively whipped out his ray gun and charged ahead, to find a rather less drastic disaster than he'd feared: Wendy had merely tripped over an unusually small person, precipitating them both to the floor.

"Mister Saturn!" Erin exclaimed.

Mr. Saturn looked up as Wendy climbed off of him. "I thought we were still on friendly terms, Erin," he said, indicating the ray gun with a glance.

"Oh, sorry, I thought you were one of the bad guys." Erin stowed the blaster in his holster. "Hey, what are you doing here anyway? This is great! Wendy, this is Mister Saturn, he's a roll!"

"Yes, I noticed," replied Wendy, who had regained her feet. "I'm really sorry about that, I guess I should look where I'm going."

"It's unusual for anyone to apologize," said Mr. Saturn. "I should know not to stand in places where no one can see me."

A door swung open at the other end of the corridor. Appetizing smells wafted down the hall as a weasel dressed in a brown leather jacket stuck his nose out: "Saturn, you ain't nothin' but a speed bump on the road of life. We goin' or what?"

"Momentarily, Snide my friend." He turned back to Erin. "I'd love to stay and chat but as you can see, I am late for a business meeting. We'll talk a bit more when you get back, Erin. A pleasure to have met you, Wendy -- at least now that you're standing on your own and not on me." He waddled off

into the open door, which swung closed. Erin looked a bit disappointed but Wendy was obviously relieved.

"Come on, that smells great!" she said, tugging Erin by the arm towards the snack room. "I didn't realize how hungry I am."

The sun was setting in a blaze of yellow and orange as Wendy and Erin, each carrying a tray piled high with steaming Animal Crossing delicacies courtesy of Redd's vouchers, sat down on a little patch of grass next to the town bridge. The rushing creek chuckled to itself while bird-folks trilled to each other as they passed on their way. A gentle breeze rustled the distant trees. Two squirrel folk were weeding their gardens just across the stream, chattering amiably to each other as they worked. It was impossible to be on guard for danger in such a bucolic setting and Erin gave up trying.

"Try this, it's great," said Wendy, handing Erin a forkful of fried fish filet. "You know, you haven't told me anything about yourself. How did you learn to be so many different people?"

"Gee, Wendy, I don't know. I didn't really learn any of that, I just like to pretend, I always have, even when I was little. I just read a lot."

"Hardly anybody reads a lot. That's amazing. What game do you come from?"

"Well, let's see, we started in the Mushroom Kingdom, from Smash Brothers. You know, it seems like such a long time ago but it's only been a couple of weeks. Wow."

"You're pulling my leg; the Mushroom Kingdom is, like, ancient! A few weeks?"

"I mean, it's just been a few weeks since we got there."

"We? Oh, yeah. I forgot about your friends. Nicholas and, um, Clarice--"

"Clara. And Tennyson and Cane and Brian. I guess we have become pretty good friends by now. It used to be that I just kind of hung out with Nicholas and Brian, probably 'cause they put with me and my mom is always making me go outside. She gets mad if I read all day. I usually ignored Cane and Tennyson; they were always fighting with each other, anyway. And I didn't like Clara at all. Envious, I guess; she's such a good athlete, and almost as smart as you are, but of course not as pretty."

Wendy, gleaming, leaned over to deliver a quick peck on Erin's cheek in return for the obviously unplanned compliment. A blushing Erin suddenly found it indispensable to clean up the fragments of eggshell he'd dropped in the grass. Wendy tried to redirect the conversation to give him a chance to recover: "Wait a minute, that's six. There were only four of you when we met."

"Well, that's true. Ever since we checked in Cane spends all his free time in the room ordering fruit stuff from room service and watching three tee vees at the same time. It's kindof funny since he never ever ate anything with fruits or vegetables at home; just burgers and fries and pizza, typical kid. And then I think Tennyson and Clara had another fight, or anyway they were being pretty cold, so Tennyson went up to the room early to watch tee vee with Cane. Except Cane's still mad that Tennyson got a bigger reward than he did, so I'll bet he'll make Tennyson watch the stupid Pro Trucker channel."

"Bigger reward? What?"

"Oh, I mean on the wanted poster. I found it! You know, the one on the ghost train. They got everybody's names wrong! Like, I was Aaron, like in the Bible, and Cane was Stick and Tennyson was T.S. Elliott -- the wrong poet, that was funny!"

"Stick?" said Wendy. "That sounds familiar --"

Erin dropped his sno cone with barbecue sauce on the grass. "Oh. Ooops. Ooops. I wasn't supposed to say that. Wendy, you're not going to go kill my friends, are you? You wouldn't do that?" He tried to stand up, struggling to drag his ray gun out of the holster at the same time. "That's no fair. You were being nice to me just to get information. That's terrible! I really liked you."

"Put that away!" Wendy said, reaching over to muss Erin's hair. "I like you, too. I'm not going to run off to shoot your friends. Besides, we haven't finished dinner. Oh, look! a shooting star!" She pointed towards the zenith. Another streak flashed by a moment later. "Tonight must be the meteor shower! Isn't it beautiful?"

Erin was still a bit leery. "You promise, right? You're not lying to me?"

"Geeze, Erin, I promise. Hey, does that mean that Nicholas -- the one telling the jokes, I mean -- oh my, 'I wish my friends were here'--" Wendy was momentarily consumed by another fit of laughter.

"Is he Nickles? I mean, did he really kill Conker and his bodyguards and Andross's wolf buddy all at once? He didn't look that mean."

"What bodyguards? Andross? I don't know anything about any of that. I think Nicholas did actually kill Conker, all right, though I didn't actually see it. I was over listening to General Scales. He writes some really interesting stuff, you know. But Tennyson told me that it was pretty amazing: Conker was hassling Clara, and Nicholas just, like, cut his head right off. With his beam sword. And then he just turns to everyone in the bar and says 'anybody else?' or something like that, and gets a drink at the bar like nothing happened. Great story, don't you think?"

"Bar? At the hotel?"

"No, no, this was at Cymballine's."

"Oh, wow. You got into Cymballine's? You guys are so lucky!"

"Cool, look, there's two more!" Erin pointed towards an open patch between the trees where two brilliant streaks still trailed across the darkening sky. "I've tried to watch meteor showers at home, but the sky was always too bright. This is really neat."

"Yow! Wow, and -- three of them!" Erin and Wendy leaned back on the grass, food forgotten, the better to absorb the celestial spectacle above them. Erin found it was much more convenient to wrap his arm around Wendy's shoulders than to try to squeeze it in between them.

"Oh, look at that!"

"Gorgeous. Look, that one must have exploded in the air!"

"Yeah, I think those are called fireballs."

"Oooh, oooh -- there's a whole set of lights! It's really -- wait a minute." Wendy sat up, somewhat reluctantly. "That's not a meteor. Hmm. They're coming this way, and fast." She reached for the holster at her belt; Erin followed suit as he squinted into the night.

"Yellow orange yellow," he mumbled. "Gee, Wendy, isn't that the same color scheme as the sleigh? I mean, shuttle? Or whatever?"

"Oh, yeah, you're right. I thought I told Dave we didn't need him until, um, nine or something like that."

"Yeah, you did. Do you think something's happened? Maybe you'd better call him."

"No need, he's just about here." She stood up, hand still poised above her sidearm. Erin's training filtered back into his consciousness; he drew his ray gun and took a position behind a rock where he could cover Wendy if there was trouble.

Within a moment the outline of the sleigh became visible as it settled to a bumpy landing in the open field behind Crazy Redd's Caveat Emptorium. Dave burst out of the bizarrely cheerful craft as soon it had come to a stop, and ran towards them, floppy green felt hat bouncing crazily.

"Thank goodness I found you! We have to fly back, right now! It's urgent!"

"What?" replied Wendy dubiously. "What's urgent? We don't have anything scheduled all day tomorrow, I'm sure of it."

"No, no, you don't understand. We've got to go! I'm in so much trouble! You have to fly me back right now!"

"Why are you in trouble?"

Dave looked around warily, as if checking for eavesdroppers. Then he looked down at his absurd buckle shoes and wiped his nose and mouth several times with his brilliant magenta handkerchief.

"Jingle called. Jingle called. They need the sleigh! We've got to get it back right now. Oh, how could this happen?"

"What? Who needs it back? My lease runs through next month."

"Oh, yeah, the lease. The lease. Well, um, to tell the truth -- Jingle doesn't really, um, exactly, um, own the sleigh."

"Okay. Do you own it?"

"No, no, no, it's not mine. I just do scheduled maintenance."

"Well, then, who does?"

"Oh, the big guy. It's his. And he needs it tomorrow."

"But what about the lease agreement?"

"Uh, uh, well, we didn't exactly tell him about the lease agreement."

"Oh, I get it." Wendy laughed. "You guys were just, like, renting it under the table to make extra money!"

"Well, of course. Do you think I could afford to dress this well on an Elf's pay?"

"Who's Jingle?" asked Erin.

"Jingle the black-nosed reindeer," Wendy replied. "He's sort of a jerk. Actually, I guess he's really a jerk. I mean, I had to fill in all these credit reference things and provide a deposit and everything, and now it turns out it's not his sleigh anyway!"

"Well, fine, you're right, Jingle is a jerk. Hey, that's a good one." Dave began to hum to himself:

*Jingle the black-nosed reindeer
Was a really slimy jerk
But if you ever told him
You would soon be out of work!*

"Oh, dear, what am I doing making up Jingle jingles at a time like this?" Dave interrupted himself. "We are going to be in such trouble if the big guy finds out his sleigh is missing. They'll cut my buttons off in front of everyone! It's ghoulish. Can we have the sleigh back?"

Wendy rolled her eyes. "Enough, Dave, of course you can have the sleigh back--"

Erin the Business Development manager stepped in front of Wendy. "For a price, of course. First there's the lease abrogation clause and the penalty fee, plus consequential damages. We have work to do, you know. I think that would come to, oh, fifteen thousand bells. And then there's the little matter of paying for silence. It wouldn't do you a lot of good to have the lease contract floating around the big guy's office, now, would it?"

"You wouldn't? Would you? You seemed like such a nice kid. Ugly, but nice. Oh my gosh. I'll call Jingle. Let me call Jingle and see. I'll get right back to you." Dave pulled out an object that looked like a striped candy cane but was apparently a cellphone, twisted the ribbon on the top, and started to mumble in a strange language into the chocolate bells dangling from the candy.

Erin turned back to Wendy and whispered: "What were you going to get for that bounty hunting job anyway?"

"About two hundred coins. That's, um, around fifty-four hundred bells. I think."

"Jingle says there's no way he's going to pay for his sleigh," said Dave, trying to be assertive.

Erin laughed. "That's fine, because you've already admitted that it isn't his! Thirty thousand bells, one sleigh. A fair deal. That's our offer."

Dave mumbled into the chocolate and then tore his ear away from the candyphone as an audible burst of incomprehensible imprecations followed. "See? See? He's not happy. Not happy at all."

"Ask me if I care," said Erin. He grabbed the candy cane from Dave and shouted into where he gathered the mouthpiece was. "Thirty thousand bells or we walk! Last chance before venison. Take it or leave it!"

"Oh, he's not going to like that at all. He hates it when you say that word." Dave cringed as he accepted the candyphone back from Erin. "Yes? Okay. My credit card? Why mine? Oh, all right." Dave reached into his back pocket and pulled out a slip of plastic. "Here. Thirty thousand bells. Charge it to me. You win."

Erin (who hadn't the slightest idea what to do with the card) took it from Dave and handed it to Wendy. "Calm down, Dave. It's Jingle's bells, not yours, right? We'll just pop right back up to the ship as soon as everything's --" Wendy, who had been doing something with the card and a device from her belt, nodded to him. "--completed. See, we'll even leave our dinner behind, that's what great folks we are. Let's go!"

Dave, somewhat relieved, ran towards the sleigh, while Erin turned back, meaning to take Wendy's hand and lead her back to the shuttle. Wendy was not interested in looking cool, however. She

grabbed him around the waist with both arms and squeezed: “That’s so much money! who needs bounty hunting? You are the greatest!” at which point she leaned over and kissed him full on the lips.

Dave had to come drag them back to the sleigh.

Chapter 16: Speed up, honk your horn, and stand your ground

"Excuse me -- um -- sir," said Tennyson, taking a wild guess.

"I beg your pardon, young man!" said the portly zombie matron, shedding bits of rotten flesh on the shiny terminal floor as she attempted to spin around to confront him. "You have something against zombies?"

"I had no idea you were a zombie!" Tennyson replied. "Why, you look like you've hardly been dead a week," he lied.

"You -- you don't really mean that," said the corpse woman.

"Oh, but I do!" Tennyson continued as he sidled around her broad skeleton. "Anyone would say you're fresh out of the grave."

"Well -- well, my friends do tell me I'm remarkably well-preserved. I always took care of myself when I was alive, and I'm confident the salutary effects have continued past my demise. Let that be a lesson to you, young man!" She waved a brightly-colored bottle at him; Tennyson could just read part of the label: THWISH.

"Yes, thank you," Tennyson continued, bowing as he retreated. "I'll keep that in mind. A pleasure to have met you." Well, that went well, he thought. I managed to get around her without having to touch her. Yuuuuck! He continued down the narrow corridor, past a group of briefcase-toting business squirrels having a loud argument about booking receivables against inventory before collecting the nuts, and came out into the wider main waiting area.

The security line turned left and proceeded a short distance down the glistening hallway to an inspection station. Tennyson moved out to one side and was finally able to see what was causing the holdup: three uniformed airport inspectors and a couple of armed police were gathered around a diminutive visor-faced fellow. Piled high on the tables around him were several opened trunks and suitcases and a collection of what Tennyson's now-trained eye immediately recognized were explosives of every description. As he neared the dispute, he was able to listen in. One of the inspectors seemed to be finishing up reading from a list:

"...seventeen hand-grenades, eleven pressure-sensitive land mines, fourteen shallow-water contact mines, three bridge demolition packs with timers, fifty-four cherry bombs, five hundred twenty-two firecrackers, and two rack-mount laser-guided cluster bombs. So, Mr. Bomberman, you expect us to believe that this is your typical carry-on luggage?"

"No, of course not, this is just my, whatchacallum, personal effects. I have some real bombs in my carry-on luggage over here.." The little guy did look sincerely disconcerted. He nervously reached into his hip pocket and withdrew several long thin objects, which he tossed to the floor one by one in a distracted fashion, where they exploded loudly.

"Harry, you missed the blasting caps!" said the inspector to one of her colleagues.

"Couldn't be. Impossible. I checked him with the metal detector and I scraped that stuff off his shoes and put it in the analyzer, and then I x-rayed his wrist-watch, and I checked the density of his cell phone by immersing it in water and measuring the displaced volume, and I compared his profile to the profile in the database, and I questioned him while he was standing under the placard that says lying to an inspector is really, really bad."

"Great, Harry. That's all very scientific. Did you look in his pockets?"

"No. Why?"

"Are you -- done here?" asked Mr. Bomberman. "Can I have my bombs back and get on the plane?"

The inspectors, engaged in an increasingly irascible exchange of accusations, ignored him. He began to shove some of the smaller minutia into his capacious pockets, while the pig-man who was next in line snorted loudly and charged forward through the metal detector, muttering loudly: "Well, I'm

not carrying anything other than a pistol and a couple of tomahawks and I have a flight to catch!” At this, the frustrated potential passengers surged forward, overwhelming the limited organizational abilities of the overworked airport staff, and streamed through the security stations without paying much attention to the beeping metal detectors or weapons sensors.

“Gee, I guess we could have taken our weapons along after all,” Tennyson said to himself. Tennyson decided it wasn’t worth trying to get past the putrid zombie woman again; since the line was moving, he might as well wait for the rest of the kids. As he lounged snatches of conversation reached him from the surging line:

“I told you, piece o’ cake, Jack! They’ll never even notice. We could’ve brought in a kilo of PS2’s in the other suitcase.”

“I think the X-boxes are enough, Dexter. We’re just lucky the inspectors are distracted. Try to look like everybody else in line.”

“Oh, ticked off?” The pair continued their dispute as they passed the ineffectually-irate inspectors along with the stream of other guests. The alarms in the metal detection frames were going off continually as passengers shoved their luggage bodily through the overstuffed x-ray machines and argued at the exit over which portable game machine belonged to whom. Crystal and the other kids rolled out into the corridor, and Tennyson shepherded them through the chaos to the boarding lounges.

While Crystal and the kids traveled in tourist fashion, the disassembled Arwings were being shipped by TeamRocket Express (When it absolutely positively has to blast off again) to Tails’ workshop in the Mystic Ruins region outside of town. Fox had been cagey about his means of travel, noting merely that he would meet the kids at the hotel. Mr. Saturn had left early and was waiting for them at gate 23C. Cane immediately parked himself in front of the large-screen television set.

“All right! check it out!” he said to Brian. “This is great!” On the screen two nomadimice appeared to be fencing with carrots equipped with glistening diamond tips. ‘A touch! Palpably a touch!’ said the speaker below the monitor.

“What is it?” asked Brian.

“Oh, it’s The Calipers of Fate, episode seven -- Burn ‘em, Wood! -- or maybe it was Ham, Let Her Feel Ya’ -- I don’t remember. See, in the last episode Mercushio and Lysander were having this big battle over the first girl they saw after they got exposed to the love potion when they were supposed to be murdering the Shogun’s wife for washing the blood off her hands, but then we had to leave the hotel so I figured I’d never find out whether Nero burned the concert hall down or not. I hope the plane’s late! Then I’ll be able to watch episode eight, that’s where we find out the real name of the Rows.”

“Uh, okay, sounds like I needed to see the other episodes,” replied Brian.

“No, it’s pretty simple, really. Do you want me to tell you the plot? See, it all starts when Pa Seiden loses his mermaid franchise and has to sell the Titanic, but then --”

“Never mind, maybe I’d better not get started,” said Brian. “Then I’d be disappointed if we didn’t see all the rest of the episodes.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right, what if we never get to number twelve? That’s the one where Inspector Klue So confronts Mort Vole, the rodent with an attitude!” While Cane continued to agonize over the potential of episodes he might never see, Brian made his way to the currency exchange window, where Erin and Mr. Saturn were arguing over how much cash they needed.

“Don’t you think the Princess is going to get wise to you sooner or later?” said Erin.

“Certainly,” replied Mr. Saturn. “That’s the plan. We want her to react irrationally. It is our conscious intention to be obviously abusive.”

“Are you sure this isn’t just an excuse to act the way you like to act anyway?” replied Erin. “An irrationalization?”

“Rationalization. And no, it isn’t. I usually prefer ambiguity.”

“Aren’t you guys supposed to be getting some cash for the trip?” asked Brian.

“Yeah, but Mister Saturn wants to put everything on Zelda’s credit card,” replied Erin.

“Not everything, Erin. We don’t want to dull the impact of grand theft with a boring list of petty larcenies.”

“Well, fine, which items are you going to charge?” asked Brian, pulling a list from his pocket. “Crystal and I worked out the budget last night, so we can just remove anything you’re going to pay for and get cash for what’s left.”

“Brian, it’s meticulous planners like you who take the joy out of impulse stealing. I was going to use the card for the hotel bill and the Arwings.”

“Really.” Brian looked thoughtful. “Doesn’t that make it particularly easy for Princess Zelda to figure out where we are and what we’re up to?”

“Precisely, Dr. Watson,” said Mr. Saturn.

“Aww, I wanted to say that!” said Erin.

“All right, Holmes, go ahead,” said Mr. Saturn, chuckling skeptically. “Show me how the scheme works out.”

“Come, LeStrade, what do you take me for?” answered Erin in the accent Nicholas knew too well. “A crucial aspect of the plan, Doctor Watson, is to arrive at Ark under the guise of having been repulsed. Leaving aside for the moment the requirements of practising the deception, it is necessary to consider the foibles of those upon whom it is to be practised. An exercise, Watson: what sort of mind is most easily deceived, a confident mind or an open one?”

“Confident,” Brian answered warily.

“Precisely. And of all the classes of creatures upon the earth who is most confident, and most without warrant, in their own conclusions?”

“A -- car salesman?”

“No, no -- a politician! A ruler! A Very Important Princess, as she characterized herself. We must give Zelda the opportunity and the incentive to become the self-appointed defender of the Project, tossing aside the obfuscations of the so-called Committee and taking control of the station to crush our pathetic invasion. Her credibility as leader will become dependent upon her apparent victory, such that she can hardly tolerate any question of its validity during her suppression of the resentment and rivalries that will be occasioned by her assumption of power. Did you follow all that, Watson?”

“I think so. But what’s to stop her from just picking us up at the hotel?”

“Timing, right, LeStrade?”

Mr. Saturn raised an eyebrow. “Astute, Holmes.” He turned to Brian. “It’s pretty hard for anyone in Hyrule to conceive of credit card fraud, so the Finance Ministry doesn’t watch as carefully as they should. Our little excesses won’t be caught until the quarterly system-wide audit, due next Tuesday. The emergency meeting of the Committee at Ark -- the meeting that Zelda spent a lot of political capital to force, that she can’t possibly miss -- is Thursday. She can’t mess around looking for us and she won’t think to try. She’s going to show up at Ark and parade this evidence of the conspiracy as her opening gambit at the meeting, angle for control of the defenses of the station, and triumphantly destroy our attacking force to validate her assumption of power.”

“Isn’t it going to seem awfully convenient that we’re revealing our plans on her credit card statement?” asked Brian, still skeptical.

“She’ll present it as if she let us take the card in order to track our progress,” said Erin.

“Gee, how do we know that’s not true?” asked Brian.

“We don’t,” said Mr. Saturn. “It doesn’t matter whether it’s our trap, or whether we’re using her trap to trap the trapper.”

“And I thought you liked her,” said Brian.

“That was a long time ago!” said Erin.

“It was? I mean, it was a coupla’ weeks but you seemed pretty serious about it back then.”

“Oh, that was just, like, infatuation. I’ve gone way beyond that. Wendy is different. We’re really soul mates.”

“Oh?” said Clara. “Tell us more. Who is this Wendy? Oh, but first, Crystal told me to remind the boys that we’re boarding in about three minutes and where the heck is our cash?”

“Gee, I was going to ask the same thing until I got distracted,” said Brian.

“Well, we’re back to where we started. How much money do we need?”

“No, we’re not,” said Brian. “Mister Saturn told me what he plans to spend on the card. Just gimme a second... hm, thirty-five less nineteen, carry a four -- okay, twenty-two hundred coins. Here, I’ve got them bagged in hundreds.” Brian handed a set of bags out of his pack to Erin, who tried to keep them from falling out of his arms as he approached the window prominently marked EXCHANGE - CAMBIO - ARGENT. Next to the window was a large display entitled CURRENT CURRENCY. It said:

	COINS
RINGS	45
BELLS	27
RUPEES	25
YEN	0.25
BANANAS	0.10
GOLD	10.0
TICKETS	0.067

and so on. As Erin watched the exchange rate for gold shifted up by a tenth.

The window was designed for taller folks than Erin, particularly when slumped with his load of coins, and the booth appeared unoccupied. He leaned over and pressed the little button next to the window labeled CALL with his nose.

A winsome face appeared in the window, topped by a disheveled mop of red-brown hair. Absurdly elaborate mismatched ornaments dangled from her earlobes, one eyebrow was multiply pierced with what looked like a spring, and her left cheek bore a tattoo of a striped hot-air balloon with the international NOT symbol overlaid. “Oh, a customer! Can I help you? Do you need help? Maybe you’re good at juggling coins. I knew an owl who could juggle coins once. He ran off with a pussycat and they got arrested for moon dancing in broad daylight. That never made any sense to me, they should have been arrested for juggling without a marriage license. I can exchange currency for good wishes, you know. Or was that ask if the customer wishes for a current exchange? You know, like the exchange interaction in the Hartree-Fock model of a conductive solid, except that nobody uses that any more even though it is the basis for pseudopotentials. I read that in a book on solid state pornography once, I haven’t the slightest idea what it means. Did you go to juggling school or are you just talented? You’d better hurry up, I think your flight is boarding now.”

Even Erin, not one to be tongue-tied, was rather overwhelmed by this unexpected soliloquy. “Uh -- yeah, I’m in a hurry, I think -- don’t I know you?”

“Oh, everybody says that, it’s because of my stupid cousin, I mean my second cousin twice removed on my mother’s side, she’s Daisy, everyone knows her.” The girl reached through the window to shake Erin’s unavailable hand; he was unsurprised to note that she wore multiple mismatched rings on three fingers and her thumb, as well as a golden bracelet with several tiny ornaments suspended from it on fine silver chains. “Please to meet you, I’m Dipsey!” She jiggled her wrist; the ornaments rang sweetly. “These are my dangling participles. I’ve been here two months now and everything is really going well. My strategic plan allows another three months before I begin my rise to the top of the cotton denim jean pool. I’m going to be the Frogger of Finance, the Bowser of the Bucks, the Luigi of Liquidity! I’ve got it all worked out. Some day people are going to say, ‘there goes Daisy, she’s Dipsey’s nephew!’, oops, I mean, ‘she’s Disney’s cousin!’, oops, I mean, ‘she’s Dipsey’s aunt’, oh, you know what I mean. I hate being related to a famous person, it’s so demeaning. Are you famous? I could be your relative.”

“I see why the line at the window was short,” Erin mumbled to himself. “Look, that’s all great, but like, I need to exchange these coins for rings.” He glanced over his shoulder; Cane was disappearing past the boarding gate and Crystal was waving urgently at him. “I mean, now. Right now. Quick. Can you do something quick?”

“I threw up once five times in succession, I mean that happened one time, and everybody told me it was all over really fast but it seemed to me it took forever--”

“Now, N-O-W. That’s forty-eight rings, more or less. Here.” Erin shoved the bags onto the counter; clunking sounds announced the excess falling to the floor as Dipsey tried unsuccessfully to organize the incoming valuta.

“Oh, okay, don’t you want your free ticket to my Chautauqua lecture? It’s good anytime through November of next year, except that actually I’ll probably get bored and stop lecturing long before then. A hundred forty-eight, you said? Here, oh, look at that, it matches my bracelet! I’ll keep that one, here’s a different one, is that a ten or a hundred? Oh, well. Thanks for your business!” she called as Erin grabbed the rings and ran full tilt for the boarding gate, snagging his pack from the chair in passing.

“Bye, thanks, you can keep the receipt!” he shouted over his shoulder.

The flight was generally uneventful, save for some minor excitement when the Yoshis in row 32 started bazooka vomiting from having been fed stewed blowfish (intended for the ichthyosaurs in row 31) instead of blowfish stew, and the little incident between the foxes in 17a,b,c and f and the hounds in 18c,d, and e, with the porcine steward caught in the middle, and the fire in the left back restroom caused by Cane’s attempt to warm his hot chocolate to the sea level boiling point when they were at cruising altitude. After a relatively relaxing couple of hours, they found themselves once again waiting in line, this time in line for the incoming Customs inspection. While Cane tried to keep up on episode 11 of The Calipers of Fate showing in the visitor’s lobby across the hall, Crystal searched repeatedly through her knapsack, growing increasingly agitated as they neared the head of the line.

“What’s up?” Clara whispered, not wanting to attract attention from the security guards at the exits.

“I can’t find our entry papers,” Crystal replied. “Fox gave them to me before we left.”

“Is it such a big deal? Aren’t we just going as tourists or something like that?”

“Oh, it’s not that simple. You can’t enter on a tourist visa unless you’re with a licensed tour. We were going to be game beta testers -- there’s a big test industry here and Fox managed to get his hands on an invitation back late last year after Dinosaur Planet. But now we’re stuck. We can’t go back without arousing suspicion. Besides then we’ll be late; there’s not another flight until tomorrow morning.”

“Let’s just ask Mr. Saturn,” said Erin. “He’s usually got some sort of illegal way of getting around problems like this.”

“Too late,” said Brian. “Didn’t you notice? He went off with the ground crew while the rest of us were waiting to deplane.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right. Hmm. Didn’t even say goodbye.”

Nicholas chimed in: “Can’t we just call him on the phone?”

“No time, we’ve only got one more person in front of us,” said Brian, thus generously characterizing the floppy-eared Gungan, who was apparently overwhelmed with the task of trying to carry his luggage, visa, and passport simultaneously.

“We could just stand to one side while you call,” suggested Clara.

“I’d rather not attract attention,” whispered Crystal. The Gungan managed to display his passport to the inspector at the cost of spilling open his soiled underwear all over the booth, providing them with an extra minute to ponder the problem.

“Wait a minute,” said Erin. He reached into his pack and pulled out two dirty crumpled sheets of paper. “This should do it.” He collected the forged passports from the kids and strode confidently up to the booth as the Gungan stuffed clothes back into his overcrowded suitcase.

“Passports,” said the bored-looking inspection robot. One arm ended in a huge gun, which would have been frightening if it didn’t have the remains of a hot dog sticking out of the barrel. The robot’s blue polka-dotted bow tie was stained with what looked like lubricating oil dripping from the neck joints. An ill-fitting hat labeled PORT AUTHORITY kept sliding onto the side of its head, blocking the document inspection camera.

“Here ya’ go,” said Erin, laying the little plastic squares on the counter.

The robot scanned them and make a grinding sound somewhere between a beep and a belch. “Reason for entry?”

“We’re attending the Officer Jenny convention.” In the background Crystal silently mouthed to Clara The what??

“That’s invitation only, I’ll need to see documentation,” said the robot.

“Here you go,” said Erin, handing him the slips of paper. “Two invites, one from Officer Jenny, and one from, er, Officer Jenny.”

“Looks okay. Well, the convention center is through those blue double doors over there by the SuperNES diorama. You might want to hurry up; the opening ceremonies have already started. All right, move along now. Next!”

“That’s right, let’s move along!” shouted Erin, leading the way towards the convention center (conveniently forgetting to go back for his luggage).

Crystal caught up with him about half way down the hall. “Where the heck are you taking us? What convention?”

“Officer Jenny. It’s all right, they’ll never actually find me. I mean, the Officer Jenny’s who invited me. There’s probably a lot of Officer Jenny’s here.”

“Invited you? What is going on?”

“That’s our Erin,” said Clara. “A girl in every port, two if possible.”

“Gee, I feel kind of left out, too,” said Tennyson. “How many girlfriends do you have now, Erin?”

“They’re not my girlfriends, I just kindof met them at the minigames park. Remember, when we were looking for Luigi’s key?”

“Yeah, but you never told us you met Officer Jenny there.”

“Two of them. And I did so. You just didn’t listen.”

“Okay, okay, that’s enough,” said Nicholas. “Let’s just figure out what we have to do, now. We don’t really have to go to this convention, do we?”

Crystal looked back over her shoulder at the robot. “I think we’d better. They usually have surveillance cameras in the terminals, though they aren’t always careful about monitoring them. If we said we’re going to the convention we probably ought to go, at least for a while. No one is going to care if we don’t stay very long.”

“Well, okay,” replied Nicholas. “We’ll just be an hour or two late at the hotel; that should be okay. So Erin, you’re the authority: what’s the plan?”

“Hmm. Why do we need a plan? So far I’ve been doing pretty well just pretending to know what’s going on.”

“You mean you don’t know anything about the Convention?”

“Diddly over squat.”

“Great.” Nicholas pondered for a moment. “Well, the key is not to split up and get lost. Everybody stay together when we get through the doors. We’ll check things out and then decide what’s safest and doesn’t look too suspicious. Okay, Crystal?”

“Sounds good to me. I don’t know anything about the Officer Jenny organization, but usually at these sorts of meetings there will be some classes and maybe some sort of trade show; that’s probably pretty safe to wander through. We don’t want to wander into one of the administrative meetings, though: that’s where everyone knows everyone else, so we’d look incongruous. Besides, anyone who shows up usually gets stuck with two or three jobs to do.”

“We sure don’t want that!” said Cane.

As they neared the doors the foot traffic was increasingly dominated by apparently identical and very pretty girls, walking in groups of two or three, all dressed in the same short leather skirts slit at the hip, and satin blouses, each bearing a little golden badge worn on the left shoulder, all with the same bleached-blond hair with just a tinge of blue at the roots, all talking loudly and in unison. This was only the appetizer: beyond the doors was a huge open area with a tall domed ceiling, swarming with identically-garbed Officer Jenny attendees, shepherded from place to place by a second class of Officer Jennys in black leather coveralls with red SECURITY badges emblazoned across the breast(s).

A huge display screen hung from the rafters just beyond the entrance. The kids made their way towards it and read:

WELCOME OFFICER JENNYs

Plenary Session	Eggman Empire Ballroom
Community Policing Tutorials	Mystic Ruins Rooms F, G, W
Nurse Joy Liaison Training	Green Hill Conference Rooms
Pokemon Reclassification	skateboard park
Planning Committee	Toxic Pool
Motorcycle Vendor Exhibition	Gigapolis Hall

TOM NOOK SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING

Selling to Squirrels Symposium	Rock Garden
Harvesting the Moon special session	Observatory Penthouse
Home Financing Tutorial	Angel Island Ballrooms I, II
Accounting for Raccoons	Ice Mountain Rooms
Developing the Inner Tom	Takumi Lounge Meeting Rooms

“Somehow, I don’t think we’re going to fit into any of these sessions,” said Tennyson, looking at the rows of identical policewomen in front of him, and the hordes of indistinguishable suit-and-tie-garbed raccoons beyond them.

Two Jennys were already cooing over Erin: “I invited him!” “No you didn’t, I invited him! He’s going to Liaison Training with me!” “No, I’m taking him to the show!” “You are not, I saw him first!”

“Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!” said Erin, extricating himself with difficulty.

“Let’s go to the restaurant!” said Cane. “I always wanted to develop my inner Tom. It’s not as good as Barry but at least it’s better than Herman. Besides, it’s time for lunch.”

“I think Cane’s on to something there,” said Crystal. “That’s probably the most innocuous thing we can do. Nicholas is right; let’s be careful to stick together. Why don’t you lead the way, Erin?”

“And an ignorant child shall lead them,” Erin recited pompously as he proceeded confidently if blindly down the broad hall, trying to move rapidly enough to prevent any Jennys from focusing their attention on him. “For lo! they of little wit, they shall be elevated unto the highest place, and they shall beat their swords into personal digital assistants, and search the world until they cometh upon he who sayeth, ‘what is that outdated boat anchor you’re carrying there, friend?’, and they shall name him Leviathan, for so that it soundeth more dreadful than Fred or George.”

“I think being around all these pretty girls is getting to him,” said Nicholas.

“Makes sense to me,” said Tennyson.

“That’s the restaurant, the big wooden doors,” interrupted Clara, forcefully directing Tennyson’s attention away from the crowded Empire Ballroom entryway by grabbing his head. “We’re going there. Right?”

“The restaurant,” pronounced Erin. “Right. I knew that.” Not yet willing to cede his newfound status, he shoved his way past Brian and Clara to barge into the swinging doors below a glowing kanji sign.

The noise of conversation rose to a roar as the rest of the kids strode through, leaving Erin to manage his own escape. Inside was a swirling mixture of Jennys and Toms, interspersed with human and feline waiters and waitresses. A cheerful female gorilla garbed in a brief shirt and a halter top stood at a podium, nearly lost in the crowd of would-be diners despite her bulk. Erin tried to make his way to the receptionist, but was delayed by the simultaneous assault of a group of three Officer Jennys: “Isn’t he cute!” “And such good hair too, ooh! I could run my fingers through it all day!” “Get away, he’s mine!” “I saw him first!” Taking advantage of his discomfiture, Clara slipped and shoved her way through the crowd to the podium.

"Hi, we'd like to get lunch, party of seven," she said.

"Oh, my, honey, we're really busy as you can see," replied the ape. She shouted over her left shoulder: "Luanne, extra waters to sixteen and don't forget the crepes! Sorry, dear, where were we? Oh, yeah, party of seven, no where to put you right now. Give me your name and I'll call when we've got something. You can wait in the bar, over there."

"Okay, Clara, party of seven."

A tall dark waiter in a tuxedo waltzed by, an amazingly large tray laden with dishes precariously balanced above his head. "Twenty-two and twenty-four are gonna' open up in a minute, Candy!" he shouted as he hurried by.

"Oh, are you DK's sweetie?" asked Clara.

"I should say not!" the ape replied. "Why, he is the most irresponsible simian since Sinanthropus! You tell him from me that we are through! If I never see him again it will be one week too soon. Jenny and Jenny, party of two, your table is ready!" Six pairs of identical girls tried to squeeze towards the podium, forcing Clara to one side before she could follow up on this interesting revelation. Surrendering to circumstance, she returned to the group and led them to the bar.

Three television sets surmounted a polished wood counter, with innumerable flasks and glasses dangling by their stems in racks above the rows of bottled liquors and beverages. It seemed like the whole room was filled with pairs of Jennys and Toms. As Nicholas walked up to the bar, all the Tom Nooks said in unison: "You are the most beautiful girl I've ever seen!"

"I'll bet you say that to all the Officer Jennys," replied the girls in synchrony.

"Of course not," replied the Toms. "Why, I've never met anyone like you."

"Can I get you something, kids?" A handsome young waiter balancing a tray of drinks in each hand was addressing them between a pair of amorous Tom Nooks. The waiter dropped one tray off with the Toms, and spun around to deliver the other three beers to the corresponding Officer Jennys. He leaned over Crystal's shoulder and said in a lowered voice, "It's sure nice to have someone different in here! Not that I have anything against Jennys, you understand, or Toms, but it gets dull to say the least!"

"Just a round of Aquastars," said Crystal. "Unless Nicholas wants to have another Margarita."

"I'd like to keep my head, thanks," said Nicholas. He turned to the waiter. "We're waiting for a table for lunch. Will they call us?"

"Oh, yeah, it's piped into here, and repeated on the inset," said the waiter, pointing to the flat-panel display above the bar. Sure enough, there was a little blue square in the bottom right with an updating list in bright yellow letters:

Jenny party of three your table is ready

Jenny party of four your table is ready

Tom party of two your table is ready

Jenny party of six your table is ready

Tom party of two your table is ready

"Not all that helpful, is it?" said Clara.

"Well, yeah, today is a special case. But it shouldn't be a problem for you -- I mean, you're name's not Jenny, is it?"

"Clara," she replied.

"Clara! What a lovely name. Welcome to Takumi's. You need anything, just ask for Ken-Ichi, that's me."

"All right, all right, that's my girl!" said Tennyson, stepping between the two. "Seven Aquastars, right?" Clara was simultaneously irritated and touched.

"No problem, right back," said the waiter.

"Oh, so you guys are officially an item now?" said Crystal. Between the television, the band in the next room, and the continuing synchronized propositioning of the other occupants of the bar, it was necessary to lean close to Clara and Tennyson to be heard.

"I don't just go out with anyone, you know," said all the Jennys.

“We’re -- friends again,” said Clara, her possessive embrace belying her words.

“I thought you told us not to use our real names!” Cane shouted above the din. “How ‘come Clara gets to use hers?”

“But I’m not just anyone! I’m financially sound with a promising future,” said the Toms.

“It doesn’t do us any good to use pseudonyms if you tell everyone we’re doing it,” said Brian.

“You know, you can talk all the Russian you want, Brian, I don’t care,” said Cane.

“Latin,” said Erin.

“English derived from the Latin,” said Brian.

“Ixnay on the atinlay, I say!” said Nicholas.

“The only good Latin is pig Latin!” added Cane.

“Can we be back in time for the first-night party?” said the Jennys.

“Is it a hosted bar?” replied the Toms.

“Oh, there you are,” a familiar voice said from below the neighboring table. “Come on, we’ve got a table by the kitchen, perfect for a fast exit if we need one.”

“Mister Saturn!” said Erin. “Where the heck have you been? And what’s a hosted bar?”

“Sorry, kid, but if you knew Wendy would find out. And a hosted bar is where you don’t have to pay for the drinks.”

“Here I thought I was keeping up on my charges,” said Crystal. “What’s this about Wendy?”

Mr. Saturn glanced around the bar. “Let’s get to the booth and I’ll fill you in.”

“Hey!” said Erin. “Don’t I have a say in this?”

“Not really,” said Mr. Saturn.

“Here are your Aquastars!” said Ken-Ichi, returning with a laden tray.

“Grab the drinks, kids,” said Mr. Saturn. “Crystal?” The fox nodded and tossed a ring to the waiter as they made their way through the door towards the dining area -- just in time, it turned out, for a moment later:

“Oh, that would be fun! Let’s go right now before the others think of it!”

“Sure thing, honey! Hey, get out of my way, I was going first!”

“You get out of my way!”

Mr. Saturn led the way through the crowds to the back of the dining area. An unending stream of servers poured in and out of the swinging doors to the kitchen, bearing trays and bowls of steaming delicacies. Paper dividers graced with pen-and-ink sketches of flowers and mountain landscapes created a semblance of privacy for a number of alcoves containing low tables surrounded by cushions, mostly packed with now-monotonously-lovely Officer Jennys. Mr. Saturn waddled into the only unoccupied booth, just to the left of the kitchen doors. Crystal followed, leaving her shoes tucked neatly in the recess next to the entry.

“Geeze, wait a minute, I have to take off my shoes to eat?” Cane complained. “Where are the chairs, anyway?”

“Yes, and no,” said Brian. “Traditional Japanese seating. No chairs. And you take off your shoes.”

“Of course, in places where such behavior is common it is also the custom to bathe frequently,” added Mr. Saturn, wriggling his nose without psychic intent. “Fortunately the ventilation is good here at Takumi’s; a very advanced system with distributed wireless sensors controlling the wastegates. Squeaky-clean restrooms, too.”

“Great, Cane can eat in the bathroom!” said Clara.

“I am not! Although at least there’s something to sit on, unlike here. Don’t anyone steal my shoes!”

“In the interest of time, I took the liberty of ordering for the group,” said Mr. Saturn.

“Tsukemono and bean curd to start, with udon and assorted water Pokemon in broth up next. Ah, here we are.” Two smiling hedgehogs dressed in a bizarre mixture of tuxedo jacket worn over kimonos bowed as they entered the alcove; in a trice the square table was laden with elegantly tiny plates graced

with perfectly - arranged colorful lumps of salted vegetable and quivering white tofu topped with helices of dark sauce.

"Yow, I thought I was used to the game world but this is the wierdest yet!" said Cane, contemplating his plate with less than his usual culinary avarice.

"Really? This is just like Japanese restaurants at home," replied Brian. "Haven't you ever had tsukemono? It's just a sort of salty pickled vegetable. I don't know how you could compare this to, like, treasure-hunting on Luigi's yacht."

"Yeah, or riding on an up waterfall!" added Nicholas.

"Or dinner cooked by a giant Toad and served by a ghost," said Clara.

"Or a cafe in Star Haven!" said Erin. "Now that was weird!"

"Let's keep our voices down about Star Haven," said Mr. Saturn, checking the surroundings. "But I agree, that is one weird place."

"I think," said Tennyson slowly, "that it's weird to be arguing about what's weirdest. This whole thing is stupendously incredibly bizarre. I mean, was anyone -- except Erin, he doesn't count -- was anyone planning on a quick trip into a video game after school, two weeks of military training, nearly getting killed ten or twelve times, traveling in space like it was a trip to the supermarket to invade a giant space station on the off chance that it would get us home?"

"You're right, I never thought of the part with the military training," said Erin. "Way too boring."

"Yeah, I mean, what's that word, neuralgic?" said Nicholas. "Oh, yeah, nostalgic. That's it. I remember that we used to just play these games. It was really easy. Only your thumbs got tired. And if you got killed you just went back to the last save. And dinners were Mom's cooking, and weird was when Dad decided to make something for dinner that no one else would eat."

"Well, it's not that different in some ways," said Brian. "I mean, like, all of us have been on, say, Speed Highway a hundred times! That's how we're getting to the hotel, isn't it?" Crystal nodded as she ripped a tentacle off a broiled tentacool. "It's a little different being there, but maybe not so much."

"Oh, wow, that's right," said Nicholas, looking concerned. "Doesn't Speed Highway have lots of, like, inverted loops and upside-down offramps and things?" He put his hand to his head. "Do we have to?"

"Well," said Mr. Saturn, "we considered the Twinkle Park route, but I thought you'd appreciate skipping the roller coaster after your last experience, not to mention the inverted hovering bumper cars."

"I hope it doesn't last too long, at least," said Nicholas.

"It's called Speed Highway!" said Clara. "Duh."

"You've never seen it during rush hour," said Crystal.

"What's in a name?" said Erin. "A nose by any other name would smell Cane's feet."

"You mean, like a traffic jam?" asked Tennyson. "What's that, anyway?" he added, pointing to a striped greenish lump floating in broth.

"Gridlock is a better word," replied Mr. Saturn. "Road courtesy is not a habit here. You could walk faster if you could walk upside down. And that's braised barboach, held by goombas to be beneficial for the heart and liver."

"I always walk on speed highway," said Tennyson. "I mean, controlling Sonic or Tails. I guess I should say, run. Seems to go fast enough."

"I like Knuckles more," said Brian. "Maybe he's not quite as fast as Sonic but I always found it easier to get through Station Square."

"Tails is fastest, at least after he gets the jet anklet," said Nicholas. "But I guess they're all pretty fast, except Big the Cat! He's terrible." The waiters cleared the last empty dishes as Mr. Saturn exercised Zelda's finances again.

"Not as bad as Amy. She's about as fast as a snail!" said Cane. "But what do you expect, she's a girl."

Clara laughed. "You should talk! Who's been last in every race since we started training? Who complained about Peppy going too fast? You couldn't catch Amy Rose if you tried."

"Come on, come on," said Crystal, trying to get the kids moving as the staff cleared the dishes. "Get your shoes back on and let's get going. I think we've been here long enough."

"I am not so slow!" said Cane. "It's just that I was wearing my crappy shoes when we got here. I'm a lot faster in my Reeboks!"

"You don't have any Reeboks," said Tennyson. "You were always taking mine to show off!" he continued, holding his worn sneakers up to demonstrate. "And they don't even fit you. Why don't you just get some better shoes?"

"Have you seen a shoe store here? If I had a good pair of shoes I'd run you guys into the ground. You'll see! I've got speed to burn. I could run Speed Highway faster than you can drive it!" Cane was so busy boasting he wasn't paying much attention to the task of donning his shoes: in fact, he wasn't. As he tied the footwear on, a pointy-eared fellow from the next booth stuck his head around the partition, knocking his oversized dark glasses askew, and shouted in dismay: "Hey, those are my shoes!" But it was too late. Cane finished snugging the laces, took a step, and disappeared in a blur of motion.

"I thought you didn't want to be seen, Sonic?" said a voice from behind the partition.

"Keep it down, would you?" replied Sonic, replacing the concealing glasses.

"Sonic! Wow! This is cool!" said Nicholas.

"Oh, geeze, why don't you tell everyone?" said Sonic. "Come on, Knuckles, let's get outta here before the crowds come." Sonic reached to the table, grabbed a ceramic container and downed the contents in a gulp, tossing the empty onto the cushions beside the table.

"What's the point of buying expensive sake if you're going to guzzle it like that?" asked his companion, a diminutive but feisty long-nosed fellow with a face almost concealed in dreadlocked red fur.

"What, you want it like last time?" said Sonic. "Get your stuff."

"What's the problem?" asked Clara.

"It's difficult for someone as famous as Sonic to go out in public without being mobbed by his numerous fans, admirers, and groupies," said Knuckles, rather sarcastically. "Or so he tells me. I don't have this problem, you'll understand."

"Them that can, do, them that can't, complain," said Sonic. "You comin' or what?"

"Sonic, you gonna' go barefoot?" Knuckles asked, glancing at the shoe rack.

"Can't be helped, and stop saying my name!" Sonic gathered a dark cloak and hood from the coat rack next to the booth and started to walk hurriedly away, but before he could take more than a couple of steps, a pretty human waitress burst out of the kitchen doors and called loudly: "Mister Sonic! Mister Sonic! Wait a minute!"

Sonic stopped, sighed, and turned back to the inquiring servitor. "For cryin' out loud. Okay. What is it, kid? You want an autograph? A smile? No -- ah, a kiss? I get it -- you're holding out for a night of passionate romance?"

The waitress held out a slip of paper. "No, no, Mister Sonic -- you forgot to pay your bill!"

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"Orange you glad I didn't say banana!" said Nicholas. Laughter did not follow.

"Don't you ever run out of dumb jokes?" asked Clara.

"I don't think so," said Tennyson. "He did this the whole time we waited in line for the hot jump rope." Fox and Crystal had given the kids a rare and welcome night off; they were in a very long slow-moving line for the giant pinball game in the casino next to the hotel.

"I remember you told me about that. Didn't you get a key?" Clara replied.

"Yep, still got it in my pack in the room, though I haven't the slightest idea why. It's kindof pretty but it's hard to imagine we'd ever find a use for it."

"Everything since we got here is hard to imagine, except for Erin," replied Clara.

"True," said Brian. "So speaking of things that are hard to imagine -- where exactly did you say you met Doctor Robotnik?"

“Aggressive driving school,” said Nicholas. “It was wild. I mean, we went by one room where they were practicing a distrust exercise where one person stands in the middle of the circle and closes their eyes and all the others try to be the first one to push them over. See, if you’re lucky everybody tries to push you down at once and they end up holding you up instead. It’s supposed to teach you how being obnoxious builds teamwork or something like that.”

“Yeah,” added Tennyson, “and the next room -- that was a classroom, they were having a kind of group oral exam, like when Mr. Classen does recitation -- and the teacher--”

“She was a koopa!” interrupted Nicholas.

“Koopa paratroopa, right,” continued Tennyson, “so she says, ‘It’s late at night and as you come around a corner, you see two headlights heading straight for you in your lane, on the wrong side of the road. What do you do, class?’”

Nicholas broke in again: “And everybody shouts out, ‘speed up, honk your horn, and stand your ground!’”

Tennyson continued: “And she was just about crying at that point, you know, ‘I’m so proud of you I could just burst!’”

“Yeah,” said Nicholas, “and then she said, ‘Get out there and smash some fenders!’ I mean, Mr. Classen never treats us like that.”

“You still haven’t said what happened with Doctor Robotnik,” said Brian.

The line snaked back and forth on the catwalk, suspended by no obvious means over rows of slot machines. The conversation was briefly interrupted while the kids watched as a gang of rampaging chaos armed with hammers and explosives attack the slots, blowing the machines to bits and stuffing the coins into impractically-large cloth bags. The chaos weren’t very good at burgling and tended to blow each other up with ill-considered charge placements, while coin shrapnel flew wildly. The displaced customers had gone up to their rooms to get their weaponry, and began to return about the same time as a crew of blue-uniformed security guards streamed in through a trap door in ceiling, landing on top of each other as well as a pair of chubby ladies who had continued to ply the slot machines obsessively through the minor disturbance.

“Yeah, yeah, I was getting to that,” said Nicholas. “So Mister Saturn drags us into this other room, and like it’s real dark inside and there’s this one wall that you can see into another room, but they can’t see you, a one-way leer--”

“One-way mirror,” corrected Tennyson.

“Right, so there’s this weird looking sortof fat guy with a big mustache, and he’s talking to a bowser, but the bowser guy is, like carrying a clipboard and wearing a necktie, and he’s saying, um, ‘Mister Robotnik, no one is going to judge you here, we’re just trying to fix up your miserable attitude and distorted sense of priorities. I’m not telling you you’re wrong, just that you’re messed up in the head a little bit.’”

“Oh, so that was Robotnik,” said Clara. “Of course he’s messed up, he’s always trying to blow everything up.”

“No, no, that wasn’t it,” said Tennyson. “‘Cause the fat guy is -- you know, actually he reminded me of Skolar, that star spirit we met at Peach’s. He was talking about how his moral -- impersonations?”

“Imperatives,” suggested Brian.

“Oh, yeah, that was it. His moral imperatives had shifted to disallow destruction without cause, that was what he said. Kinda’ got me to thinking. He went on for several minutes about how you shouldn’t cause trouble unless there’s a legitimate reason, and how the eternal search for enlightenment should extend to every aspect of the world including driving, and so that’s why he let the other guy at the stop sign have his turn.”

The chaos having been rounded up or disposed of, the gamblers below returned to parting with their coins. A sort of jazz band composed of penguins, who were having significant difficulties playing the wind instruments as their beaks didn’t fit the mouthpieces very well, made the rounds of the slots, drawing many catcalls, some thrown food, and rather little applause. A spinner, a chubby fellow suspended from a propellor around its waist, floated by the blackjack tables, the backwash sending

playing cards flying everywhere, as the dealers (all foxes) shouted imprecations. The spinner, apparently their supervisor, took no notice, moving into the grand foyer past the huge statue of Sonic.

"Oh, yeah, that was funny!" interjected Nicholas. "I mean, when he said that, the bowser guy went off the deep end. Like, 'after all the time we've spent on this you're still in denial! Still blabbing this obscene nonsense about taking turns. What does it take to pound some sense into that oversized peanut of a brain of yours!'"

"And then," said Tennyson, "Robotnik said, 'look on the bright side, with all the hours you spend with me you're that much closer to completing your internship'."

"What does any of this have to do with us?" asked Brian.

"Oh, yeah, I was getting to that," said Nicholas. "While we're quietly in here listening to this stuff Mister Saturn takes out his cell phone and then the bowser guy gets a call, you see it's Saturn imitating somebody else, I guess his boss or something, and he goes out, and then we sneak in through some kind of hidden door into the room."

By this point the kids were nearing the head of the line (finally). A smiling attendant directed participants towards one of four control stations, from which each directed one of the four giant flippers in the huge pinball machine.

"And the fat guy sees us coming in," said Tennyson, "and is he surprised or scared, like you'd think? Fat chance. 'About time you got here, Saturn. I was about to die of boredom. Who are your friends?' So Mister Saturn is explaining how we need to get to the reality dissimulator or whatever, and then Robotnik says 'Yeah, I know all about it, they haven't accounted for the possibility of divergent positive back feeding--'"

"It was 'feedback'," interrupted Nicholas. "And then Saturn and the fat guy got into this big argument about all kinds of computer stuff, and then the counselor guy comes back and instead of chasing us out or something, he joins in the argument! So they're all going on about loops and detractors--" ("--attractors--" added Tennyson) "--right, attractives and control alchemisms, and Tennyson just walks right up to the fat guy and says, 'Hey, while you guys are talking, do you suppose you could tell us the security code for the recreational doors on the station?' And the guy says 'of course, here, it's not hard, it's just a generalized hibachi series'"

("--Fibonacci--" added Tennyson) "right, and he scribbles a bunch of stuff on the back of a driving vest." ("--test--" added Tennyson.)

Tennyson held up a coffee-stained slip of paper. Brian could read part of the printed text: "INTENTIONAL DENTS ARE USED TO INTIMIDATE OTHER DRIVERS WHEN..." "And he told me how to find the safe entrances -- some of them have traps that make you tell bad jokes and stuff--"

"Nicholas must have already gone through one of those," said Clara.

"So anyway they were all still arguing when Nicholas and I left. And then on the way back, we were getting hungry so we stopped at Amy's diner, and who do you think we found there?"

"Mario?" said Clara?

"Tails?" guessed Brian.

"General MacArthur?" said Erin.

"No, Cane! Eating!" said Nicholas.

"Redundant," said Brian.

"And from the look of it he'd been eating for quite a while," added Tennyson. "I counted eleven empty plates on his table and that didn't include the pot pie" ("and raspberry sherbet ice cream", added Nicholas) "yeah, and sherbet he was finishing up when we got there."

"That's a lot even for Cane," said Clara.

"Well," replied Tennyson, "he said that running ten or twelve miles in the light speed shoes gets you really hungry."

"And it's lucky we showed up 'cause he didn't have any money with him!" added Nicholas. "We had to pay the bill and it used up pretty much all the coins we had with us."

"So what were you guys up to while we were gone?" asked Tennyson.

"Crystal and Clara spent the whole afternoon talking girl talk," said Erin.

"How do you know?" asked Nicholas. "You listened in?"

"No, no, I was just -- looking for a phone."

"So, what were you talking about?" asked Tennyson. "If it's not too private."

"If you must know -- Crystal was talking to me about staying here in the game worlds. She thinks I could be a successful mercenary soldier after my apprenticeship. So she was telling me how the different specialties work, like bounty hunting, assassins for hire, military work, bodyguards, kidnapping, treasure hunting, all that stuff. And stuff about whether you join a company or work for yourself, where to get money to start a business, how much money you need to live in the different worlds."

"Wow," said Tennyson. "So you're deserting us to become a businesswoman."

"Businesswoman and murderess," said Erin.

"Redundant," said Brian.

"Hey, whoah, you didn't tell me that!" said Nicholas. "How are we going to get through Ark without you?"

"Hold on, there, I'm not deserting anybody," replied Clara. "I'm just making sure I have a backup plan. You know, we still don't know much about what's in Ark. We could get to the whatever-it-is and still not get home."

"You're right that we might not get home," said Brian, "but I'm not sure it's fair to say that we don't know anything about Ark. There are four different routes from the colonized farming areas to the research area, which is certainly where the simulator is. The power conduits seem likely to have regular maintenance access, though the old sanitation tubes may be unattended. There aren't any --"

"Okay, okay, Brian!" said Tennyson. "We know you've been studying the maps. Clara should have said everybody but Brian doesn't know much about Ark, right?"

"Besides, she wasn't really talking about knowing our way around inside," said Nicholas. "It's more like what the simulator thing really is and whether we can figure out how to use it or find someone to help."

"Is that what she was talking about?" asked Tennyson.

"She's just making it all up," said Erin. "I'll bet it was just girl talk. You know how girl talk is. First they spend hours discussing the boys they like, and then they spend more hours talking about what sort of stuff they should wear to get the attention of the boys they like even though everybody knows that boys don't ever notice what girls wear, and then they complain about how the boys never notice them for a couple more hours. I'll bet that's what they were doing."

"You're the one that's infatuated, not me," said Clara. "Just what were you looking for a phone for, anyway? Probably to call some mystery girl whose name starts with W?"

"I was not. I was just -- ordering pizza for Cane."

"Come on, you're sweet on Wendy."

"I am not! I'm was just pretending to like her to find out about the smuggling ring."

"Okay, we'll tell her that when we see her. Oh, and about how you were flirting with all the Jennys."

"I was not calling Wendy, and besides she said she doesn't mind about the Jennys."

"There you are!" It was Cane on the neighboring catwalk. That was the line for the occupants of the pinballs: it was much shorter, so that Cane had caught up with the others despite his late arrival.

"You guys deserted me again!"

"I thought you had dessert!" replied Nicholas. "More than once, if I recall."

"Are you sure you want to be in that line?" shouted Brian.

"Why, what about it?" But by this time Cane was first; a helpful monkey-like kiki took his ticket and helped him into the door of a huge white pinball twice as tall as a kid, with a PacMan smile painted across the front.

"Be sure to latch the decoupler first and the door second once you're inside," said the Kiki. "Decoupler first, door lock second!"

Cane as usual paid no attention. "I'll see you guys after I get a hundred thousand points or so!" The door closed with a CLICK-CLACK. The Kiki pounded on the outside, shouting "No, no, decoupler

first!” but it was too late: the ball rolled down a track into the chute next to the huge plunger and another giant Pacball rolled up to take its place.

While this was going on, the other kids took up positions. The week’s special theme, explained by a huge banner hanging above the playing surface, was Pacball. The board had been redone in true PacMan style; points could be had by rolling over little round dots that looked like freeway lane markers, and on the board prowled mechanical ghosts that were worth 500 points if taken from behind, but could take 1000 points from the unwary player who allowed their ball to be captured. Some of the monstrous bumpers, marked ‘TNT’, would blast the ball across the playing surface at a high rate; others, spring pads, projected the ball high into the air to fall unpredictably onto the board. It was a challenging task for the flipper team to keep the ball in play, though of course that paled beside the challenge of surviving the noisy, bumpy, roller-coaster environment inside the ball (even when the decoupling linkage was properly engaged).

Nicholas and Tennyson had the two left-side flippers and Brian and Erin took the right side pair. Clara got the launcher control and the projectile gun. The latter, positioned on a turret in the center of the huge board, could fire blasts of dry ice to deflect the ball, though considerable skill was required to strike the fast-moving ball with the narrow stream. A successful run depended on teamwork from all, combined with clever manipulation of the rolling ball by its occupant. The current high score, shown on the top of the stupendous score wall, was 454,217 points, by the 1619 Twos; the Sons Of New York were in second place with 411,021.

Clara pulled the plunger lever, her action mirrored by the huge simalcrum below her, and released: the big piston struck Cane’s ball and the game began.

Now, when properly installed (i.e. when the decoupler was engaged prior to locking the door), the chamber within the ball was suspended on internal tracks so that it stayed upright, allowing the player to see and respond to the board, shifting his or her weight to subtly influence the passage of the ball across the playing surface. Unfortunately, Cane had engaged the door lock first, so that the decoupling linkage could not seat properly; thus he plummeted head-over-heels, belly-around-butt, and on several other axes as the ball was pounded by the flippers and bumpers, absorbing Pacdots and messily squashing piles of apples, pears, and strawberries. In consequence, he was entirely too occupied with his own difficulties to notice the gossamer shape poking its head above the gunwales of the ersatz pirate ship suspended above the gambling floor to the left of the pinball arcade. The figure was shielded by the second bumper from the view of Brian, the only other member of the group who would have recognized a real Pac ghost. Having established the identity of its quarry, it retreated briefly back into cover. There was a loud whining noise, barely audible above the clanging of the pinball bells and the shouts of the gallery as Cane unwittingly overran an imitation ghost to gain the team 500 points.

Suddenly a huge silvery shape bounded into the air above the pirate ship, heading towards the pinball arcade. Brian and Tennyson, involved in a difficult cross-board handoff to try to get a clean shot at the ramp to Cleopatra, paid no attention. Even Clara, absorbed in the game, barely gave the object a glance. But Nicholas, who had never been a pinball enthusiast in the real world and felt even more awkward manipulating a flipper bigger than he was with hundreds of folks watching his every mis-step, was mentally ready for a distraction. He couldn’t immediately identify the gleaming bug-eyed craft or creature but it looked entirely too bizarre to ignore. He pulled the hilt of his beamsword from the belt holder he had taken to using to avoid a repetition of the awkwardness at Cymballine’s. Tennyson shouted, “Come on, Nicholas!” as Cane’s ballcraft slipped right by his idle flipper, but Nicholas was vacillating about extending the blade and didn’t heed the admonition.

As the creature cleared one of the roof support beams, its mouth opened. Something about the view staring down its throat decided Nicholas, and just in time. As his energy blade hissed out of the hilts, a brilliant yellow and gold flaming shaft shot out of the mouth at lightning speed, heading straight towards Brian. Nicholas’ many hours of surreptitious defensive practice, disparaged by Peppy, took over: the sword swung in an arc to meet the glowing beam. There was a spark-spitting, screaming, screeching clash as the two energy weapons met, but the parry deflected the attack into the partition next

to Brian instead of his head. “The killer frog!” Brian shouted, ducking a bit too late but reaching immediately for his ray gun.

The arcade broke into tempestuous chaos as the slightly-truncated tongue zipped back into the flying frog. Before the frog could alight on the crowded flipper line catwalk, Clara had snapped off two rifle shots, spanging off the stainless steel exterior as she searched unsuccessfully for the vulnerable lubrication cover plates at the leg joints. Tennyson managed to get under cover behind the snack vending machine; Erin stood on the hazardously-narrow barrier wall surrounding the pinball floor, brandishing his pinball program like a conductor’s baton and shouting, “jump, frog, jump!”

Meanwhile, Nicholas decided that the best defense was a good offense and charged down the catwalk, beam sword at the ready. The frog turned to the attack, but its view was blocked by the wildly fleeing crowd of folks on the catwalk, so that Nicholas was able to close the gap unchallenged. Up close, the tongue was an awkward weapon, easily avoided as it shot out, brushing past Nicholas’ shoulder to knock a spinner sideways down to the floor. Nicholas could see a wide-eyed blue ghost figure behind one of the eye-like windows of the craft as he pursued the only attack he knew, a head cut followed by a slice downwards towards what would be the shoulder of a human. His blade sunk partway into one of the legs of the creature before it fled back into the air, knocking him harmlessly onto his behind. Remembering Brian’s experiences at the mansion and leaping to an inspired conclusion, he shouted “It’s Blinky!” as the frog flew over his head.

The frog landed awkwardly on the right-side ramp (which led to a realistic miniature PacBay Harbor), squishing an orange melon. Erin nodded and said to no one, “Frog with three legs, thirty feet,” as a ghostly head extruded itself out through the top of the frog and shouted, “The murderer Brian dies!”. The frog twisted to position the tongue for a shot at Brian through the partition wall. Unfortunately for the ghost’s plans, Cane’s PacBall, which had been heading around the top of the board, struck the TNT bumper at this point and was projected at high speed off the retaining wall and down the ramp. It rolled right over the frog, reducing the craft to silvery road kill, legs flying in all directions. The scoreboard, undisturbed by the chaos, went ching! and added another 500 points to their tally.

Blinky the ghost, at this point a deep aquamarine, floated above the wreckage of his craft, ineffectually trying to reattach the broken joint of the left front leg. “Get over here and help me!” he shouted pointlessly to the mechanical Inky as it methodically made its way past him towards the trampoline. Clara had produced an ectoblaster from her pack, but deprived of his armament the ghost didn’t seem to represent a significant danger. As the flipper teams were thoroughly distracted, Cane’s Pacball had finally rolled into the exit chute. Clara jumped over the wall onto the pinball floor and brandished the blaster. The Kiki tried to shoo her off the pinball surface, while Tennyson and Brian scrambled over the barrier to join her. Nicholas shouted from above, “Just stun him!”

Erin jumped down and walked over to the smashed frog and shouted, “Jump, frog, jump!” He nodded to himself and muttered, “Just as I thought, frog with no legs, deaf.”

Tennyson approached the glowing blue figure, ray gun at the ready. “Blinky, I gather. Let me introduce my good friend, Brian. He did in your buddy Inky. He could stop there -- if you feel cooperative today.”

Blinky moved towards Brian only to be halted in his tracks by a blast from Clara’s pistol. “Ow! I’ll get you next, you stinking bitch.”

“I see you have the same charming habits as Inky,” said Brian. “Didn’t help him, won’t help you. Do you think we should let Cane eat him or do the honors ourselves?”

“Up yours, you PacPunk! I’ll blow you up like the trash you are!” screamed Blinky, trying to unweave the frog leg he’d just shoved into the joint to use it as a bludgeon.

Clara raised her blaster threateningly, as Nicholas shouted “Get down!” from above and behind them. By this time, the kids were in the habit of obeying orders: they did. Just in time, as a crackling brilliant green lightning bolt leapt from behind and above, striking the ghost full on. With a wailing cry he exploded, spewing yellowish ectoplasmic slime onto everything nearby.

An armored figure dropped from the support rafter, a frightening-looking cannon of some sort attached to its arm. “Cover!” shouted Nicholas. He had swapped to an armor-piercing blaster, but the

others had left their packs at the flipper control stations and would be exposed to fire from the mystery soldier if they tried to scamper back. The silver figure dropped with a thud onto the remains of the frog and probed at the goop where Blinky had been with its foot, ignoring the kids and the other customers.

A spinner floated over the wall into the pinball floor and approached the soldier. "Firing major weapons on the premises is completely against the terms of use which are clearly posted at all the entry doors--" it started to say officiously. The armored figure turned its cannon towards the spinner and a different blast of red fire shot out. The spinner drifted erratically to the floor, a head-wide hole blown right through the middle.

The soldier twisted off its glistening helmet, revealing a familiar shock of short blond hair. "Clients are not permitted to compete with a bounty hunter once she's hired. Clearly stated in the contract."

Clara remained in cover but spoke: "Aren't you still trying to kill us?"

"Not now," answered Aran. "Client misbehavior terminates any obligations by a hunter, except to terminate the offending party." She stepped on the mush. "Nothing left of this one but the tax writeoff." She turned back towards the hole in the roof through which she'd entered the complex and pulled a rope gun from her belt.

Clara stepped out and advanced towards Samus. "I see you've got places to go so let's make this quick. Would you train me as a bounty hunter? Like you?"

Aran stopped and considered Clara for a moment. "Thought you were leaving. Come to my house if you capture Ark and live, and I'll consider it." Then the Amazon donned her helmet and fired a grapnel through the opening in the roof. She rocketed up the rope and was gone by the time the Casino security guards finally appeared in the corridor below.

"Is your dad looking to remarry?" said Erin. "We could take her home with us."

"Where does she live?" wondered Clara aloud, ignoring Erin.

"Near the train station," said Brian. "Down the street from Luigi's place. We walked by her place, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Clara was thoughtfully silent for a moment.

Fox poked his head over the retaining wall to take in the scene. "Can't I leave you kids alone for an hour without you blowing something up?"

Nicholas dropped over the wall to the pinball track, ignoring Fox and the shouts from the security guards to stay off the play area, and called to the kids. "Come on, let's get Cane out."

"Yep, we owe him one this time," said Tennyson, leading the way down the exit chute, as Fox and Crystal leapt down to make sure the kids were all right. They found the Kiki struggling to force the jammed PacBall door open. Tennyson and Brian joined forces with him, and together the three dragged the lever down. The door swung open. "Bleeeah!" said Tennyson, as the unpleasant odor wafted out of the little chamber.

Brian poked his head into the door and pointed. "Oh, look, there's the pot pie. And the raspberry sherbet." Cane's voluminous lunch was plastered all over the spherical interior chamber. Cane himself, looking just as slimy as the kids but smelling much worse, was shivering on the bottom of the chamber. He obviously hadn't bothered to clamp on the safety harness, either.

The Kiki called out, "One for the showers! Clean up crew!" Three gray-clad staff members wearing rubber gloves and respirators helped Cane out and supported him as he walked unsteadily down the catwalk towards the shower room, with the kids walking behind (and upwind).

"Way to go, Cane, you squashed him good!" said Tennyson. Cane didn't respond.

"Tennyson's right, that was a great job," said Clara, trying to be supportive. "You really saved us all!" She slapped him on the back and then wiped her hand on her slimy trousers: "yuck."

"Hey, we can buy you another dinner when we get back back to the hotel," said Brian, meaning to be kind.

Cane turned his head (slowly) back to look at Brian. "As God is my witness -- I'll never be hungry again."

“Do you think he’s serious?” said Nicholas, sounding concerned, as Cane returned to his slow amble towards the shower room.

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” said Tennyson. “After all -- tomorrow is another day.”

“When the going gets tough,” said Erin, slapping the swagger stick against his palm for emphasis, “the tough go shopping. Your job is not to die for your country, it’s to make the other poor bastard dine on his countrymen!”

“You know, I’ve been thinking,” interrupted Nicholas.

“Go back to sleep son, you’re the only one here who knows what he’s doing,” replied Erin.

“No, really, I was trying to remember Madame Clairvoya’s other predictions. I mean, you remember that mine was the party ball, and then Cane found the light-speed shoes.”

Erin looked disconcerted. “Pure coincidence, son! On the battlefield you can’t trust to good fortune, you need bribery.” He slapped the stick hard against the toyshelf. The clerk, a bored-looking young lady wearing a pair of headphones over her bleached-blond hair, looked up and said without rancor: “You break that stick, you bought it.”

The kids were at the Dry Dry Outlet, Capital City. It was a spanking new shopping mall set on a little rise looking over the bay. They were under strict instructions from Fox to be highly visible tourists, and Nicholas and Erin were attending to orders enthusiastically. Brian was taking in the view from the top of the stairs: he was feeling a bit homesick, and the site reminded him of San Francisco seen from the hills above Cow Hollow. Cane had flirted with a look inside the Chaotic Jewelers (“the chaotic bracelet: strangely attractive!”, or so said the window display), but then headed to the Chao Cafe, looking for copious quantities of chow. It can be presumed that God wasn’t looking, or at least Cane assumed he had snookered the Man Upstairs, as he was more than ready to recover the meal lost the previous evening.

Tennyson pointed to a brilliantly-lit, almost garish storefront across the already-crowded walkway: “Ollie’s” written in huge glowing script hung over an animated display of wands chasing flying keys through the air. “Looks interesting -- what do you think?”

“Sure, I always wanted a magic wand,” said Clara. A chimed version of That Old Black Magic greeted them as they passed the threshold. Smartly appointed displays of wands of various sizes and colors alternated with instructional posters and shelves stuffed with neatly-stacked, colorful boxes. A smartly dressed young man with his long hair caught up in a ring at his shoulder bustled from the back of the store to greet the kids.

“Welcome to Ollies! Wander no further, we want to please. How may I be of service?”

“Is this the same as Ollivander’s wand shop?” asked Clara. “It’s not the way I imagined it, somehow.”

The young man shivered distastefully. “Gad, no, certainly not the same. Awful lighting, terrible product presentation, pathetic market positioning. Outdated, deficient inventory management. Awful cash flow. Ollie’s is a fully modern integrated source for prestimanagerial products and accessories. We’ve retargeted our message and reconstructed our image to go after a more desirable demographic.”

“Oh, you mean customers with lots of money,” said Tennyson. “Erin was telling me about that. Do you mind if we browse a bit?”

“By all means, be my guest! Perhaps you’d be interested in some of our exclusive product lines.” He guided Tennyson and Clara to a stepped display that looked rather like Tennysons’ model of a ziggurat from History class. “Here we have the most extensive collection of Weasleyized wands available anywhere.”

“Weasleyized?” asked Clara.

“The spells are directed backwards, towards the user, young lady. Perfect for weight loss charms and acne preventatives. Or perhaps the iWand, here: we have platinum, cherry, jet black, or transparent.”

“Does the color of the wand affect how it works?” asked Tennyson skeptically.

“No, not at, all, but our wand employ only natural magical ingredients, and we offer a free power boost with every iWand: honey melon or bubbler’s yeast.”

“Do any of these wands actually do anything in the nonmagical game worlds?” asked Clara.

"I don't know -- I've been so busy running the store, I haven't had a chance to actually take one out and try it." The young man appeared honestly distraught. "By Gad! I shan't waste another moment." He grabbed a wand off one of the displays and seemed to check it over. "This appears to be in fine shape. Let's see -- vidiveritasum, I believe. A temporary spell that causes the subject's true nature to be revealed. I should think that upon such gentle and innocent children as yourselves the effects should be quite modest. Shall we?" He pointed the wand at Clara. As he started to speak she realized that he had pulled the wand from the Weasleyized section, but it was too late: "Vidiveritasum!" said the young man, pronouncing it with an accent on the third and fifth syllables. There was a poof! and he turned into a gray, hunched, bespectacled old man in a ragged overcoat.

"Now you look like the Ollivander I imagined," said Clara.

The no-longer young man looked in the mirror and tried to scream, though what came out was rather more a prolonged wheeze. He didn't look pleased. Tennyson took Clara's hand and said, "Perhaps we should come by another day." They made their way out while Mr. Ollivander Jr. tried unsuccessfully to scrape the whiskers off his cheeks.

Outside they met Cane, looking distraught. "How was the cafe?" asked Clara.

"It was terrible! The food was awful, and such small portions, too!" Cane replied.

"I thought you weren't going to be so hungry any more," said Tennyson.

"What? Did I say that? I meant I wasn't ever going to be hungry yesterday, not now."

"Brian?" said Clara, ignoring Cane. "You okay?"

"Yeah, come on, Brian, let's check out the bookstore!" said Tennyson.

Brian sighed and made his way down the stairs. "Okay, I guess you're right."

"Bookstore?" said Cane skeptically.

"Store with books in it," said Clara. "Remember books? Those are the things you never open unless a book report is due."

"I do so," replied Cane. "I read *The Golden Stopwatch* from cover to cover last summer!"

"Oh, from front cover to front cover?" replied Clara.

"Compass," added Brian. "The *Golden Compass*. That was a good book. I wonder if they have real world books here."

"Come on, let's go find out." Tennyson led the way into the glass doors under the Boarded Books sign. The store was huge and brightly lit. Colorful signs hung over long rows of bookshelves: GAMES, HISTORY -- GAMES, RULES -- GAMES, POLITICAL SCIENCE -- ROMANCE -- PSEUDOSCIENCE -- SELF-SERVING BIOGRAPHY -- HONEST BIOGRAPHY (that was a small shelf in the corner) and so on. Big racks near the door held special displays of books on sale, featured works, and new releases.

While Brian wandered over to the FICTION section, Clara pointed to one of the piled volumes near the door. "Look at this -- Luigi's Private Diary, volume three, the unauthorized inside story." She turned the book over and read the back. "Continuation of the best-selling series of exposes -- the secret lives of the rich and famous. The famous Luigi's private journals, written without the slightest idea they are destined for publication. (Don't tell him!) Hmm. How did Erin find time to do a publishing deal?"

"Erin?" asked Tennyson. "Oh, you mean that book he had in Mister Saturn's bag. He probably just gave it to Saturn. We have no idea what he's been up to -- Saturn, I mean -- he probably took it to a publisher or something."

"Hmm, but this is volume three," replied Clara, picking up one of the books. "Does that mean that Mister Saturn stops by the mansion a couple times a year to steal Luigi's private diary and Luigi never notices?"

"Sound plausible to me," said Tennyson.

Clara began to flip randomly through the book. "What the heck is this?" she said, chuckling, pointing to a photograph of a smiling Luigi, a Poltergust on his back, hat in his left hand, and the carpet cleaning adaptor in his right. His hair was chaotically bedraggled, obviously soaked as well as sporadically covered with soapy foam. She read the caption: "I discovered a new fast way to wash my hair today."

"Hey, let me see that," said Cane. He took the book from Clara's hands. "Wait a minute. That was my idea! Hey, Brian, didn't I invent this?"

"Invent what?" asked Brian. He was looking through the BOWDLERIZED CLASSICS row, just next to REFERENCE and behind REVERENCE.

"Using the Poltergust to wash up," said Cane. "Remember, while you were wasting your time with those stupid treasure chests."

"That's true, at least the part about the Poltergust is. I don't know if you were the first person to ever apply one to personal hygiene but you did do it."

"Hey, I'm gonna complain. Wait a minute, let me write this down." He borrowed a pencil from Tennyson and took an advertising flyer from the display table. "Okay, page two fifty three, what does it say, um -- 'I discovered a new way to wash my hair today--'" As he wrote, a port on the back of the book opened up. Clara shouted "Drop it!" and whipped her ray gun out as a small gun popped out of the port and began firing blaster bolts at Cane. It took three full-power blasts of the ray gun and one from Cane's slower but accurate beamer to put the automated weapon out of commission, by which time Cane had suffered a couple of nasty burns on his belly and thigh.

"What the heck was that about?" he shouted, as Clara stomped the book with her heel.

"What's your problem over there?" asked the desk clerk, a tall young fellow with thick glasses, looking up from his textbook.

"What's our problem? This book was shooting at me!" shouted Cane.

"That's just the copy protection device. All rights reserved, says so on the front cover. You're not allowed to copy anything without the express written consent of the publisher. And remember it's illegal here in Freedom to defeat copy protection."

"But it was my idea!" protested Cane.

"What does that have to do with anything?" asked the clerk. "You'll need to pay for the book."

"You want us to pay for a book that's openly stolen from the author and tried to kill us for copying enough of it to prove that it's stolen?" asked Tennyson.

"Is that unusual?" asked the clerk.

"No," said Clara. "Not in the least." She took the flamethrower out of her pack and pointed it at the pile of Luigi diaries. It just took a few moments to reduce the pile to cinders. Then she pointed it at the clerk and smiled. "I'll have Mister Luigi pay the bill. I'm sure he'll be happy to take it out of his royalties. When he gets them." The clerk glanced at the smoking pile, then at Clara (still holding the business end of the flamethrower), nodded, and returned to his textbook. An older lady sitting at the cafe complained knowingly to her companion, "They always over-roast the coffee beans here -- smells like a burning book!"

Brian picked up the first and now the only remaining copy (the gun slot still smoking slightly), put it in his pocket, and laid two rings on the counter. "I think I'd like to read it after all," he said.

"I'm getting out of here!" said Cane, charging out through the glass doors. "I knew there was a reason I don't like book stores. Okay, this looks safe enough."

"I'm getting out of here!" said Cane, charging out through the glass doors. "I knew there was a reason I don't like book stores." Cane strolled down the hallway searching for more food, Brian following with his nose in the still-smoking book. Mr. Saturn blocked their progress just before the food court entrance.

"Come on, Cane," said Mr. Saturn. "We told you to get noticed and you've done a great job, now it's time to roll." He led the kids back out of the shop just as a mousy little fellow in coveralls came out of the door at the back of the room, behind the giant rhododendron, wheeling a cart loaded with crimson bottles. Mr. Saturn looked around to make sure they were unattended and then said quietly, "Stay right behind me. Cane, you have your thirty-two long with you?" Cane nodded. "Good, we might need to take out a security camera or two. Let's go." Mr. Saturn led the kids down a row occupied by several women's clothiers, furniture stores, and other items of little interest to the kids. The corridors were beginning to fill up with browsers and shoppers as the morning wore on. They passed a gift shop with tiny magnetized Diddy Kong Racers on display in the window, just beyond which was an entry marked

RESTROOMS. Mr. Saturn led them through; a long hallway with subdued tile walls and track lighting led into the bowels of the mall. The hall was deserted at this relatively early hour. A little box hanging from a bracket on the wall near the ceiling was broken apart and smoking. Mr. Saturn nodded and said, "Good, Clara's been here already. Let's go." He led them to a doorway marked EMPLOYEES ONLY -- DO NOT ENTER, and went in. Erin and Cane followed; Erin locked the door behind him.

The room led down another hallway, lit only by emergency lights mounted on the walls, moving slightly down hill. As they proceeded, they could detect an odor that at first was merely unpleasant and grew overpowering by the time they reached the end of the hall. The corridor opened into a larger room occupied by a number of wheeled dumpsters; the floor was covered with scattered refuse and detritus. Brian was sitting on an inverted trash can, holding his nose. Clara and Tennyson were behind him, talking quietly together. Nicholas was standing watch by the other entrance to the room, a large metal garage-door apparatus that looked like it rolled up on tracks.

"Glad to see you made it," said Mr. Saturn. "You all have done an excellent job of being seen and hopefully a similarly excellent job of not being seen in making your way here."

"We were pretty careful," replied Clara. "The code you gave me for the door worked first time, and I don't think anyone saw us go in. I took out the camera from the turn in the hallway so they wouldn't have gotten a good look at who did it."

"So hopefully you can tell us what was so important about the trash heap that we had to come and see it," said Nicholas. "It really really stinks in here. Reminds me of when my sister's diaper pail was in my room."

"Your attitude will need some adjustment if you decide to get a degree in sanitation engineering," said Mr. Saturn. "Or your nose. In any case, in addition to being another character-building experience, this sojourn has considerable practical value. The Dry Dry Outpost Real Estate Investment Trust has conveniently placed a warp pipe to a location in the Mystic Ruins quite close to Tails' workshop in this very facility."

"A warp pipe here?" asked Tennyson, puzzled. "Whatever for?"

"Certainly not for our convenience," said Mr. Saturn. "The holding company was very unthrilled with the exceedingly high cost of a waste disposal permit from the local authorities, so while a small fraction of their rubbish is delivered to the city to avoid arousing suspicion, the greater part is dumped through the warp pipe into an illegal but convenient repository. Ecologically dubious but financially beneficial."

"So we're going down the trash dump?" said Cane. "Wait a minute, I think I'll go back to the bookstore."

"That wouldn't be a good idea," said Mr. Saturn. Just then, there was a descending screeching noise ending in the low thump of an explosion. "Ah, that would be a squadron of Bowser's Koopa Krushers. Right on time. With any luck, in their eagerness to find and eliminate you kids, they'll accidentally blow this rubbish dump to smithereens, ensuring that little or no trace is left of our escape."

"Blow up!" said Cane. "What about us being in it? I'm getting out of here, where's the warp pipe, let's go!" He flung open the steel door behind him and plunged into a dark room, the spring-loaded door swinging closed behind him.

"Cane!" said Nicholas.

"What?" said a muffled Cane from behind the wall.

"That's the broom closet! I looked." Cane somewhat sheepishly returned, scattering brooms and mops around him as he struggled out of the crowded storage room.

"Quite so, Nicholas," said Mr. Saturn. "The warp pipe is hidden behind the wall panel here, to deflect casual observation. Let's just enter a little encrypted packet or two here... and there we go." A seemingly-fixed concrete panel slid back and to one side, exposing a chute arrangement into a foul-smelling pipe; above the stink of old trash they could detect the ozone scent of the warp field.

"Don't we need storm troopers shooting blaster bolts down the hallway to encourage us to jump in?" said Erin.

"If we wait very long you'll get your wish," said Mr. Saturn, as the sound of more distant explosions shook the floor and walls. "I hear the whine of patrol hover cars; that would be the Freedom copyright cops. They should keep the Koopas busy for a while. I'd suggest we sacrifice Erin's Star Wars nostalgia and go while the going is good." He waddled up to the chute, stepped up the metal ladder at the side, and slid in: zoop! he was gone.

Nicholas took over. "Clara, Cane, Tennyson, Brian, Erin, in that order. I'm rear guard. Go!" The kids disappeared one by one until only Nicholas was left. He reached into his pack and pulled out a little thermal detonator packet; a twist sufficed to arm the explosive device. He tossed it into a pile of used food containers. "They really ought to be more careful about letting stuff rot here," he said to no one, and slid down the chute. "It could catch fire, you know. Garbage dump, here I come. I hope Tails' place has showers!"

"Scheherezade," said Tennyson. "The Planets. Beau Soir. Beethoven's Pastoral symphony. Fantasia on a theme by Thomas Tallis -- I love that piece. I didn't know you listened to this kind of music." Tennyson was flipping through the files on Tails' music system, looking for something to play for takeoff. He was supposed to be checking the connection to port fifty-two.

"Jeez, don't get me started!" replied Tails. "Dat's all dat junk what Sonic is into 'dese days, it's a joke! Or it would be if I didn't hafta hear it. All full o' dem whatchacallem, violences."

"Violins," said Tennyson.

"Yeah, dem things. Everybody knows dey's dangerous to your mental health, make folks go crazy an' start playin' X-Box 'n stuff. Enough anyway, let's get back to work, we gotta' get 'dis done in two hours!"

"All right, all right, let's see: port fifty-two, MAC address zero one zero three seven niner five eight."

"Check, 'dat's it! Next port."

Tennyson sighed. It was very boring work. "Port fifty-three. MAC address five eight four one seven seven seven two. Remind me what the point of all this was again."

"Geeze louse, you kids just ain't got no patience! We're replacing 'da whole analog communications system in 'da Arwings wid' a modern shared medium addressable real time interrupt driven bus, dat like saves maybe twenny, maybe thirty kilos. 'Dat's ten meters shorter turning radius, might save your butt in 'da process, 'ya got it?"

"Not really. Pull out one wire, put in a different one."

"Ain't no wire, it's a whatcha call fiber optic cable, never mind. Just read 'da next port."

"Okay, okay. Port fifty-four. MAC address two two three three three seven one zero. What would you do if you were in our shoes?"

"What? Oh, ya' mean like if I was lost or somethin'. Well, ain't so different from leavin' all 'da old Sega worlds behind. When 'da big blast hits 'ya gotta go, 'dat's what I say, if ya' was supposed ta' go back your eyes would point 'dat way. Next port."

"Fifty-five. Niner niner three niner one five one four. It's not quite the same. I mean, it just seems like a big decision. If we go we're heading straight into who knows what, maybe getting blown up with the ships, I don't think we get replaced like you do. If we don't go we're abandoning our homes and families. Or maybe not. Maybe our real selves are still back at home living their normal lives and we're just figments of some giant game machine imagination. How would we know? Fifty six: eleven eleven eleven twenty-seven."

"Ain't no use speculatin' about what might be if 'ya ain't gonna find out. Twenty-seven? You sure 'dat's not twenty-six?"

"Nope, says twenty-seven on the label."

"Okay, we gotta swap 'dat one out, wrong one. Here's 'da screwdriver. 'Ya know, if I was you, I tell ya' I wouldn't waste no time wid' all 'dis worryin. Ya' know 'dat place is 'da biggest thing in 'da whole game worlds, everybody wants 'ta be in on it, an' you wanna' get away? Crazy. No, no, take 'da top screws out first! Yeah, okay. Gimme 'dat one, put 'dis one back in. Not to say I'm tryin' ta' get rid

o' ya', kid, you're okay even if ya' ain't got no taste in music. Just so's ya' don' start takin' cello lessons like Sonic, drives me up 'da wall, sounds like a cat wid' it's guts bein' ripped out!"

"I tried viola but it didn't work out. I'll stick to singing. Okay, twenty-six should be hooked up."

"Check. Next port."

"Okay, that was -- um -- fifty-seven. Three four five seven six one one two. Was it dangerous doing Sonic Adventure?"

"Naah, not really, 'dey got everything worked out. Most of the stuff is on big sound stages anyway. Some stuff on location 'round here, an' over in Capital City. We did do one big shoot at Ark, but we were so busy what wid' 'da schedule and 'da retakes and whatnot, hardly saw anything but a coupla' rooms. I didn't even get a chance ta' take a look at 'da station whatchacall infrastructure, power an' lighting an' such, probably real interestin' if ya' like 'dat stuff like I do. Was a lot more fun back in Genesis days, everything was always in chaos, ya' never knew what you were gonna' do until an hour before, but exciting!"

"Sometimes I feel like that. We went to the Monterey Aquarium when I was seven, and it was so cool! Everything was amazing. And then we went back last year, and it just wasn't the same. It made my feel like everything great is already done. Pretty silly for someone who just turned eleven, I guess."

"Ain't got 'da slightest idea what 'dat Monterey thing is, but you're right, you're bein' pretty silly for bein' just a kid. I figure all 'dem kids back where you was goin' ta' school -- every one o' 'dem 'd probably sell their sister for to get to do what you guys are doin'. An' skippin' school too. Course, maybe 'dat's a bad choice, dey'd sell their sister anyway just 'ta get rid of her. You know what I mean. If you go through ya' life makin' decisions cause o' what you're afraid of, y'ain' never gonna' have a life. You keep worryin' about what could happen but you ain't thinking about what could happen! Ya' could make your best friend 'dere, ya' could meet some fox -- I mean a girl, ya' know -- ya' could whip a sand golem for real! Jeez, lookit dat', ya' just doin' dis to get me started up so we don't finish our work. Port fifty-eight, come on, only two more ta' go!"

"Seven three seven niner two one zero five. Life belongs to those who are not afraid to lose it, eh?"

"Yeah, ya' could say it 'dat way. I'd say 'dem what's too afraid ain't got nottin' ta lose."

"I think I just want to fly. If I can do that it's okay."

"See, d'ya think ya were gonna' get to fly anything like this beauty if ya' were still at home? Fat chance! Ya' don't come here, ya' never find out what your true callin' is. Who knows what da' next big challenge is gonna teach ya? Course ya ain' gonna' fly nowhere in 'dis here Arwing until we get this last port entered in! Fifty-nine!"

"Five one three seven four four four zero."

"Great, dat's it, lemme' run a final check ... yep, we're good ta' go. So let's go on to 'da next one."

Tennyson climbed down the ladder and helped Tails carry the toolbox to the next glistening craft, singing softly to himself:

*Un conseil de goûter le charme d'être au monde
Cependant qu'on est jeûne est que le soir est beau
Car nous nous en allons,
Comme s'en va cette onde:
Elle a la mer,
Nous au tombeau.*

"What da' heck you singin? I heard 'dat somewhere," asked Tails as he plugged into the communications bus while Tennyson opened the access panels.

"Beau soir. You have-- I mean, Sonic had it in that collection, you probably heard it when he played it. It's in French, Bonapa T. could translate it for you. It's something like, enjoy life when you have the chance, while you're young and the night is fun. That's the title, beau soir, beautiful evening."

“Interestin’, I wonder what it would sound like wid’ a real backup tune an’ some lead guitar. Well, ya’ know you’re gonna’ get it.”

“Get what?”

“A beautiful evening for takeoff. By da’ time we finish, it’s gonna’ be maybe four-thirty, an’ meanwhile all da’ other stuff is gonna’ get loaded in -- I figure ya’ gonna’ get outta here just about sunset. Gonna be a pretty one, too.”

“What will you do after we leave?”

“Geez, I got lotsa work on my plane from ‘da last time I crashed it, and some more work for ‘da Professor, too. Course I gotta go get toasted in ya’ honor, first.”

Tennyson put the fourth plate down on the ground and turned to Tails. “I hope I make some new friends like you said, ‘cause I’m leaving a good one behind. Thanks for your help, Tails. Where would we have been without you?”

“Ya’ never anywhere widout your friends, bud, don’t ya forget it. Okay, ya’ got all dem wires yanked, let’s go, fifty-nine comm ports ta’ install. Can’t stop in da’ middle, ‘dis thing ain’t gonna fly anywhere ‘till we’re done. How’m I gonna’ miss ya’ if ya’ don’ go away?”

Chapter 17: Sand in your eyes

"Captain's Log, Star date thirty-two-seven-eight point five. Our situation is desperate. We are adrift in endless space, with limited supplies of oxygen and power. It is perhaps ironic that our cold dead bodies will float forever to the limits of known space -- and beyond, exploring in death what we could not in life."

"Erin," complained Brian. "We're maybe five hundred meters from the station, for crying out loud. Endless space. Give me a break. Besides, I'm the captain, I should be doing the log."

"You were," said Erin. "I don't know if you get to still be captain when you let your ship get blown up."

"I didn't let it get blown up, Cane blew us up! You could have shot the bomb before it got us if you hadn't been so busy slicing Wendy's initials in the gun tower."

"I was not, and besides, your own guys aren't supposed to shoot at you!"

"Well, this is Cane, you ought to know by now he isn't very careful. Things were pretty hairy anyway. I mean, with laser blasts flying everywhere and security robots popping out from behind the asteroids, and Fox and Tennyson competing to see who could fly the most incomprehensible course around the cannon, it isn't really surprising if you got confused about who you were shooting at."

"I didn't get confused, it was Cane! And I was not carving Wendy's initials, either."

"You told me you liked her."

"I do. She's really something. You'll have to meet her. But what's the point of carving her initials on Ark? She'll never see them."

"Oh, never mind, just enough of this lost in space stuff, okay?"

"No problem. That was an awful show anyway. I used to watch reruns on channel forty-four."

"Why'd you watch it if it was awful? Oh, forget it. I wonder if it's safe to start towards the entry area. I mean, if you think about it, this is pretty much what we were supposed to do, we just lost our ship a little bit early."

"Hmmm. We better check the long range channel to see what the rest of them are up to."

"Yeah, you're right. We don't want to go blasting around if they're coming back over here."

Brian squinted at the heads-up display as he adjusted his communications system to pick up the encrypted intership traffic. "I hope they're all right."

"-- the idiot's on your tail, spin around and take him!" It was Fox's voice.

"Good point, boss," replied Tennyson's voice. "There we go, all yours, Clara."

"Fish in a barrel," said Clara's voice.

"Keep turning and you'll be able to take comm tower eight," said Fox.

"We're through the screening structures and in range of the outer rim locks," said Nicholas' voice. "Whoah -- robot at three o'clock high, I'm rolling, take him, Cane! Good shooting, we're okay, I'm positioned for perpendicular assault run. Wings report!"

"Free and climbing, we'll be there," said Tennyson's voice.

"Just give us a minute for Crystal to leave a little calling card on the administration tower -- nice shot, honey. Okay, ramp to hundred percent, little tight turn, we're on course."

Brian switched back to the local channel. "Looks like they're about to hit the target area. That's almost completely across the station from here. Do you think we could risk a little thruster impulse?"

"Weren't you listening to my log entry? I mean my earlier, more primitive logs. The ones on the way through the van Allen belt."

"Truthfully, no. I was busy with course corrections, you know."

"Well, if you had been listening you would know that my rocket pack isn't compatible with the networked bus. That thing Tails stuck in just before we left. Doesn't work for squat."

"Geeze, why didn't you tell somebody before we took off?"

"I didn't find out before we took off."

"Checklist. C-h-e-c-k-l-i-s-t. You review it before you take off so you don't forget anything. Item eighty-one, verify individual thrust manpack control integrity."

"Geeze, Brian, what is it with you and memorizing things? Do you know the whole phonebook for Daly City? Some of us have a life!"

"Is that supposed to include you? I thought yours was all imaginary. Enough already, just jet over here and we'll hook together."

"Just what am I going to jet with?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry, well, throw something in the other direction. That hand pack."

"That has Wendy's picture in it, I'm not throwing it away!"

"When did you get her picture?"

"She gave one to me before I left. It's the one of Turtle Island. She thinks it isn't very good but I like it."

"Well, he who cannot throw away a treasure in need is in fetters."

"Lord of the Rings, Aragorn to Pippin."

"Merry."

"Pippin. Anyway, you didn't make it up. Fine, you throw away something then. Why don't you just turn on your jet pack?"

"Because I'm trying not to attract attention! I don't want to use it more than once. Never mind, what's that other thing?"

"That's my extra -- um -- water supply."

"Water? We've got water in our suits. Oh, come on, you brought books to read, didn't you? No wonder my weight and balance calculations were all messed up. Well, throw them away! Towards that asteroid with the blue gantries, over there. And do it with both hands so you don't go spinning."

A toss send The Subtle Knife (stolen after Brian had finished it), Ship of Dreams, The Silmarillion and The March of Folly spinning towards the aforesaid rock, while Erin tumbled rather more gently in the other direction. Fortunately he had retained Longitude for last-minute course corrections; with the aid of its departure he managed to hit Brian more or less in the gut. Brian latched on with his line, but in the process unintentionally converted Erin's linear momentum into angular momentum, leaving them both tumbling rather more vigorously than before. "Geeze, it's going to be hard to get the direction right now," said Brian. "Do you have any more books?"

"Just The Amber Spyglass."

"We can't throw that away, I haven't read it yet!"

"Who was lecturing who?"

"Whom."

"That's not the point! I thought we weren't supposed to worry about how much we liked the book. I haven't even started The March of Folly."

"Oh. I thought you were pretty far along."

"I got that joke. Who do you think you're talking to, Cane? Just forget it, I'll throw the book."

"No, no, I'll throw it."

"Who's the course correction expert here? Besides you're too upset to get rid of this piece of trash. I'll do it."

"I said I'll do it. Give it to me!"

Erin stuck his tongue out at Brian. This had little effect inside his suit helmet but was satisfying anyway. He gaged their axis of rotation by the stars and made to toss the book, but as he did so Brian said "Not that way!" and tried to grab it. The book went flying off in a direction unintended by both would-be navigators, increasing their rate of spin still further.

"Nice job," said Erin. "You're the big expert, you fire your stupid jet pack. I just got us all home from the exploded asteroid when everyone else gave up hope. Don't ask me how to do it."

"Fine, I won't." Brian was actually getting dizzy, which perhaps ought to have inclined him to request assistance but in practice enhanced his irritability. He watched the little entry port, just visible on

the now-distant station, rotate into view and tried to guess when to fire the rocket pack. He was queasy and sweating in his suit and wished there was a window to open. "Okay, here goes -- now." Fwoooooooshhh!

Unfortunately, just at that moment Erin craned his neck to see what Brian was doing, twisting the rest of his body the other way and offsetting the center of gravity of the Erin-Brian binary system enough to undo Brian's attempt at centering the thrust of the jetpack. The pair went zipping off at a much higher rate than Brian had intended and about thirty degrees to the left of the target, though by accident Brian had almost eliminated their rotation so at least they could see where they were going.

"Geeze, Erin, can't you sit still for one second? Now we really are floating off into empty space!"

"I'm always right, it just takes a while for you to figure it out."

"We are not gonna die of suffocation and you're not right and would you let me do the thinking if we're ever gonna get out of here back to the station like we're supposed to!"

"I had everything under control until you started crabbing about which books you hadn't read. What about what I want to read? I like reading more than you do anyway! Now we're stuck dying out here with nothing to read! You're right, we won't suffocate, we'll die of boredom!"

"Will you stop yacking about suffocation? In fact, why don't you just shut up while I figure out how to get us out of this!"

"You figure it out? Fat chance! It's time you listened to my advice instead of your dorky ideas."

"You forgot to do your checklist, that's how we got into this! I could have just left you floating out in space until the patrols picked you up, you know."

"Well maybe you should have!"

"Well, next time maybe I will!"

"Fine. Just fine. Since when is there going to be a next time?"

"Oh, there you are!" said a familiar female voice. "That's a pretty good encrypted voice channel, it took me almost a minute to tap into it. Did you guys want a ride or something?"

As both boys tried to look back over their shoulder at the same time to identify the source of the puzzling if welcome interruption, conservation of momentum prevented either from actually turning. They had to wait impatiently for their rotational velocity to expose the rear hemisphere to their view: a space-suited figure, inverted, riding what for all the world looked like a rocket-equipped snowboard.

"Wendy!", exclaimed Erin. "What are you doing out here? This is great!"

"Just a little well-deserved recreation after two more very profitable smuggling runs! We moved the Starlight Highway run out here after the Antilles folks threw us out."

Wendy was tumbling out of view again; Erin felt awkward talking to her while turning his back. "How did you know we were here?"

"Who else could it have been? 'EH loves WL'. That was so sweet of you. I never had my initials done with a blaster before. So, did you want a ride or what?"

"Well, we're supposed to be sneaking into recreation access port fifty-two a," said Brian. "Can you help?"

"Gee, I park my ship in fifty-seven, it's only a little elevator ride away, sure!"

"You can fly right into Ark?" asked Brian, incredulous. "I mean, without getting blown up?"

"Sure; they let me dock here in exchange for doing an occasional late-night pizza run planetside."

"Wow. All that training and practically getting killed and who knows if the other ships are okay and -- wow. That's amazing." Brian was silent for a long moment.

"That's my Wendy," said Erin. "I told you she was special." Wendy tumbled back into view, flashing a glowing smile as she nudged the board over to them with a few thruster taps. She dragged them onto the board and killed the remaining spin. Brian sighed with relief.

"Thanks," said Brian. "Wow. Thanks a lot." Just then a series of very bright flashes illuminated the flat bottom face of Ark. "That must be the others, blowing their ships." Brian switched channels for a

moment: 'Yow! that was too close!' said Crystal's voice. 'Pedal to the metal, good luck, we're outta here!' came Fox's voice. "I hope they're okay," said Brian, back on the short range link.

"They'll be fine," said Erin. "I told you it would all work out. You shouldn't worry so much, Brian."

"You did not. You told me we were going to suffocate in endless space!"

"I knew Wendy would save us."

"You did not!"

"Gee, this is nice, it's almost like having Dave back," said Wendy cheerfully. "While you guys are arguing, can I get us beamed up into my ship?"

"Oh, yeah, that would be great," said Erin. "Did you get the phase adjustment done?"

"Yeah, yeah, it's okay again, even Dave didn't puke."

"Can we not talk about puking?" said Brian.

"We're talking about beaming, not puking," said Erin.

"Yes, now that I've got the phases properly matched again the tractor beam hardly ever makes people puke," added Wendy. "Besides, you shouldn't puke inside a space suit, it smells terrible! Wait until we get on board. Then you can use the bathroom. Here we go! Hey, did I tell you today is my birthday? We can have a party!" A blindingly bright chartreuse light from behind her cast Wendy into silhouette and Brian felt his stomach drop from under him as they were dragged towards the source of the glow. In the dizzying confusion he could hear Erin:

"Captain's log, supplement. Who would have imagined a last-minute rescue by a gorgeous Amazon from outer space? Since the last war with the Romulans, when the Federation outlawed action-adventure genre cliches, we've had to make do with social relevance and moral quandaries. But since we had to throw all our books away, we can return to what truly makes us human: girls and junk food."

"We can't waste time looking for them now," Clara said. "We've got the advantage of surprise; let's use it!"

"I don't agree," said Nicholas. "This is a different sort of surprise attack. You told me yourself; it's based on -- missection? midilection? oh, yeah, missed direction, I mean, misdirection. I think we really don't want to show up right away. We want them to believe they got us and let their guard down. So a little delay doesn't hurt."

"But if we go outside again, we risk being detected," added Clara, not willing to give up. "Then we would really be in trouble."

"You're both right," said Tennyson. "We should lie low, not a peep, no hint that we're not dead. That means we can't really risk any kind of rescue mission."

"But what if -- like, if their jet packs malfunctioned and they went the wrong way?" said Nicholas. "Eventually they'd freeze or run out of air. Can you leave your friends to die like that?"

"All they have to do is turn on the open channel on the radio and call for help," said Tennyson.

"But then our cover is blown for sure!" said Nicholas.

"I don't know," Clara chuckled. "You don't learn much talking to Erin even if you're his friend; by the time he's done, he'll have them chasing Meta Knight in the Beanbean kingdom. Maybe we should have planned to have him captured!"

"You're terrible!" replied Nicholas. "We're not gonna' intentionally set up someone to get captured."

"Nicholas, you're worrying too much," said Tennyson. "I think they're just fine."

"Yeah, they're probably, like, eating cake and ice cream right now while we're starving!" added Cane, who had long ago cleaned out the meager ration store in the Arwing and was thoroughly sick of protein bars anyway.

"Just how would they be eating cake, Cane?" said Nicholas. "We're out in the middle of empty space."

"You just watch!" Cane returned to searching through his backpack for edible items for the fourth time.

Suddenly the door to the corridor hissed open: Clara whipped her beamer up and nearly decapitated Erin as he strode in through the door, scraping the last of a piece of chocolatey layer cake off a plastic plate with his fork.

"Hey, hey, great to see you, too!" said Erin. "No need to get huffy, Brian has enough cake for everyone."

"Cake!" said Cane. "Here I was gonna' apologize for blowing you up but I guess it worked out better this way. Where's the food?"

"How'd you get here?" said Nicholas. "We were about to start looking for you." Brian strode into the room behind Erin, carrying a little platter with several slices of confection in his left hand.

"Yep, we thought you'd been blown to smithereens, and here you are glowing with happiness and high blood sugar," said Tennyson. "Awfully thoughtful of you to provide some for the rest of us."

"You should thank Wendy," said Brian. "She's the one who insisted we save enough for the rest of you. But it's a little late for that; she said she had to leave for a business meeting or something, so anyway she's gone again. Do you want the pieces with the little pink frosting flowers or the purple stripes?"

"Wendy?" said Clara. "I guess you were right about him, Tennyson. Erin, how the heck did you arrange to meet your girlfriend right in the middle of a war?"

"Here, take a flower piece," said Brian, handing one of the plates to Nicholas.

"Let me see, how did I arrange that?" said Erin. "I used the thirty-two thousand coins I won at Hide and Sneak and bribed the MBHL to pay off Saturn's library fines -- no, wait a minute, that doesn't make sense."

"When did that ever stop you?" said Clara.

"Come on, Erin," said Nicholas, holding up his plate. "It was a piece of cake!" The other kids groaned.

"Hey, why don't we call up Saturn?" said Cane. "What's he up to anyway? How come he wasn't with us? Too dangerous? I still think he's in league with the parrot."

"The parrot got shot! Don't you remember?" said Tennyson.

"We just heard it on the phone, maybe they faked it," replied Cane.

"You and Erin ought to spend more time together," said Clara. "You can compete to see who's crazier."

Nicholas finished his joke prop and sighed. "That was good. Well, we'd better be getting on. Brian, where do we go now?"

Brian opened his suit pack and pulled the GBH out. A bit of control manipulation and: "Here's where we are. The entry tunnel to torus four, at radial five. This is a service torus around the outer rim. There's no direct passage from here to the core cylinder; that's why they don't have any security here. Now, we need to move clockwise along this torus to the vertical riser service passage, corridor five A twenty-four, which should take us to the agriculture torus."

The interior of the station was segmented into a number of independent pressure vessels, shaped like huge torii -- doughnuts -- save for the central core, a vast cylinder with hemispherical endcaps that stretched the whole vertical extent of the colony. Connecting the pressure vessels were cylindrical radial and vertical passages, sealed by self-closing pressure-capable doors at each end, to prevent a leak in a single torus from endangering the whole colony. The largest torus, running around the rim of the hemispherical outer shell, providing easy access to natural light and also relatively exposed to cosmic radiation, had been reserved for agricultural pursuits. After the abandonment of the station as a functioning space colony, the agriculture torus had been sealed up as unneeded. When the core was refurbished as a hidden research facility, the relatively miniscule staff could be easily served with stored air; there seemed to be no need to operate the oxygen-generating section. The research staff inhabited the innermost core, with security guards also assigned to the base torus, which provided convenient access to the surface weaponry.

Brian led them down the corridor of the service torus. The service passage was so small that the curvature of the walls was readily visible. As they moved away from the transparent access ports, the light of the sun slowly failed; they continued using their suit lamps into the stale-smelling but perfectly clean corridor, punctuated every thirty paces or so by access doors adjacent to dimly illuminated control panels. Brian checked each door placard with his hand lamp: after what seemed an interminable passage but was objectively only a five-minute walk, Brian nodded and turned back to the group: "This is it." He pressed a button and a door hissed open, exposing a long dark corridor that hardly looked big enough for a grownup to walk in.

"Okay," said Nicholas, drawing his beamsword hilt, "We don't know what's at the other end of the corridor. I'll take point, Clara is rearguard, Tennyson and Cane, Erin and Brian. Ray pistols and knives at hand for close quarters, and don't shoot each other! Let's go." Nicholas strode carefully past the threshold, almost falling as he did: "Whoah! Careful, there's no gravity in here."

The kids moved silently into the passageway, enduring the disconcerting transition as they passed over the threshold back into zero G, then sliding hand-over-hand into obscurity. The trip became monotonous after a while: left-hand right-hand left-hand right-hand... Tennyson found himself drifting into a reverie, interrupted when he bumped into Nicholas' butt.

"Oww! what's up?" said Tennyson.

"Shhh!" whispered Nicholas. "Everybody quiet! I heard something." The group stopped, floating in the tunnel, each held in place by a fingertip or two on the guide rails. A faint, repetitive tap - scrape - thump was distinctly audible now that the kids were still. Nicholas pressed the button to extend the beamsword blade and whispered, "ray pistols drawn, don't fire without my order. Lamps off, glowplugs only. Let's go, and keep quiet."

They moved on cautiously, their way illuminated only by the feeble glow of the weapon panels, as the scraping sound grew louder, until with a thump Nicholas' head bumped into the end of the passage: "Ow!"

"Shhhh!" hissed Tennyson.

"Sorry," replied Nicholas. He turned on his lamp, shielding most of the light with his hand. "Oh, the panel illumination was just off," he whispered. Scrape - thump - scrape: the noise was obviously right on top of them now. "Tennyson, Cane, Brian to the top, Clara and Erin bottom, grab the rails and set up a crossfire if we need it -- but try not to get me, okay? I'm going to open the door manually."

The kids floated into position and whispered "ready" one by one. Nicholas twisted the lever past the detent and slowly slid it down to the OPEN position. Nothing. He pushed on the door: it seemed free of the locking mechanism, but something else was holding it closed. He closed his beamsword, and reached with his feet for something to provide leverage, finding Tennyson's face: "oh, sorry!" His feet found a set of gratings set into the wall; with the extra purchase he was able to raise the door a hint: dim light flooded in through the crack. "Hmm. Tennyson, float over here and give me a hand, everyone else hold your positions."

With the efforts of both boys the door swung upwards; through the opening flooded a burst of dust and dry plant matter. In the semi-darkness the swirling invasion was initially frightening, but then Tennyson recognized the smell: he laughed aloud and said, "It's hay! We're under a barn." He turned his lamp on, exposing the broken brown stalks floating in the gravity-less tunnel.

"Shhh!" said Nicholas. "We still need to be careful. I'll go first."

Mounting the lamp on his headband, he forced his way up into the pile, temporarily disoriented as his head and then shoulders entered near-earth-gravity while his torso still floated free. The others watched him kick and flounder as he struggled up, then saw his feet disappear. There was a bit of grunting and then suddenly "OWW!!"

Tennyson jumped into the opening and thrust his head up through the hay. "What happened? Are you okay?"

Nicholas, buried in hay just beyond him, nodded and sighed. He turned back to Tennyson and handed him a gleaming metal sliver with a red droplet at the end.

"Ah. I see. You found a needle in the haystack."

Nicholas grunted assent and continued up and sideways. Finally he shoved aside the last bits of chaff and stuck his head out. Before he could even figure out what he was looking at, his head was swamped by another load of dried stalks. "Hey!" he said.

"Yup, 'course it is. What about it?"

Nicholas tried to shake the hay from his eyes but before he could identify his interlocutor he was swamped yet again. "Would you cut it out?" he said.

"Ah'm a' pitchin' hay, not a' cuttin' stuff. What fur ya' climbin' around in mah haystack, anyway?" The laborer tossed another forkfull; this time Nicholas covered his face with his arms to preserve his vision. He managed to pull the rest of his body out of the stack before the next toss, and slid down to a dusty landing. A teenager, dressed in faded blue coveralls all covered with chaff, with a long hay stalk sticking out of his mouth, continued to work on the pile in front of him with his oversized pitchfork.

A moment later, Tennyson stuck his head out through the opening, only to receive his own facefull of dried vegetable matter. "Hey!" he said.

"You folks shore have a hankerin' fur statin' the obvious," said the boy.

"Would you cut it out?" said Tennyson, struck a second time.

"Y'all are sure consistent, too," said the boy.

"Tennyson, tell the rest to climb on out," said Nicholas. "And tell them to cover their eyes!"

By this time the boy had finished emptying the bin of hay, and walked over to hang his pitchfork on a rack on the wood-veneer aluminum wall. "Whatchya' say yer name was?" he asked Nicholas as he hitched his overalls up.

"I didn't. Nicholas. Look, we need to talk to -- um -- Mary Ellen, that was it. Mary Ellen. Could you help us?"

"Seems ta me yer a'talking jus' fahn, 'cepting fur having a funny furrin sorta accent. Y'aint gonna need mah help fur ta talk."

"No, no, I mean, help find her. Can you show us where she lives?"

"Ain't no point fur ta do that, she ain't a' gonna' be home nigh on all day." As the boy spoke he collected a straw hat and a rough walking stick.

"Did she leave the station?"

"Leave the what?"

"The station. Ark. Where you live."

"Lan' sakes, no! She's a' jus' helpin' out with the weddin, what'd'ya think? Well, yer only kids, ah guess y'ain't a' gonna' know much important stuff. Tell 'ya what, I'll take y'all ta' see 'er, ah'm a goin' that way anyway. Come on, nuthin' fur ta' be a' skeered of." He stuck out a not-very-clean hand. "John Jacob."

"Pleased to meet you. That's Tennyson, Cane, Brian, Erin -- and there's Clara," added Nicholas, as Clara dropped lightly down from the hole, energy knife in one hand and 9 mm automatic in the other.

"Ain't she a cutie," said John Jacob, chewing on his haystack. "Maria'll wanna' meet 'er fur sure. Well, come on." The boy led them out the faux wooden door of the barn and into the bright light. The scent of fresh cut grass replaced the stale barn air as they came out into what ought to have been sunshine. A long row of uncut hay blocked their view directly in front of the barn. To the left, laid out in neat little squares, was a meticulously-kept garden: Brian recognized cucumbers, artichokes, and cabbage. On the right were a number of rabbit cages. The bucolic illusion was shattered as soon as his gaze rose past the local environs: about a hundred meters away on each side the curving walls of the donut, festooned with vines and creepers, wrapped completely around to meet above their heads in rows of brilliant white lights. The floor curved more gradually along the torus, so that the rows of apple and plum trees seemed to rise up on the side of a rolling hill, above the top of the nearby hay, until they disappeared in the horizon defined by the artificial sunlight. Brian felt a certain claustrophobic discomfort that he had never experienced in the cramped confines of the Arwing, as if somehow farming demanded more space than even a huge space colony could hope to provide.

The older boy, insensitive to the contradictions of his world, led the kids down a narrow path along the edge of the hayfield. They passed another barn and a cornfield, and then a low red building with big windows. Brian glanced in as they walked by. "Hey, look, it's a school!" he said. Nicholas stopped to poke his head into an open window: Thirty or forty kids, from little kindergarteners to what looked like middle school kids were seated at neat rows of desks. An older woman wearing a dark blue blouse and gray striped pants, her graying hair gathered in a tight bun behind her head, was pointing to writing on a white board. The kids were all reciting together:

"In nineteen eighty six, the Super NES was released, setting new standards of performance with its new sixteen-bit processor." One of the littler kids raised his hand:

"scuse me, Missus Luna, what are they bits of?" A couple of the older kids in the back rolled their eyes.

"Ah kinda furgot y'all are sorta little, did 'ya wanna go to school with t'other kids?" asked John Jacob as he continued his unhurried pace past the school garden. Nicholas turned back to the trail with mixed feelings.

"Are you kidding?" said Cane. "No way! Everything I need to know I learned in kindergarten!"

"Yep, looks kinda' lahk that," said John. He led them past what was obviously a church, a very modest retailing area with a flower shop, a general store, a restaurant or saloon or both, and a little diner / soda fountain, then around a modest park and bandstand. A few folks were about their business, paying little attention to the kids or anything else. By this time the barn through which they'd entered was quite out of sight around the curved roof. The trail passed between two surprisingly voluminous oak trees and came out in front of a modest two-story wood-veneer structure, white with red moldings around the windows, behind a squarish wooden sign labeled in precise block capitals: COMMUNITY CENTER. "Y'all 'll fahnd Mary Ellen 'in the meadow, a' working up the decorations fur tamarra. Ah'll see ya'll at the bachelor party tonaight, 'ceptin 'a course for the little lady, gotta' mosey on now."

John Jacob took off down the trail, now apparently oblivious to the kids. Nicholas led the way, trying to act as if he knew what Mary Ellen looked like. Girls in plaid dresses and boys in denim hustled in and out of the community center building, carrying vases, boxes, trays of hors d'oeuvres, chairs, rolls of ribbon, paper decorations, and bottles of drinks. A large grassy meadow surrounded by elms and willow, just past the building, was partly filled with folding metal chairs and tables, and decorations hung from ropes tied to the tree limbs. A wooden dance floor filled a corner of the meadow, near a platform and some large speakers. "No wonder it was so quiet in town," said Nicholas. "It looks like everybody is here. Excuse me, we're looking for Mary Ellen," he said to a middle-aged woman who was directing the hanging of a large floral wreath.

"Up a bit -- to the left -- that's fine, tack it in place, thank you," said the lady to her two teenage helpers. "Now, what was that, dear? Mary Ellen? She's over there by the head table, but I'm afraid she's quite occupied." The woman stopped for a moment and actually looked at Nicholas for the first time. "I don't know you, do I? Are you Gray's relatives? I heard he has some folk from Outside."

"Uh -- well, no, not really, but -- well, Jack and Ellie sent us, you see," said Nicholas.

"Who cares who sent us, look at that cake!" said Cane!

"Now, now, son, that's for tomorrow," said a stocky fellow in coveralls as he passed carrying a big wooden keg.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Nicholas, and trundled off towards the indicated table. The scene was a bit intimidating socially but didn't look very dangerous: discipline seemed unnecessary, and the others followed half-heartedly, and then began to wander as their interests took them.

The head table was a buzz of activity. It wasn't hard to guess who was Mary Ellen: all the conversation seemed to center on the tall, wrinkled, gravelly-voiced lady in the flower print dress. "We need the fairies now, Mary Ellen, that batch of grapes just isn't ripe yet! Nobody could eat them."

"Well, you'll just have to wait until they finish with Anna's punch," said Mary Ellen. "If we keep changing their tasks faster than the tasks can be completed, nothing will get done."

"But Mary Ellen!" "We don't have time to wait!" "I thought you promised us--"

"Enough! I won't have your petty squabbling ruin the mood for tomorrow's special day. Behave yourselves and make up." She sighed and sat down in a folding chair, turning her back on the crowd in dismissal. Nicholas saw his chance and advanced.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but Jack and Ellie said that I should talk to you when we got here."

"They did, did they, young man?" she replied. She smiled warmly but her eyes were calculating. "When exactly was that, now?"

"When? Wow. It seems like a long time ago but -- let's see -- you know, we've been so busy I've kind of lost track of things. I think it would be three weeks today, or was it the day before that?"

"Three weeks, that's not very long ago. But perhaps you have been otherwise occupied, dear. Where were you at the time?"

"Luigi's mansion. I was going to say at dinner, but I guess we actually met Jack when he was cosmic bowling with Bonapa T. They were using bombs for bowling balls -- it seemed kind of silly, I have to admit. But it was later at dinner that I got to talk with him and his wife."

"I declare, that jibes exactly with what Ellie told me when I spoke to her. Now, one more question, if you'll tolerate an old lady's eccentricity for a bit more -- did you give them anything?" Nicholas had the distinct feeling that more than eccentricity was behind the inquiry.

"Sure, I gave Jack this golden hammer that Erin and I found in Mario's toolbox. Mister Luigi said it was okay."

"Hmmm. Well, it all seems to fit. I must say that when I spoke to Ellie she obviously never imagined you'd actually get here. Your friends would be -- no, no, it's good for me to work this out -- Erin you named yourself, Tennyson, Clara, Byron, and Cane is over there with his hand in the cookie jar."

"Brian."

"Oh, yes, of course. They are all here -- easy enough to place them from Ellie's descriptions. So then it's true about the golden hammer. And from there to here in three weeks, indeed." She stopped and looked Nicholas over again. "I declare, you are a remarkable young man. There's more of you than is apparent on the surface."

"I had a lot of help, ma'am. Speaking of help, could you help us?"

"Yes, of course, now that I'm sure who it is that I'm offering to help. What do you need?"

"We need to find a way to get from here to the central core, preferably without attracting any attention. We have a plan of the station but it doesn't show anything going that way."

"Really? The core? Are you sure that's wise?"

"I hope so. It appears to be our only choice."

"All right, I'll do what I can. But I've no idea how to manage such a trick. I've heard tell that some of the young men will venture quietly into torus seven -- that's the next one in -- when they're feeling a bit adventurous, though of course such a thing is strictly forbidden. Can't have those nosy ivory tower types suspecting that we're here, now, can we? We'll have to call a council to decide what we can do to help you, and that can't possibly happen until tomorrow evening."

"Tomorrow?" said Nicholas, trying to hide his distress. "That's cutting it awfully close."

"Can't be helped, dear, the whole town is consumed with preparations for the wedding right now. Land sakes! how I'm behaving, forgetting my manners completely. You must be tired and hungry. There's a lounge in the Community Center where you can change out of those flight suits -- do you have other clothes with you, dear? And get a shower if you like. And then of course the boys must attend the bachelor party, we wouldn't think of leaving you out!"

"A what?" said Nicholas?

"The party, tonight before the wedding, of course."

By this time Cane and Clara had wandered into earshot. "Party!" shouted Cane. "Whoah yeah! Is there gonna' be food?"

"Why of course, young man," replied Mary Ellen. "Enough food to choke a horse, I've no doubt -- though of course I haven't seen a horse for nigh on fifteen years."

"This Ark thing wasn't such a bad idea after all," said Cane, turning to Nicholas.

"Gee, thanks, I'm glad you noticed."

"That would be nice," said Clara, "as long as I don't have to sit with Cane! I'm really starved."

"Oh, no, no, dear, it's a bachelor party, for the boys only," said Mary Ellen. "You'll be helping Maria with her trousseau. You can tell us of your travels; I'm sure it will help calm Maria, she'll be a bit nervous. Come with me, dear, we'll find you something acceptable to wear."

Clara stamped her foot, raising a little cloud of dust from the bare spot she was standing in. "I won't be left out again! I'm better than any of these boys."

"Of course you are, dear, Ellie told me all about you. But there'll be no fighting at the party -- at least, I hope there won't be, not like Cyrus and Alice's wedding last year. My, my, that was a disaster. Besides, that's not the point. My dear, being equal to the boys does not mean you have to be the same as they are. Heaven forbid!"

Tennyson had kept a half an ear on the discussion while he tried to talk an older boy into providing an early taste of the punch. "Clara, you should go," he said quietly from behind her. "You never know what you might find out there."

"Fine, fine, never mind." She sighed and offered an arm to help Mary Ellen out of her chair. "I guess there's something to be said for a shower and clean clothes anyway." She turned back to Tennyson. "You stay out of trouble, then. Don't get drunk or anything."

"Gee, I think that's the point of a bachelor party. Well, we'll do our best."

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"When should you strike a match?" asked Nicholas, pausing for dramatic effect. "Only when it turns violent!"

The crowd of teenagers and young men around him, already mildly inebriated, laughed wildly. "When it turns violent! Turns violent! That's a crackup!" said Clemm, the butcher. "Oy, stop, I'm gonna' break a rib!" said Lewis, the metalworker's apprentice.

"All right, let's see, I got another one: what animal keeps the best time?"

"A cow?" said Bill, the barkeep's son.

"A cow? It's a bird, ya' ignorant drunkard!" said Mr. Miller, the baker.

"A bird? What's a bird?" said Mr. Baker, the miller.

"You're all wrong," said Nicholas. "It's -- a watchdog!"

"A watchdog, of course!" roared Lewis. "You're killin' me! A watchdog!" He slapped Bill so hard on the back that his beer ended up on Mr. Baker's shirt. Mr. Baker didn't seem to notice.

"Okay, okay: what did the dog say to the child pulling on his tail? Anyone? No? Okay -- 'this is the end of me!'"

"The end of me! Oy, that's right, I'm gonna die laughing!" guffawed Lewis.

"Those jokes are really not very funny," said Erin. "I guess people are already pretty drunk."

"Well, remember that these people appear to be sort of isolated," said Brian, sipping a fruit punch. "This kind of humor could be quite new to them."

"New jokes that aren't funny still aren't funny," replied Erin, taking another slice of pumpkin cake. "And a good joke is still funny the hundredth time you hear it."

"Maybe, but I think novelty plays an important role in humor," said Brian.

"Interesting point, but the more interesting question is whether humor plays an important role in novelty."

Erin jumped out of his chair. "Mister Saturn! What are you doing here?"

"That's a fine welcome," said the diminutive fellow, floating himself up onto the empty chair next to Brian. "I'm meeting you, what did you think?"

"Well, the way you disappear without explanation these days, it's hard to be sure," replied Erin.

"He does have a point," added Brian. "We've hardly seen you since we got to Tails' place, and Fox and Crystal didn't say anything about how you were going to get here, or even if you were coming. I assumed you had other things to do."

"You assumed correctly, as is often the case, my astute young friend. Fortunately, or unfortunately depending on your point of view, those things conspired to deliver me here. For one, I'm on in -- two more minutes."

"On? On what?" said Brian.

"A show business term, son. The colonists here are pretty provincial in most ways, but even they recognize that their isolation gives them limited insight into the gameworlds music scene."

"Ah -- you're the deejay," said Erin.

"I prefer to think of it as the entertainment administrator," replied Saturn.

"Well, my mom calls the garbage men sanitation engineers but they're still garbage men," said Erin.

"And women," said Brian.

"I don't think it's nice to talk about a garbage woman," said Erin.

"Now this is no time ta' speak like that about womenkind," said Gray, the groom, sitting down somewhat unsteadily beside Erin. "Tonight is a celebration of the glorious opposite sex, ya' know."

"If we're celebrating girls," said Brian, "why don't we have any here?"

"It's probably easier that way," said Mr. Saturn. "And safer, given how drunk these fellows are likely to become."

"Saturn!" said Gray. "Weren't you supposed ta' be supervisionally -- supervisisinational -- doin' the music?"

"I was just musing about that, yes," said Mr. Saturn. "I thought we'd start with the sound track recordings from some of the classic silent films," he added, waddling towards a small raised platform surrounded by speakers.

"I don't get it," said Gray, looking puzzled.

"Trust me, it's not funny, and I know not funny," said Erin.

"Say, you're a one o' them outside fellas, right?" Gray looked around conspiratorially and lowered his voice. "Ah'm feelin' a mite worried, ya' know, I ain't never been married a'fore, what's it like? What 'm I supposed ta' watch fur 'n like that?"

"You've come to the right place," said Erin confidently, putting his arm around the shoulder of the older boy. Brian rolled his eyes and drank more (non-alcoholic) punch. "The first thing is, you have to make sure you take out the trash." A high trill from a clarinet, followed by a hard-thumping bass, announced the beginning of the musical entertainment.

"Take out the trash, right, take out the trash. Out to where?"

"Well, out of the house, to where the garbage collection folks can get it, you know. The cans."

"The who? Ah' didn't know folks collected garbage, ah' thought that was what ya' threw into the recyclin' piles for ta' be mashed up 'n stuff."

"Well, you see, once it gets old and rotten enough they call it an antique and then it's valuable again," said Erin. Gray nodded uncertainly. "Now the next thing is: don't ever tell her she's storing up fat for winter time, Bobby Villadsen said that to his mom and now his parents are divorced and he has to live with his Aunt Mathilda!"

"Now wait, yer sayin' Bobby said that to his mom? But I'm not marryin' my mom, I mean, I'm marryin' my sweetheart, it's different. Not to say that I don't like my mom, ya' understand."

"Well, that's okay, we all have our faults. Oh, yeah, mothers, that reminds me. The next thing is, don't ever tell your wife about how you're visiting other women, they get all upset and go home to their mothers." Brian hid his head in his hands.

"You mean they can't visit their mothers after they're married?"

"No, no, that's okay on Tuesdays and bank holidays," Erin replied confidently. "But the rest of the time you're stuck with 'em!" Brian took out The Amber Spyglass, which Wendy had very kindly rescued for him before she took them into the station, and picked back up at page 127.

"A -- bank holiday? What's a bank?" said Gray.

While Erin provided a misleading summary of the operations of a financial system, Kent, the son of the chief of hydroponics, was attempting to initiate Tennyson in the appreciation of fine wines. "Now

this is a mixture of cabernet and merlot grapes from tanks thirty-seven and fifty-two, ripened to around fifty Brix, aged in real imitation oak. Moderate acidity, with blackberry, blueberry, and a bit of plum.” He handed Tennyson a small rounded glass. Tennyson took a cautious sip.

“Hmmm. I suppose I could taste the plums if I could get past the gutter water and chalkboard eraser,” he said, grimacing and coughing. “Are you sure this is the part you’re supposed to drink?”

“Yeah, okay, I guess it is a bit tannic. Forget it, let’s try a white.” Kent pulled another bottle from the rack and poured the slightly pink liquid into a fresh glass. “This is a white Zinfandel. A bit of residual sugar and just a little hint of carbonation.”

“Carbonated? You mean like soda?”

“Yeah, yeah. I won’t say anything this time. Just try a sip.”

“Right,” said Tennyson dubiously. “Hmmm. Hey, this one is okay.” He took a more substantial swig. “That’s not half bad! Maybe I could get used to this wine stuff after all.” He tilted back the glass and took a mouthful, then sputtered and spat the liquid out on the table and his companion.

“Slow down!” said Kent, wiping his glasses with a napkin. “A sip at a time! You can’t appreciate the subtleties when you’re guzzling.”

Tennyson took the advice and indulged more carefully. “Kinda’ tingles on your tongue, all right. This is really good.”

“Okay, great, but don’t get carried away! You gotta watch yourself, this is your first time.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Do you drink a lot of wine?”

“Oh, yeah, we have a glass every day with dinner. My dad says dinner without wine is like day without the lighting panels on. We have a different wine each night of the week. Monday is Gamay Beaujolais, for the start of the week, Tuesday is sauvignon blanc, Wednesday is merlot, like that. Yesterday we had a real Moon Mountain cabernet.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember Moon Mountain from the N sixty-four.”

“Yeah, it was smuggled in.” Kent sighed. “Gee, I wish I could see one.”

“A smuggler?”

“No, no, a mountain. Did you ever see a mountain?”

“Geeze, of course. I mean, the whole Bay Area is surrounded by them. They’re not very high, of course -- maybe three thousand feet.” Kent looked puzzled and stared at his shoe. “Oh, what’s that -- um, a thousand meters high’.

“A thousand meters? Come on, nothing could be that big! Do you think I’m dumb?”

Tennyson looked puzzled. “Well, it’s not all that high -- I think the tallest mountains are down near San Jose. Anyway that’s not particularly big for mountains. I mean, the tallest mountain in the real world is Mount Everest -- that’s, um, twenty-eight thousand feet high. It’s so high you have to have oxygen tanks to stand at the top. I’ve never seen that except on teevee. But we’ve gone up skiing a couple of times in the Sierras. Those are real mountains! There are places where if the car went off the road you’d still be rolling!”

“Wow. You’re so lucky. I can’t even imagine something that big. Obviously. I can’t imagine anything bigger than this.” He waved his arms at the surroundings and then laughed. “Not the bar, of course. I mean the torus. Here you’ve been in mountains and I’ve hardly ever even been outside our home torus.”

“This seems like a really nice place to live,” said Tennyson. “The weather’s always good -- well, there isn’t any -- and no bugs, and everybody seems really nice.”

“Oh, I guess it is, but it’s so boring! The only thing there is to do most weekends is walk around to the other villages to visit.”

“Oh, how many other villages are there?”

“Six, pretty much evenly spaced around the perimeter. They’re okay. Heck, my best friend, Benjamin, lives over in Titanium Town -- that’s the one across from us. But it just gets old. Same villages every weekend. Every month. Every year.” He looked around conspiratorially and then leaned close to Tennyson. “Of course, every once in a while we sneak into seven, that’s the one next to us. But the council cracked down on us after Cyrus almost got caught, so now it’s really hard to get away with it.”

"Oh, how do you get in?"

"Through the drains. You have to swim."

"Like a river?"

"How would I know? I've never seen a river." He took a big swig of the cabernet, but unlike Tennyson didn't cough or spit. "What's it like? Oh, here, you're empty." He filled Tennyson's glass halfway. "You fill the glass partway, you see, so that the aroma can collect."

"You know, we went to upstate New York once, to visit my great aunt, and we saw the Hudson River. Now that's a river. It's just incredibly big: you'd think you're looking across a lake."

"Is it -- like -- bigger than the whole torus?"

"Much bigger. It must be, oh, maybe as wide as Arc is high."

"Naw. That's crazy."

"True. It's so far it would take you fifteen-twenty minutes to walk across if you could walk on the water."

"How could there be so much water?"

"That's not a lot of water -- you should see the ocean! It just keeps going. Thousands of miles, halfway across the whole world. When we fly down to LA, you can look out the window to the west and there's just nothing but waves and clouds forever."

"Wow. Can I go with you?"

"I don't know. Can't you just fly down to the surface? Don't you guys ever, like, visit Capital City?"

"Hardly ever. Oh, you get to go on a trip when you get married -- Gray's going to Casino Park. But otherwise you're supposed to stay home."

While Tennyson was trying to decide whether to commiserate or conspire, the conversation was interrupted by a commotion as two of the older boys flung open a double door at the back of the bar. Two more teenagers pushed a creaking wheeled cart supporting a huge frosted cake through the doors. Mr. Saturn turned up the volume on some sort of raucous jazzy music that Tennyson felt he ought to have recognized and took over as master of ceremonies.

"Gentlemen of Pear Tree Town, guests, friends, men, boys, and sundry creatures! It's the moment of truth, the tempest in a torus, the bildungsroman without buildings! Good or good enough. Cinderella or cinders? Will Gray make the grade? Or will he be bowed before this loud crowd? Yes, it's time for the cake, make or break, make no mistake!" Whistles and catcalls rose from the crowd.

"What is this? Are we gonna' talk or eat?" said Cane impatiently, reaching out to grab a fistful of frosting as the cake creaked by his chair. The cartmaster slapped his hand away: "Not yet!"

In a moment the cart was parked before where Gray sat at the improvised head table. Gray stood up, wavering slightly, slopping beer onto the table from the mug in his right hand. Mr. Saturn cut the music abruptly. An expectant silence wafted over the crowd. Gray inhaled and began to chant what was obviously a time-worn incantation:

*Hear me now, the time is nigh
When with my bride I'll only lie
In this last night of single freedom
Grant our wishes if you can read'em
Impassive while we lust and leer
Harvest Goddess now appear!*

The crowd (except for the kids) joined in shouting the final two lines. Nicholas half-expected a genie to materialize magically from nothing, but in fact the Goddess' entrance was a bit more mundane: the top of the cake burst upwards and outwards, releasing a strikingly gorgeous woman, completely naked save for a coating of frosting on her hair and back. She rose until she was floating head high above the enthusiastically cheering crowd. As she passed serenely above Cane, who had already finished consuming the fragments of cake that had landed on him during her entry, he reached out and took a swath of frosting from her hip. Nicholas remembered something vaguely like this in a video his parents

had been watching late one night; he gave some thought to shouting ‘take it off!’ as he recalled the folks in the movie to have done, but then reflected that the advice seemed redundant.

“Wow,” said Erin. “She has green hair!”

“You’re looking at her hair?” said Clemm, puzzled.

The Goddess took a breath to speak. The crowd grew instantly silent. “Thank you all, it’s always such a pleasure to visit with my devoted worshippers,” said the Goddess, as she slowly rotated suspended before the now thoroughly devout male audience. Her voice was as sweet as her smile. “As you know, we Harvest Goddesses exist only to brighten the lives of those truly devoted to the cultivation of the bounties of nature. On such a night as this, by ancient practice and tradition, we offer to grant one wish to the faithful, anything at all so long as it is pure of heart. According to custom we turn first to the fortunate bridegroom.” By this time she had spun to face Gray, who was staring wide-eyed up at her from an arm’s length away. She began to sing:

*“Loyal, obedient, patient Gray,
what is it you wish today?”*

Before Gray could so much as seriously think about speaking, she shook her head in dismay. “Uh uh uh! Naughty, naughty! You know I don’t do that sort of thing.”

“But I didn’t say anything!” Gray said, distraught.

“Didn’t say anything!” laughed Lewis. “Didn’t say anything!”

“Get a clue, Gray, this is the Goddess!” shouted Mr. Baker from the back of the room.

The Harvest Goddess’ gaze fell upon Brian, who was sitting a bit apart from most of the crowd, by the fire, drinking fruit punch, waiting to get back to The Amber Spyglass (he had reached page 154). She sang again:

*“Child who’s passed through ghosts and fires
What is it your heart desires?”*

“Well,” said Brian, as the crowd turned hopefully his way, “I’d feel more comfortable if you’d -- uh -- put some clothes on.”

“BOOO!!” “WHO LET HIM IN?” “DOWN WITH WHAT’S-IS-NAME!” “WHO THOUGHT OF THAT?” The crowd was not impressed. However, the Goddess found Brian’s idea appealing: the frosting swirled away onto the floor and a glistening gown of leafy green wove itself from her feet and rose up to be clasped by an amber brooch at her shoulder.

“Another groom, another failure,” said Mr. Miller, taking a deep draught of beer.

“What went wrong?” asked Nicholas.

“Oh, it’s always this way,” said Lewis. “Everyone knows that on the eve of your wedding the Goddess will grant any wish except the one that every groom can’t help but wish for when she’s floating there in her birthday suit.”

“Yeah, in fact, it’s pretty unusual to find anyone in the crowd who’s able to make a wish she’ll grant,” said Mr. Green, the mushroom farmer. “That boy is the first since -- oh, my, since Virgil Tweedy’s bachelor party three years ago!”

“Yes, and remember how that one turned out!” said Lewis. “Billy wished to never have to do homework again so she turned him into an azalea!”

“Right purty one, too,” said Mr. Miller. “He’s better off as a plant, anyway.”

“Yep, got the brains for it,” said Lewis.

“This is not the ideal time to change your mind,” said Mr. Saturn, taking another sip of the beer floating in front of his nose. He was taking a break before doing his last set of the evening. “Ark is not going to be the quietest rest spot in the game worlds for the next few weeks, and as I recall you destroyed all the Arwings specifically to forestall this eventuality.”

“Yeah, I guess we did,” Erin replied. “I don’t know, I’m not used to this sort of thing. When you’re a kid you get to back out of stuff most of the time.”

"It's certainly not that simple. Let us for the moment ignore minor issues like deserting your friends and breaking your promises and deal in practicalities. If you don't want to go on, you can stay here in Pear Tree Town, but be aware that I plan to bring the village council up to date on the outside situation at the meeting tomorrow after the wedding. I have no idea what their response will be. If you stay behind and don't get planetside soon you could find yourself in the middle of a battle that makes this morning's look recreational. Can you contact Wendy?"

"I have her number, I guess. Gee, I don't know. I mean, what excuse would I use?"

"You could tell her the truth."

"That I'm -- I've -- got a crush on--"

"Erin, if you can't say it isn't worth risking your life. Are you in love with the girl or not?"

"I think I am -- but how are you supposed to know? I mean, we've hardly been together. That's the problem! I don't want to leave right now, I want to spend more time with her."

"In love as in war -- much must be risked and all may be lost."

"I hate it when other people quote books at me."

"You're avoiding the question."

"Was there one?"

"Yes. You have to make a commitment before you're sure. It doesn't make any sense."

"Wow. Is this what being an adult is like?"

"Nonsensical? It does often seem that way. Let me know what you've decided tomorrow and I'll see what I can do. Oops, I'm on in a minute."

"Oh, yeah. What are you going to play next?"

"Into the Woods. Sondheim, you know."

"Of course I know."

"Yes, you would. Well, around here it's exotic, since there aren't any forests and not much mystery, at least inside the torus."

"You've got enough mystery all by yourself, without the woods. Where the heck have you been anyway? You brought up Wendy just to distract me."

"I brought up Wendy? An interesting interpretation of the evening's events. One more set, we can chat afterwards."

"You're giving me lectures on commitment and here you are ducking out again!"

"Yep. Welcome to adulthood." Mr. Saturn waddled back up to the stage while Erin tried with little success to find out what it was about beer that was supposed to be helpful in situations of this nature.

"That's just like us!" said Kent. "Right, Wal?"

Kent's friend Wally nodded. "Yeah, we learn all the songs in first form, and the kids have to sing them every year. I guess it's exciting when you're little, but by now it's awfully dull. I wish we could sing something else."

"Oh, come on," said Tennyson. "Let's hear one."

"Oh, man, I don't know," said Wally. "They're really dumb."

"Tell you what, I'll sing one of ours and we'll see which ones are dumber."

"Okay, let's see." It was obvious enough that Wally was actually thrilled to have an audience for whom the material might be new. He took a deep breath and began to sing in a clear tenor, joined by Kent:

*Winter brings despair
ice is in the wind
Snow thickens in the air
fear is in our kin*

"What's wrong with that?" said Tennyson. "It's kind of pretty."

"You're kidding," said Wally. "It's so trite."

"Come on, your turn," said Kent.

Tennyson began to sing acapella
Well I come from Alabama
with this banjo on my knee
And I'm bound for Louisiana
my own true love for to see

at which point, Cane added a high harmony from his seat at the bar next to the large bowl of pretzels and mixed nuts:

It did rain all night the day I left
the weather was bone dry
The sun was so hot I froze myself
Susannah, don't you cry
I said, Oh, Susannah
now don't you cry for me
Cause I come from Alabama
with my banjo on my knee.

"Boy, your world is really strange," said Kent. "Dry weather when it's raining? Freezing in the hot sun? I thought Capital City was weird."

"That's just made up," said Tennyson. "It's sort of a joke. At least I guess they thought it was funny then. It's a very old song. More than a hundred years."

"You're kidding!" said Cane. "I thought Mrs. Amherst wrote it for the second grade talent show."

"Alright, alright, your turn again," said Tennyson.

"What's next, Wal?" asked Kent.

"Hmmm, the pasture song." Despite his protests Wally was obviously getting back into the swing of performing. He hummed a B-flat and the pair began to sing again:

There are no blasters
in the summer air
The sheep are in the pastures
where the wind whips your hair.

A flower flies into your hand
a fleeting beauty lent
But any one who works the land
knows how soon it will come to an end.
The stream cools you down
we're off to fishing
But we don't forget the trials of life
that drive us all to wishing
Live like each moment is shiny as a polished knife.

Tennyson and Cane applauded, though in the noise of conversation and continued consumption no one else took much notice. Kent took a sip of his white wine, and Wally a chug of beer. "Come on, your turn."

Tennyson turned to Cane: "Betsy?"

"Yeah, sure, I like that one." And they sang:

Have you heard tell of sweet Betsy from Pike
She crossed the wide prairie with her lover, Ike
With two yoke of Oxen, a big yellow dog,

A tall Shanghai rooster and one spotted hog

*One evening quite early they camped on the Platte
'Twas nearby the road on a green, shady flat
Betsy, sore-footed, lay down to repose
In wonder Ike gazed on his Pike County rose*

Erin and Nicholas came over to the bar to listen. Gray and Lewis joined them. The room slowly grew quiet as the two boys continued to spin the tale of an old West they'd never seen:

*Out on the prairie one bright, starry night,
They broke out the whiskey, and Betsy got tight.
She sang and she shouted and danced o'er the plain,
And she showed her bare arse to the whole wagon train*

Mr. Saturn joined in with a simultaneous bass line and parallel thirds from Tennyson's melody:

*They soon reached the desert where Betsy gave out
And down in the sand she lay rolling about
Ike in great terror looked on in surprise
Saying, Betsy get up, you'll get sand in your eyes*

*Sweet Betsy got up in a great deal of pain
Declared she'd go back to Pike County again
Ike, he just sighed, and they fondly embraced
And she traveled along with her arm round his waist*

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

The room burst into applause. Cane bowed, knocking the pretzel bowl onto the floor. Tennyson looked up surprised: he hadn't noticed the audience. "They reached California in spite of it all," Kent recited. "Wow. California."

"Hey, I know a good one!" said Cane, figuring to enjoy the spotlight while he had it. "We're gonna need some help, though."

"Aww, do I hafta sing?" complained Clemm.

"Naw, you don't need to sing, you just need to drink!" said Cane. "How many bottles of beer do you figure there are?" he asked the crowd, waving up at the bar.

"Thirty-seven!" said Mr. Miller.

"Seventy-six!" said Lewis.

"Nine million!" said Baxter, the tailor's son.

"You're all wrong!" said Cane. "I'll bet there are exactly -- precisely --"

Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall

ninety-nine bottles of beer --

You take one down and pass it around'

(which he did, twisting the top off and handing it to Wally on his left)

"Ninety-eight bottles of beer on the wall!"

Kent, Virgil, and Mr. Baker were quick on the uptake and joined in for the next verse, while the bottle made the rounds of the hangers-on:

*Ninety-eight bottles of beer on the wall
Ninety-eight bottles of beer --
You take one down and pass it around*
(this one started with Clemm)
"Ninety-seven bottles of beer on the wall!"

Brian and the Harvest Goddess were on their fourth fruit punch, deep in a discussion of comparative religion. "So then Buddha is the God of Enlightenment?" asked the Goddess, still a bit puzzled.

"No, no, the Buddha was a real person. Gautama Sakyamuni. I think. Something like that. He lived a couple or three thousand years ago. He had these ideas about how people are reincarnated."

"I'm sorry, what was that term?"

"Reincarnated. It means that you live one life and then you're reborn as something else, and the thing you're reborn as depends on the level of enlightenment you achieved in the previous life."

"Oh, yes, you mean they're replaced."

"No, no, it's actually the opposite. I mean, here if someone gets killed or dies, that person is replaced with a similar person with a similar personality, right? But not the same person; they don't have the specific memories the original had, and stuff like that. At least, that's what Fox told us. But reincarnation is kind of the other way around, where it's the same person at heart, potentially even with the same memories, but in a different body, maybe even a different species."

"Now I'm puzzled again. What has this all to do with worshipping obesity?"

"Oh, gosh, I'm not explaining this very well. Buddhists don't worship obesity, but they build big statues of the Buddha -- this Gautama fellow -- who happened to be pretty chubby. At least, that's how he's always shown. I think the chubbiness is supposed to show how happy he was. Somebody once told me you rub the Buddha's tummy, I mean the statue's tummy, for good luck."

"Oh, that sounds like an entertaining idea for a ritual," said the Goddess. "Let's try it. Do you mind?" She pulled her gown up to reveal her not-very-Buddha-esque midriff. As the concept of undergarments had not occurred to her, this resulted in a level of exposure which was highly appreciated by those nearby members of the party who were not occupied with beer bottle number seventy-two. "Go ahead, dear, give me a good rub," she continued, ignoring the catcalls and wolf-whistles.

Brian took a deep breath and leaned forward, carefully keeping his gaze focused on her navel (why does a Goddess have a navel anyway?), and gave her belly a good rub as he'd seen friends do to the little statue in the Man Bo Duck on Castro Street in Mountain View. His whole face felt like it was glowing white hot. He cleared his throat and said, "That's pretty much it. You could -- put your dress back now."

"Oh, that was quite nice," said the Goddess. "I like that idea. Do you feel lucky?"

"I'd say he's lucky!" said Bill. "I'd like to be lucky, too-- can I have a rub?"

*Fifty-four bottles of beer on the wall
fifty-four bottles of beer,
You take one down and pass it around --
"Hey, Virgil? Virgil? Aww, he's zonked. Here, Lewis, you start this one."
Fifty-three bottles of beer on the wall.*

"I forgot again," said Kent, frustrated. "What was the next verse?" He and Tennyson were closeted in the far corner of the room, behind the fireplace.

"They soon reached the desert where Betsy gave out," said Tennyson.

"What is that anyway? A desert?"

"It's a place with no water. A place where it doesn't rain."

"I read about rain. That would be cool. Of course we have the stripelands where we have sprinklers up on the roof but it doesn't seem the same."

"Yeah, it can be pretty neat. When it rains hard you can go stand in the gutters and kick up a storm."

"What's a gutter?"

"Oh, yeah, that's how the water drains away."

"Okay, okay, never mind. Let's see: They soon reached the desert where Betsy gave out, and down in the sand she, um, pushed up her snout?"

"Rolling about."

"Oh, yeah, down in the sand she lay rolling about. You know, I really liked that song."

"I noticed."

"Come on, Brian, we should get some sleep," said Nicholas. He was dragging Erin behind him. Brian looked at the pendulum clock next to the fireplace: it was after eleven.

"Yeah, I guess I'd better get going," said Brian.

"My, how the time flew by!" said the Goddess. "I shall be late for the mid-autumn ritual." The Goddess floated up off her chair and drifted horizontally towards Brian. "You can join my worshippers any time you stop by," she said, delivering a lingering kiss on his cheek. Then she drifted slowly upwards while becoming increasingly transparent; by the time she neared the ceiling she was nearly invisible.

Brian sat slack-jawed and blank-eyed until Nicholas jogged his shoulder. "Come on, Brian, let's go."

"Let him be," said Mr. Baker. "Getting kissed by the Goddess like that is -- well, it's gonna' get anybody's attention. He'll recover by and by." He yawned. "Guess I'll be moseying on, too, after givin' my respects to the lucky fellow. Ain't as young as I used to be, you know."

"Come on, let's collect Tennyson."

*One bottle of beer on the wall,
one bottle of beer --
you take it down, you pass it arou--*

"Hey! Where is everybody?" He stood with the bottle for a moment, surrounded by sleeping boys and men. The barkeep (one of the few people left awake) was staring at him with a meaningful expression as he counted the contents of the cash drawer. Cane looked around and then pointed at the stool against which Gray was slumped, snoring peacefully. "Put it on his tab!"

=====

The girls were gathered around Maria, who was dressed only in her white linen slip, her long black curls draped over bare shoulders. Mary Ellen sat at the table next to the group making a couple of last-minute adjustments to the wedding gown.

"So these two blondes are going to go to Casinopolis for their vacation, and they're walking along when they come to a fork in the road," said Maria. "There's a big sign that says, CASINOPOLIS LEFT, so the blondes shrug their shoulders, turn around, and go home."

The girls broke into laughter, except for Loraine. Loraine was a guest from Phantasy Star, invited due to her friendship with Muffy's second cousin, Sandra. She was a tall platinum blonde with a protruding bust that seemed to have no respect for the laws of gravity, dressed in a halter top and shorts. "I don't get it," said Loraine. "Is that funny?"

"Probably not if Nicholas told it," said Clara, mostly to herself.

"Nicholas?" asked Loraine. "I thought her name was Maria. I was sure of it."

"Okay, I'm done, let's try it on," said Mary Ellen, rising somewhat awkwardly from her chair holding the gown in front of her. The girls backed off to give Maria some room to don the dress; Loraine, turning without looking, struck the shorter Clara in the eye with her left breast.

"Ow! Watch where you're going with those!" said Clara.

"I'm sorry, they just keep getting in the way," said Loraine, meaning the other girls.

"You could have them surgically removed," said Clara, meaning the anatomy beneath the halter.

“Oh, does it work that way?” asked Loraine. “Usually after they’re around me for a while they leave by themselves.”

“Clara, come help me with the buttons,” said Mary Ellen, interposing herself between Clara and Loraine.

“Why does she get to help? She’s just a kid!” said Louise, the schoolteacher’s daughter.

“If you can’t recognize character when you see it,” said Mary Ellen, “trust those who can. Maria, dear, inhale and hold, please. Clara, you start at the bottom and have a care to lay the pleat flat at each step.”

“Oh, Maria, you look ravishing!” said Karen, the winemaker’s daughter.

“I wish I had her figure,” said Muffy.

“Why?” asked Loraine.

“Never mind, you wouldn’t understand,” said Sandra.

“Come on, Maria,” said Muffy, “do you have big plans for your future?”

“I’ll bet she has big plans for tomorrow night!” said Karen, giggling.

“What kind of big plans would she have?” muttered Clara, but not low enough to be unheard.

“Is that what you think about the folks who you come to for help?” said Mary Ellen. “Perhaps you should listen before you draw conclusions. And do that one over -- the cambric is twisted.”

“Well, perhaps our plans wouldn’t seem very big to someone like you,” said Maria over her shoulder as Clara undid the sixth button and relaid the fabric. “I admit I haven’t traveled all over the gameworlds, killing everything in my path. That’s not our way. But we have our own dreams, Gray and I.”

“I heard from Alice that you were going to expand the library!” said Muffy, wide-eyed.

“Oh, much more than that,” replied Maria. “We’ll start with a book store here in the village. I know that Jill and Martin failed, but we think we have a better business model and an improved supply chain management approach.”

“Wow!” said Sandry. “Your own store. That’s amazing!”

“Oh, that’s just the start. I’ve been working with Amelia and Ryan in Emerald Town on a possible franchising agreement, and Gray has friends in Titanium Town who might be interested.”

“You don’t think small!” said Muffy. “Why, in no time you’ll be the biggest business in the torus.”

“The torus? Oh, my, that would be thinking small. We believe that Boarded is overextended and highly vulnerable if we can manage the financing. Is that it?” the latter being directed to Mary Ellen, who was closing the top button.

“Yes, there we are,” she replied. “Thank you, Clara.”

“I guess I -- owe you an apology,” said Clara, holding the hand mirror so Maria could see her back. “I sort of thought -- you know -- that you were like some of the girls I know, all they want to do is get married and go shopping and change dirty diapers.”

“I don’t see what’s wrong with diapers!” said Muffy. “I mean, with children. I want to have children some day.”

“Well, of course!” said Maria. “We certainly hope to have children. I know it’s not easy to mix family and career but I think we’re ready for the challenges.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” said Clara. “I guess -- I mean I suppose being a mother is important. I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember?” laughed Sandra. “You mean you were a mother? To what, a doll?”

“I mean, I don’t -- remember my mom. Not very well. It was a long time ago. I -- can’t even remember what she looked like.”

“What do you mean?” said Muffy. “Was she replaced?”

“People don’t get replaced in the real world,” said Clara. “It’s not like here. She just died and she was gone.”

“I’m sorry,” said Mary Ellen quietly. She drew Clara to her side and turned to the other girls: “Come on, now, Maria, that is the loveliest gown for the loveliest bride, if I do say so myself. There’s

some wine and cheese in the office, and punch for the little ones. Shall we?" She led the party down the hall. The office furniture had been neatly piled by the wall; set out on the conference table was quite a bit more than a bit of wine and cheese. An upright piano had been wheeled into one corner of the room. Jillian, the village administrator, began to play one of the traditional wedding songs; most of the girls gathered round and joined in:

*Oh they had a little party down in Stone Town
there was Harry, there was Mary, there was Grace
Oh they had a little party down in Stone Town
and they had to carry Harry from the place.
Oh they had to carry Harry to the ferry
and they had to carry Harry to the shore
and the reason that they had to carry Harry to the ferry
was that Harry couldn't carry any more.*

"What's a ferry?" asked Loraine.

"Oh, a little creature that flits around people's heads in the forests," said Sandra.

"What does it mean, carry Harry to the ferry, then?" asked Loraine.

"Oh, just to get him blessed because he has a bad back, that's why he can't carry things," said little Melanie. Maria laughed and mussed her hair.

Clara felt ill at ease, hanging back by the door. "Are you all right, dear?" asked Mary Ellen.

"I'm fine, I just feel sort of silly here. I mean, I don't know any one. And I keep -- everything I say is coming out wrong --"

"Social skills must be practiced, Clara. It will come with time. Of course, you need to make an effort, too. Not many girlfriends back home?"

"Many? Any. None of the girls like me very much."

"I can't say I'm surprised. Clara, you don't make yourself an easy person to like."

"Tennyson likes me. Sometimes, anyway."

"He adores you, dear, it's obvious to anyone. But he's like that."

"You're right. You sure seem to know a lot about us."

"I had a long talk with Ellie, dear. You all made a big impression on the folks at Luigi's place.

Of course with that sort of publicity, it's a mite astonishing you made it this far. You must know there are folks who find your presence inconvenient."

Clara chuckled. "Let's see -- dropped out of the ghost train, chased by the rocker wolves, blown off an asteroid, ambushed by the Black Hole army, Blinky and his giant tongue, Capital City and the copyright cops, and of course the Ark security folks meant to do us in with our Arwings. I think I figured out a while ago that we're not completely welcome here."

"Oh, my, this is interesting," said Maria, who had been listening with half an ear until now.

"Ambushes? Exploding asteroids? Copyright violations? With the proper promotion this could be a hot seller in either the reality-as-fantasy or true-confessions genre. We'll have to make you older so you can have a more serious romantic interest, and, oh, we can edit some of the photographs, too."

"What? What are you talking about?" By this time the rest of the girls had gathered around Maria and Clara; Mary Ellen, chuckling, quietly exited to the piano bench.

"Why, a book deal, of course. Exclusive to us, naturally. What a nice wedding present! We'd just need to get Aran to agree to do the back-jacket blurb. It's a natural!"

"You want me to write a book about us kids?"

"No, of course not. We'll get a ghost writer, I know one at Luigi's who would be interested, and just tweak the truth a wee bit here and there to keep the story tight and broaden the appeal."

"Ummm -- Cane told me that there's already a book about us -- that Star Spirit we met at Peach's had it."

"Great Goddess! You've been inside Peach's and talked with Star Spirits? This is too good to be true."

"But what about that other book?"

"Oh, don't worry, I know about that one. It's preachy and pedantic, and way too long: only Star Spirits would read it. Tiny market niche. With a girl as the focus of the story, we'll get good penetration in the young female creature segment, and if we show some flesh on the cover the boys will go for it."

"Some what?"

"Don't worry, we're not talking about a nude shot -- got to leave something to the imagination. Besides, you're really cute but a little young -- maybe we'd borrow a bit of Loraine's anatomy and edit it into the picture. That okay with you, Lori?"

"Anything for a friend, Maria," said Loraine, peeling off her top. Unlike the Goddess, she had heard of undergarments, but apparently hadn't been convinced. "Besides this is your night! What angle did you want?"

"You're going to stick those things on me?" asked Clara.

"Just on the cover shot, dear, we can use the real you on the insert."

"No one would believe it! I mean, I couldn't walk around without falling on my face."

"It doesn't have to be believable, we're just trying to get them to look."

While the older girls searched for the most plausible approach to merging Clara's head with Loraine's chest, Clara beat a hasty retreat to Mary Ellen at the piano. "I don't think that helped my social skills," said Clara.

"Maria can be a bit overwhelming when she gets riled up over something," Mary Ellen replied, absent-mindedly picking out a chord on the piano. "She'll test Gray's patience often enough, I'm sure. But then, married life is often a test of patience."

"Are you married?"

"I was. Dear Albert. He passed away last year."

"Oh, doesn't he just get replaced?"

"We're a simulation people, Clara, not a shooter people. When one of us dies, the relatives name a child after them, and they grow up as our replacement."

"We'd call that a godchild."

"Yes, that's what we call it, too, at the naming ceremony. So there'll be another Albert, perhaps for another Mary Ellen -- but not for many years. I'll be long gone by then. I hope they'll be as happy as we were."

"But -- do you know about the army and the attack on the Ark and --"

"Yes, yes, we know enough for our purposes. We'll discuss it at the Council tomorrow. You needn't trouble yourself about us. The young must live their fates and let the old worry about the consequences. But someone will carry on. They always do. As long as there's folk tilling the land for their bread, even on the farthest star, our way of life will not wholly be lost."

She plinked out the tune with one finger as she sang:

*A flower flies into your hand
a fleeting beauty lent
But any one who works the land
knows how soon it will come to an end.*

=====

"I thought we were done wearing these things?" Cane complained. "This helmet smells terrible every time I have to put it on!" Kent was leading the kids along a narrow trail between piles of broken farm equipment and empty wooden crates.

"If you would brush your teeth a little more it would smell less," said Clara.

"Didn't you listen to anything I said?" said Nicholas, a bit peeved.

"How can I pay attention when Clara is insulting my space suit?" replied Cane.

"I wasn't insulting your space suit, I hadn't gotten that far yet," said Clara.

"Do you guys always argue like this?" asked Kent. "I mean, all the adults were telling us how we should learn discipline from you and stuff."

"They were?" asked Brian.

"Yes, ordinary, modest, self-effacing Brian," said Erin. "It's time for you to realize that your fame has preceeded you! Brian Chang, Citizen of the Galaxy, the Rememberer of All Things, beloved of the Harvest Goddess, envy of ordinary mortal men." Erin inserted himself in front of Brian, shoving Clara and Kent to the side. "Stand aside! Brian comes. He takes large steps."

"That's the second time I've heard this stuff," said Clara. "What exactly is it with Brian and this Harvest Goddess thing?"

"Thing?" said Erin, shocked. "Thing? How dare you characterize the lovely Goddess in such a gender-neutral fashion! She was unquestionably, definitely, authoritatively a she! Green hair, too."

"Okay, she's a girl," said Clara. "With green hair. What has that got to do with Brian?"

"Only that he spent the whole party talking to her!" replied Erin.

"Yeah, but by that time she had clothes on," said Nicholas.

"What?" said Clara.

"Well, she was naked when she popped out of the cake!" said Cane. "Except for the frosting. I got some off her hip. Delicious!"

"Ah, does that make her a sweetie?" said Erin.

"The Harvest Goddess was wearing frosting?" Clara continued.

"Not really. She wasn't really wearing anything, she just got some frosting on her butt when she popped out of the cake," said Nicholas. "But then Brian wished some clothes on her so she would sit with him."

"I did not!" said Brian.

"Well then why did you tell her to put clothes on?" asked Kent. "All the guys look forward to seeing her for weeks before the wedding. Usually we get to stare at her for fifteen or twenty minutes before she finally gives up."

"You mean you just go to the party to leer at a naked girl?" said Clara. "Boys!"

"No way, we went there to eat!" said Cane.

"Speak for yourself," said Kent.

"I believe Kent's view of the situation is probably more generally accepted," said Mr. Saturn. "Though a considerable amount of eating and drinking -- especially drinking -- also takes place."

"Besides you just brought this up to distract me," said Cane. "I don't want to wear my suit! I can't figure out how to pee in it."

"Geeze, just go in the water, it doesn't matter," said Erin. "I did."

"What?" said Clara.

"What water?" said Cane.

"The water we're going through," said Brian. "Although that doesn't help, Erin: the suit is sealed so if you don't use the catch tube you'd just pee on your legs, even in the water. Unless you just wore your helmet. That would work."

"You guys are disgusting!" said Clara. "Anyway, don't you think we ought to be thinking about what's next, Nicholas?"

"Yeah, you're right, except that we don't really know too much. I mean, even I remember a little bit of the map, but it doesn't say anything about who's in what room or whether the security systems are on or stuff like that. Right, Brian?"

"What map?" asked Kent.

"Oh, this one," said Brian, taking the GBH out of his pocket. "We have this nifty three-dee model of the station, and if you freeze the slicer and click on a room with the joystick pad like this, you get a little dialog box. But it doesn't tell you very much."

"Oh, wow, that's neat!" said Kent. "You guys have such cool stuff! So -- what is it you're worried about?" They passed by a large fenced-in area, posted with big signs CAUTION -- LOW

GRAVITY AREA, in which were kept several chicken coops. The chickens were flying happily around, easily avoiding a large fellow in faded coveralls with TWEEDY'S FARM on the back.

"Well, what sort of guards we're going to run into, whether we can sneak by them, stuff like that," said Nicholas.

"Oh, why didn't you say so? I can help you with that stuff. At least to, um, about here," Kent replied, pointing with his finger to a spot about 1/3 of the way around torus 7. "Before we got shut down we used to come in here a couple times a year. We know all the ways to get around without getting caught."

"Oh, that would be great!" said Tennyson. "I thought you were just going to get us to the door."

"Oh, yeah, I'm supposed to come back, aren't I." Kent sighed. "Well, maybe I can go over some of it with you. What room are you trying to get to?"

"Weren't you listening at the council?" said Nicholas. "We're trying to get to the central cylinder."

"Oh! Gee, nobody ever told me that!" Kent looked around as if to check for eavesdroppers and then gestured for the kids to gather close. "We know a secret passage into the core. It's behind the Personal."

"Really," said Mr. Saturn. "It would have been helpful if you'd spoken up at the Council."

"Geeze, Saturn, I can't do that! I'd be in big trouble."

"We? Who's we?" asked Clara.

"Well, Cyrus taught me about it -- but I don't think he found it."

"What do you mean secret?" asked Nicholas. "Does that mean there aren't guards at the entrance?"

"Oh, there aren't any guards on this passage!" said Kent, laughing. "But you'll never find it. I'll have to come."

"Oh, that would be great!" said Tennyson. "But -- shouldn't you ask your parents?"

"I think this is one of those items where you ask forgiveness rather than permission," said Mr. Saturn.

"Yep, that's the idea," said Kent. "Besides, I'm not due back in school for a coupla' days, no one will notice."

"Well, having a guide sounds good to me!" said Tennyson.

"Yeah, that's great," said Nicholas. "Everybody okay with Kent joining us?"

"I'm still waiting for somebody to tell me what the spacesuit is for!" said Cane. "I thought we were staying inside the station?"

"The space suit is so you can breathe when we go through the water!" said Nicholas. "Unless you want to hold your breath the whole time."

"Water? What water?" said Cane.

"We have to swim through the passage to the storage tank and then trigger the hatch to let us out. Didn't you pay any attention at all at the Council meeting?" asked Clara.

"Oh, you mean like the big water tank in Sonic Adventure?" said Cane. "I've gotten through that a bunch of times. It's easy, you just have to keep hitting the time switch so you can swim against the current."

"No, no, we're going with the current," said Kent. "The water flows from here into the main electrophoresis plant in seven for treatment; we just need to hitch a ride."

"A very advanced system for its time, as I recall," said Mr. Saturn. "We studied it in school." said Mr. Saturn. "Seems to me there were some provisions for solids removal that might represent a significant obstacle for solid objects like us."

"Well, yeah, besides the currents being pretty fast, there's the lasers at the entrance to the storage tank. You have to be careful, obviously," said Kent. "We have to bring along something to set the lasers off for each of us. They take about three seconds to recharge, so you shove your junk in and then zip in during the dead time."

“Yeah, yeah, I know all this stuff from Sonic Adventure two,” said Cane.

“Battle,” said Brian.

“Yeah, that’s what I said,” continued Cane. “This is gonna’ be easy. I always get through this stage on the first try. Piece of cake! Whoah, that cake was good. I’ll lick the Harvest Goddess any day.”

The path led to a door in a metal partition near the curved wall of the torus. Above the door was a worn placard reading SANITATION AND RECYCLING.

“Why are we going into the sanitation department?” asked Cane, stopping at the door. “You gotta go or something?”

“This is where we get in,” laughed Kent. “What did you think?”

“What? I mean, shouldn’t we start at the river or something like that? It’s the water supply pipe, right? Like in the games.” Kent pressed the buttons next to the door in some complex sequence and pushed it wide. He pointed to a series of large pipes passing through the back of the room, each with a tee joint terminating in a large hinged cover.

Nicholas rolled his eyes. “You just don’t pay any attention, do you? They just cleaned it up for the Sonic games. It’s a sewer pipe! Geeze. Come on.”

“Swimming in poop?” exclaimed Cane. “NO WAY! I knew I should’ve stayed at the Mansion. Forget it, I’m staying where the food goes into my mouth, not where the result comes out!”

“Well, that’s your choice,” said Nicholas. “We haven’t got time to argue about it.” He turned to the rest of the group. “Let’s go. Remember the briefing: we have to get through the feeder lines to the main storage tank.”

Kent directed the kids to a pile of aluminum blocks. “Grab one of these to set off the lasers, that’s what we usually do.” He walked over to one of the covers and flipped a lock away; a pneumatic lift popped the big steel cover up, exposing rapidly flowing, foul-smelling water below. While the kids grabbed blocks, Kent rummaged in a locker behind the pipe and pulled out a sort of aqualung, some rubber gloves, and swim fins. “Put these on, too, we’ll go a lot faster.”

“I’m not going!” said Cane.

“Fine, you said that,” said Nicholas. “Okay, Kent will lead since he’s the guide. I’ll take rear guard this time, Clara with Kent, Tennyson and Brian, Cane -- oh, yeah, never mind, Erin with me. Mister Saturn, can you keep up?”

“No problem. I’m actually faster under water than on land.” The little guy produced a curious sort of mask.

Nicholas continued instructions: “We’ll surface in the degassing chamber before the main storage tank to finalize before we go for the main tank and the exit. Masks on, let’s go.”

One by one the kids disappeared into the pipe. Erin gave Mr. Saturn a lift and then jumped in. Nicholas checked around to make sure they weren’t being watched and then reached back to close the cover, sparing a wave goodbye to Cane, and then disappeared.

Cane, left alone in the foul-smelling sanitation headquarters, paced back and forth for a moment. He started to walk out the door, stopped, turned back, and then stopped again. He took a deep breath, sighed, and shook his head. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.” He donned a pair of fins, popped the lid back up, and sat on the pipe edge, staring down into the dun-colored water flowing rapidly past. “But they’ll never make it without me.” He resealed his helmet, dropped into the pipe, and was gone.

Chapter 18: Zen Bomb

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Calm down, Nicholas," said Tennyson. "Kent's risking his skin trying to help us."

"Yeah, you're right, I'm sorry. But we have to figure this out or we're stuck."

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

Cane took advantage of the momentary lull: "Say, guys, what's the haps? Problems?" said Cane.

"Oh, you're here," said Nicholas. "I thought you were staying behind."

"He's just trying to get attention," said Brian.

"Clara went in first through the lasers," said Tennyson. "She stuck in her block like Kent told us -- and the laser just blew it right up, it was scary -- and then she went right in like she was supposed to,

but it couldn't have been more than a second before the laser went off again, got her in the foot. And she's the fastest by far, except maybe Mister Saturn."

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

"What do you mean?" said Brian.

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

"Okay, let's think about this, maybe we can work something out," said Nicholas.

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

"Why don't we just blow up the laser with one of our bombs?" said Brian.

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

"Hmm, I'd rather not do something that would attract that sort of attention," said Nicholas.

"You'd rather have Clara bleed to death?" said Tennyson.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What?" said Nicholas. "What are you doing over there?"

"Great!" said Tennyson, diving beneath the surface.

"Wait!" said Nicholas. "Be careful! Let's figure out what's going on--"

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

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

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

"What was it?" asked Kent.

"Townes sucks," said Cane. "Whatever that means."

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

"Well, wow," said Nicholas. "Great job, Cane! Kent, can you get the tank door open?" The teenager, already swimming toward the exit, waved an affirmative. "Erin, Brian, cover Kent from the

wings when the door opens in case there's someone out there, Erin AK-47, Brian silenced Magnum, stay out of each other's way. The rest of us will help Clara out."

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

The port was at the top of the chamber, a good bit above the surface, with a short ladder dangling downwards. Kent had already gotten it open, apparently without incident, and was reaching down to help Brian make his way out. By this point Clara was obviously losing strength and depending on the boys for support. Tennyson and Cane dragged her over to the ladder and then, treading water vigorously, pushed her up to where Nicholas and Erin, hanging with one arm on opposite sides of the ladder, could grab her arms. As her body rose out of the water and consequently regained its full weight (in addition to pack and suit), the boys were unable to push her high enough for Kent and Brian to drag her up. Mr. Saturn, who had stayed behind to configure the lasers for reactivation after they were finished, wriggled his nose as he appeared at the surface. Clara's now nearly inert form suddenly grew lighter; Nicholas didn't stop to wonder, but took advantage of the opportunity to shove her upwards. Blood still poured from the burnt and shattered boot to cover Tennyson's faceplate, blocking his view. By this time all four boys in the tank had mounted partway up the ladder to push from below, while Kent and Brian each pulled on an arm. Nicholas was sure that under other circumstances he'd be in big trouble for shoving Clara in the behind, but at the moment she didn't seem up to complaining. In a moment Clara was high enough to rest her belly against the rim of the exit port. Kent dragged her out and down the sloping outer surface of the tank; Brian grabbed her legs and together the two boys laid her out on the metal grating floor surrounding the tank.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, well, they fixed it, of course. Wendy had a heart container, she fixed him right up. After she gave him a hard time about it, that is."

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

"Oh, yeah, I remember that," said Cane.

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

“This is yours?” said Brian.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You always say that. What?”

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

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

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

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

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

“You pretty much did,” said Tennyson.

“And it was totally gross,” added Cane.

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

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

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

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

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

“How do you feel, Clara?” said Tennyson.

“I’m fine,” she replied. “What are you guys all standing around for? Let’s go.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The bribe claw?" asked Mr. Saturn.

"Yeah, right, you know him?" replied Kent.

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

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

"You mean he stays bribed," said Mr. Saturn.

"Yeah, right. As long as you keep paying him he's straight."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You guys sure you know how to handle all these guns and stuff?" asked Kent.
"Don't worry, if you get in the way we'll just shoot right through you," said Erin cheerfully.
"Erin, shut up and look after Mr. Saturn," said Nicholas. "Let's go."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kent nudged Brian and whispered "Ten." Brian dug into his pack and handed a glistening gold-colored coin towards Bribe O. He grasped the tiny coin with his claw, displaying surprising dexterity with the primitive-looking prosthetic. "Your best bet would be to go up two levels so that you can access transfer gate b eleven. Them bombers usually take some sort of siesta about three, they call it a coughing break or something like that, that's the best time to go. Use the service elevator to go up, not the ramps."

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

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

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

"Mostly," said Bribe O, an acquisitive look in his eye. "The situation in L is -- umm -- sort o' complicated, but a group like you, you're up to it." Another pair of coins changed hands. "See, the bomber folks have converted levels two through seven of the old industrial segment into a kinda bomb factory. They're makin' everything you could imagine: water bombs, fire bombs, plasma bombs, the whole shebang. Three assembly areas, four or five stockrooms, clean area for specialty fabrication, some thin film reactors. But you don't want to go there anyway. Best bet is to grab a couple three bombs out of the storeroom and dress up as delivery folks, go in through the loading dock. That's why I sent you to b eleven. Clerks in Receiving make a spike-tail look smart; you can fool 'em. Go in through their

warehouse, fills darn near the whole of level six, then you can cross to m no problem. Whatcha' doin in m anyway?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's an intersegmental transition zone," said Kent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is that the placard that says 'DANGER, RADIATION SOURCE -- MAINTAIN 10 METER CLEARANCE'?" asked Brian.

"Yeah, right there. Don't worry, it's only dangerous if you stop for lunch."

"Hmmm," said Nicholas. "The gate goes straight out?"

"And a little to the left," replied Kent.

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

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

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

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

"That's a mixed metaphor," said Brian. "We covered that in literature circle last month."

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

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

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

"That's my line," said Tennyson.

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

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

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

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

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

Erin was helping Tennyson wrangle the bomb rack from where it had landed, wedged between two aluminum girders, when he heard a familiar voice from the platform above. "Wow, that is so

convincing! You koopas are so committed to your roles. Anybody would think you're dying!" The speaker was not visible, though Erin could see a koopa at the platform edge. It must have been one of the ones Clara shot -- it was bleeding something yellow and coughing. "You know, I played Zelda in the school production of Ocarina of Time and I got shot with an arrow! I think it was from Cupid. Then Ganondorf -- that was Billy Hatcher, he was an awful singer, he burped once during his solo, did I tell you it was a musical? -- invaded and we all got exiled to Shiver City until the end of act three." The poor koopa spat something onto the metal platform and shook uncontrollably. Erin gave a thought to going to the dying creature's assistance, but it was obviously too late to offer any useful help. "You know, Young Link -- that was Irving -- a Dodongo killed him but you're much better at it, he started laughing after the fake blood went up his nose." The koopa wasn't moving much by this point. "Well, there's the ending bell, I have to go back and submit my referee's report now. Gee, you just stay right there in character. You should think about a career on the stage. See ya!"

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

"What is it?" whispered Nicholas.

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

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

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

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

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

"You don't. We split up into two groups, him 'em from the front and then ray guns in back. Kent, there's a corridor coming in there from the left, in front of the robots. Can we get there without being seen?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"All right, what starts with 'e' and ends with 'e' but has only one letter?"

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

"He needs some jokes, period," said Tennyson.

Three soft metallic PINGS -- "Go!" said Nicholas. The three boys quickly crossed the facing corridor, backs against the opposite wall out of sight of the robot guard, and sidestepped along the wall. Nicholas was counting: "seven ... eight ... nine ..." He led the boys into the open area behind the robots just as three nearly-simultaneous rifle blasts echoed through the halls. As the robots turned towards the source of the fire, the helmets of the rightmost and center guards flew into the air. A bullet spanged off the left robot but the helmet was not dislodged. Nicholas snapped a ray gun blast right into the blinking patch on the back of the exposed head of the right robot, while Erin similarly disabled the center. The third robot launched one blaster bolt before a second pair of rifle shots ripped its head off; three ray guns simultaneously finished the remaining guard. By this time Clara had already swapped her rifle for a silenced handgun and spun on her heel to check the other intersecting halls.

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

"Good work?" said Clara. "Brian wasn't even close. I had to rescue him."

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

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

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

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

"I hit the helmet!" protested Brian.

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

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

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

Drop the BOMB!! --- - - -

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

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

Beyond was a sizable chamber. At the right a ragtag collection of boxes and crates were piled haphazardly against the perforated metal walls. Towards the back of the room Nicholas recognized an entrance port for one of the huge pneumatic tubes that moved supplies within the segment; the door appeared to have been blown off its hinges, and a sign declaring OUT OF ORDER in block yellow letters

had been hung over the cracked end of the tube. Against the left side were a series of workstations, each equipped with a flat-panel display and keyboard and manned (creatured?) by fellows in a sort of plastic armor with their heads hidden by TV-set facemasks: bomberfolk. Above the first of the putative employees a recognizable boom box was the source of the music. One of the technicians was sporadically typing at his keyboard as he sorted through a small pile of boxes; the other two appeared to be singing along with the music while gesturing in rhythm with their arms and fists, though their contribution if any was quite inaudible over the cacophony of the radio.

Drop the BOMB!! --- - - -

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

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

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

"What was that for?" said his companion.

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

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

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

"Yeah, we have to look just like we're working," said blue-and-gold. "It's not easy to emulate every aspect of productive dedication without actually accomplishing anything," he continued, turning to Kent. "It takes years of training. Can we help you? See, just like that. Sounds sincere, doesn't it?"

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

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

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

"I'm complimentary," said Mr. Saturn.

"Funny, I hadn't noticed," said Tennyson.

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

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

"F739B52 dash 390," read Brian.

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

"Yeah, yeah, that must be it," said Brian.

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

"The what?" asked Kent.

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

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

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

“Good question,” said Mister Saturn.

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

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

MS. GLAUBER

ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT

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

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

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

your attention.” The presenter sat down at the table to the accompaniment of polite applause. Erin’s arms were getting really tired holding the heavy bomb while waiting to be noticed.

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

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

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

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

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

“Right away, sir.”

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

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

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

“Profound and yet disturbingly relevant,” said Sobrero.

“Carthago esse delectam,” said Graecus.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“A storm,” said Erin. “Oh, yeah, that’s what you need. A brainstorming session.” He reflected on how amazingly useful it could be to know someone as boring as his cousin Evan, who had described the practice several times in much more detail than Erin had ever imagined he would need to know.

“Somebody stands at the board and everybody shouts out ideas and the person at the board writes them down. And -- um -- it kindof doesn’t matter how stupid they are or what, you don’t try to be perfect, cause then it’s not creative. And you can, like, steal somebody else’s idea and improve it, that’s okay.”

He was half talking to himself, not really noticing how the other occupants of the room were hanging on his every utterance.

"Brilliant!" said Nobel, handing Erin a whiteboard marker. "Let's do it! Ms. Glauber! Ms. Glauber!"

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

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

"Right away, sir!"

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

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

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

"How do you -- do that?" asked Ms. Bacon.

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

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

"Okay," said Erin. "So use what you know."

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

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

"Oh -- oh -- I've got one!" said Bickford.

"Go ahead," said Erin.

"What about -- bombs filled with chocolate?"

"Chocolate ice cream!" said Sobrero.

"Chocolate covered beets with baking soda --" said Smith.

--and vinegar!" finished Bacon.

"Brilliant!" said Nobel. "Brilliant. Write that down, Erin!"

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

"Brilliant! Write it down, Erin."

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

"I think that one's been done," said Erin.

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

"Brilliant!" said Nobel. "Write it down, Erin."

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

bread bomb

matzoh bomb -- explodes if you try to leaven it

shopping bomb

encyclopedia bomb

omb bomb

bom bomb
 zen bomb --- bomb that explodes only when you don't expect it to
 baseball bomb
 potential bombs -- no fuse or trigger but they could explode at any moment
 really bad movies that make the audience explode
 champagne bombs -- explode when shaken
 book bombs -- explode if read
 book bombs -- explode if unread
 book bombs -- explode if reader is a reviewer
 book bombs -- explode if pitched on TV talk show
 riddle bombs -- answer riddle to set them off
 mystery bombs -- solve mystery of who set off the bomb to set off the bomb
 history bombs -- if you see one you're history
 calm bombs -- only explode when bored
 maraca bombs -- explode when clacked in 4-4 time
 a bomb to blow up Carthage (this one appearing at the end of every completed board)

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

"Brilliant!" said Nobel for the fiftieth time.

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

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

"Yes, Erin, what about it?" said Nobel.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, sir."

"Well, get them out! Erin, take whatever you like. It's the least we can do."

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

"Bye, Erin!" said Bickford. "Thanks for everything!"

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

"Cathago delenda est!" said Graecus.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"He may," said Mister Saturn, his brow wrinkling with concentration as he slowly floated up past Tennyson. On his head was balanced a wheeled rack similar to those borne by the kids, with the handles removed. "I'll just be a moment." In the promised interval the little fellow was perched atop the rail, balanced on the rack as if it were a skate, a position no doubt precarious in the absence of psychokinesis. "I haven't done this in a long time. Should be fun. See you at the lab."

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

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

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

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

Nicholas had assigned himself rearguard purposely, if perhaps not wisely: the handles still reminded him of the parallel bars in the playground. He didn’t want the others to see him mess up, though as he neared the top of the ladder it occurred to him that that also meant there was no one to help him if he fell. A momentary hesitation was quashed as the shocked sounds of someone entering the Receiving area penetrated the echoing warehouse. It turned out to be much less difficult than he had feared: the kid who had struggled to hold himself up for a few minutes on the Pokefloats was three weeks of intensive training in the past. He had to agree with Mister Saturn: it was a wild but entertaining ride. George and Akbar (from Mrs. Turnbull’s class) had frequently teased Nicholas because he was too scared to go on the Top Gun roller coaster at the Great America theme park back home; wait until they heard about this one!

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

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

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

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

“Sure, Max,” said Mr. Saturn. “Whatcha’ buildin’, anyway?”

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

“That’s pretty small. What’s it for?”

“What it’s for?” replied Max thoughtfully. “I haven’t decided. It could be for different things. The koopas asked me to blow up the station. They’re going to attack. Did you know? They wanted me to blow up the station if they failed. Interesting. I don’t like the koopas. Perhaps I should use it to blow them up. Zelda asked me to blow the koopas up. That would be interesting. But I don’t like Zelda. Perhaps I’ll blow her up. Or maybe just the bomb factory. That would be ironic, wouldn’t it? Can you reach up and press that black lever?” the last directed towards Kent. “Good, hold it down.” Something arced loudly inside the bomb. Black smoke started to pour out the top.

“Should I stop?” asked Kent.

“No, no, keep pushing. That’s supposed to happen.” Max stuck his arm way up inside the sphere and twisted something. There was a loud buzzing sound and then a POP! The black smoke was

briefly replaced by billowing white vapors. Max stood up and seemed to reflect while staring at the bomb. The smoke slowly dissipated. "You can stop now," he said, without looking at Kent.

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

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

"Well, is there a problem?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Kindof depends on what you mean by 'straight'. I've never found anything about women to be straightforward, personally."

"Geeze, are you guys gonna' blab here forever?" said Clara. "I'll take care of this, let's go."

Max looked at her for a moment, shrugged his shoulders, and went back to his plasma bomb. Clara made her way around the equipment racks and scattered parts toward the door. The arrangement reminded Clara of a naval ship: there was a wheel in the center that controlled four large steel shafts engaging locks on all sides of the doorframe. She spun the wheel to free the lock shafts, grabbed the 9 mm pistol from her belt to complement the beamer in her left hand, and swung the door open. From the inside of the tunnel came a very loud female voice:

"You are the most arrogant uptight capricious self-centered excuse for a male I've ever seen!"

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

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

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

"No thanks needed," replied Max.

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

Max turned back to what remained of his plasma bomb. "My lab? It's not my lab."

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

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

"Okay, that was strange," said Tennyson.

"No," said Mr. Saturn, "that's actually about typical for Max. Kent, alternate route?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So you admit you like her now? Come on, Cane, Tennyson can't shoot like you can. Between you and Clara you should be able to deal with the first rush of this whoever it is. She seems to need a few seconds to reload; that should give the rest of us time to get in to back you up. Saturn, Kent, stay behind in here until we're clear." Nicholas spent a moment working out the remainder of the attack plan; a resonant singing sound from the entry door, obviously something heading down the rail, indicated to all the wisdom of proceeding with alacrity. Nicholas and Tennyson turned the wheel on the door as silently as they could. Cane and Clara stood side by side -- Cane still jabbing her with his elbow to get clearance for his favored high-velocity Johnson semi-automatic rifle -- as Brian pulled the door ajar.

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

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

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

Before Nicholas could answer, the kids dealt with another assault, this one of four javelin-like thermal detonators. One, only partially disabled by Tennyson's ray blast, exploded in a fiercely-bright

flash, making Nicholas' skin burn where it had been exposed to the direct illumination of the charge. Clara tossed her beamer, charge exhausted, behind her and reached for the Q-Laser, still in her pack. Cane shouted "reloading", just as the Mermaid appeared, holding a large pink spherical bomb with a hissing fuse on the top above her head. Nicholas glanced at the object, leapt from cover and charged towards the Mermaid, screaming: "I'm Nicholas and I am sick and tired of you!" Clara tried unsuccessfully to grab him as he went by, then attempted to take out the Mermaid directly, but it was impossible to get a clear shot past Nicholas' rushing form in the narrow hallway.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Just a second," said Nicholas. "Clara, aren't those kay twenty-two's?"

"Yeah, they might be useful. And there're some ice bomblets under the pile over there."

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

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

"Give us two minutes."

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

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

"Got it!" said Nicholas, tossing the device into the mermaid's little refuge. "Let's go! Move it!" They ran down the corridor, which after about 10 paces took a sharp left turn and descended noticeably.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hmmm. You're right. I wonder what the heck that means."

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

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

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

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

"Son," said Mr. Saturn, "she's trying to learn to be gracious. You can help. Your line is 'thank you, Clara'."

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

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

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

"What do you mean by that?" said Nicholas.

"No--he's right," said Saturn. "That's Holic, all right."

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

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

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

"Cane dancing!" said Clara, chuckling at the thought.

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

"I didn't know you guys did Dance Dance Revolution?" said Kent.

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

"Oh, are you allowed to play?" asked Kent. "We would get into big trouble if we got caught. I've only gone a couple of times. I did with Baby Gimme Your Love with Amy Lou once." His eyes grew distant. "She's so cute."

"Humm," said Nicholas. "Do you think that's what Bom Bette meant? Well, I can see now. No where to go but forward. Come on."

A few more steps ahead the tube corridor terminated in a partly-open pressure bulkhead door. Nicholas and Clara slid the door silently ajar. Beyond was an ordinary straight-walled corridor, gently curving to the left, the right wall broken by conventional pneumatic doors at intervals. The thumping grew louder as they proceeded; soon the music itself was readily audible. As they advanced, an

oversized door was revealed on the left wall, casting brilliant yellow light into the corridor and spilling music into the air. Nicholas waved the group into cover behind a ventilation control panel and silently slid to where he could poke his head around the edge of the opening.

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

"What's going on?" whispered Clara in his ear.

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

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

"What?" asked Tennyson. "Don't tell me you had something to do with that."

"Just another backup plan. It was actually Crystal's idea. I paid Jak and Dexter to smuggle a bunch of PS2's in."

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

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

"Say what?" said Tennyson.

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

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

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

"But we've got to go!" said Clara. "This is taking too long already."

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

Clara sighed. "You're right. We've got to get him out. But how?"

"I'll go get him," said Tennyson.

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

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

"What took you so long?" said Clara.

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

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

"Doesn't that take too much time?" asked Brian.

"The whole thing takes too much time!" said Nicholas. "Let's go."

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

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

"Just helping you follow your dream," said Mr. Saturn.

"You got somebody to produce the Stupid Ghost Show? That's great! Where do I sign?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s called pizza,” replied Tennyson. “Just a sort of baked bread with cheese and sauce. You just pick up a slice and eat it, like this.” He proceeded to demonstrate the art of consuming a slice with minimal floor loss. “You guys have cheese, don’t you?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, I guess we have changed a bit, haven’t we?” Tennyson took a long thoughtful sip of Moon Mountain Merlot from a plastic cup. “Like drinking wine! I’m not allowed to do this at home, not

'till I'm twenty-one. That's ten more years! But really, Kent -- our home is in front of us, not behind. We don't have any choice. We have to go on or we'll never get home."

"California, right? You made it sound so cool. I wanted to see all that stuff. Mountains. Rivers. Wild trees. Wild animals! Wow. I thought it would be easy. I could just tag along with you guys. I thought that was what I wanted, too, just like you, to go to California. But right now a boring life in Pear Town seems really attractive."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"RFQ?" asked Clara.

"Oh, sorry, request for quote. That's where they ask you how much you'll charge them for something."

"So you get to go anywhere in the station?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah, is that how you got in here?" said Brian. "I've been wondering about that."

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

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

"Do you?" replied Mr. Saturn.

"Enough, enough," said Nicholas.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Wendy's coming with us?" asked Clara.

"Well -- not exactly--" said Erin.

"We're going to see Metroid Melodrama" said Wendy. "I hear it's great!"

"Erin, we don't have time to see a movie!" said Clara.

"That's okay -- you guys can go on ahead," said Erin, not meeting Clara's gaze.

"Okay, so you're staying," said Nicholas. "I guess Cane was right."

"I knew it!" said Cane. "About what?"

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

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

"I don't know how much he earned!" said Nicholas, remembering his mansion-cleaning adventures.

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

"Put 'er there, bud!" said Cane, presenting a greasy and slightly tomato-sauced right hand. "Cake and pizza! You sure found a girl with good taste!"

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

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

Getting into the multiplex was no problem with the tickets from Erin, but it had turned out to be impossible to tear Cane away from The Calipers of Fate. Fortunately the preview was followed by an educational film (Born of the Inferno: The Story of the Solar Wind), from which he fled in dismay. Nicholas led the group through the corridor, past a pair of robot security guards carrying bags of ball bearings soaked in machine oil ("Oh, dear, I forgot the graphite! We'll have to go back to the concession stand.") and a fellow wearing an ice pack on his head and an IN Security patch on his back, who was

trying to put his arm round the waist of his female companion despite her consistent efforts to escape. The men's, women's, and androgynous-and-monsters' rooms were at the end of the corridor by a fire extinguisher and an emergency pressure suit.

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

"In the bathroom, duh," replied Clara.

"The girl's room is over there!" said Cane, shocked, blocking her way.

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

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

"Well -- you can't go in here!" Cane objected. "Not while I'm peeing!"

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

"What are you talking about?" said Cane.

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

Nicholas returned to the group. "Looks clear. What's going on? What are you guys doing out here?"

"Waiting for Cane to pee," said Clara. "I guess he can't go if anyone's around."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's wrong?" said Nicholas, sticking his head into the stall.

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

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

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

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

While Clara and Nicholas searched through their packs, Brian squeezed into the stall. "Where did Cyrus lose the key?" he asked.

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

"Where was the honeymoon?"

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

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

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

"Great job, Kent!" said Nicholas.

"Don't thank me, it was Brian who had the key. Where the heck did you get it?"

"At the bottom of the bobsled ride. And it wasn't me. I think the Penguin gave it to Clara."

"Penguin?" asked Kent, puzzled.

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

"Well, that's great, whoever did it," said Nicholas. "Kent, what's at the other end?"

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

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

"You sure you'll be okay?"

"Well, not completely," chuckled Nicholas. "But so far we've been able to get by. Okay, I'll take point, Clara with me. Tennyson, Cane, Er-- oh, yeah. Tennyson, help Mister Saturn. Brian, can you handle rearguard? Great, in we go." It was awkward to get into the tube -- like climbing up a tube slide

at the park while wearing a backpack and carrying a rifle-- but with a good shove in the behind from Clara he managed to get started. The others followed as Nicholas pushed and struggled the first few steps -- then he felt the twisting sensation at the edge of the artificial gravity field, and found himself floating. After that movement in the tube was much easier.

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

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

"Kent, you back there?" he heard Brian call.

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

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

"Good to have you!" he heard Tennyson's voice call. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Let's go!"

"Okay, let's roll!" Nicholas' voice rang back through the tube.

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

"What makes you think the attack has begun?"

"Didn't Brian say the seal in torus seven was breached?"

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

"But won't they do the same thing in the core?"

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

"Quiet down back there, I'm coming up to the end!" they heard Nicholas whisper, wierdly distorted by propagation down the tube.

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

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

"The what?" asked Nicholas.

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

“Oh, yeah. Is that what that is?”

“It’s a miniature airlock to enable you to pass small items in and out of the tube in the event of a pressure integrity breach, so repair crews can work without having to constantly evacuate the service tube or wear pressure suits inside of it. Way too small for you but just big enough for me, if you would be so kind as to cycle the doors.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 19: Hint: It Rhymes with Orange

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“As I recall, the previous quarterly report showed that your factories have cost three times the original estimate and turned out in six months less than a quarter of the munitions you promised us in three,” said Peach. “Your vaunted private-sector managers appear to devote far more effort to inept attempts to regain their former commercial status than to fulfilling their obligations under the contract. In

any case, what is in the past is done with. Our present concern must be to ensure that the future of the game worlds, the key to which, I should not need to remind you, sits two and three-fifths kilometers below us, remains subject to a collective, just, and open decision process. I must say I have had the gravest difficulties persuading this Committee to pursue openness to even the modest extent it has done. I should have little hope for any progress in that direction should our adversaries take control.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LOCATION: 3c 42L

TYPE: backup control center

REMARKS: within firewall; security alert issued

REMARKS: corrupted controls database

REMARKS: intervention in progress

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

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

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

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

The Princess smacked her hand to shut off the connection and growled. “Cromwell, get me a security view of that room!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He launched the explosive missile just as Zelda said, “NOW!” Cromwell pressed a button and the command platform, surrounded instantly by a protective silvery cocoon, fled to level one; the grenade bounced ineffectually off the top of the shield and exploded, destroying the torus six restroom status panel.

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

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

“What is your will, human?”

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

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

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

“There does seem to be a general disregard for that accord!” shouted Zelda as she retreated into the corridor. Two of the guardsmen leapt out of the doorway to protect her retreat, but as they were still unaccustomed to the concept of projectile weapons, their wild gunfire did little damage to the onrushing Koopas. The door began to close, but an expert cast from Peach wedged her beamsword firmly between the doorframe and the sliding panel, as the Paratroopas readily dispatched the poor abandoned guardsmen. Shouts and explosions could be heard from several levels above as the Morpha engaged the Black Hole brigade.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hah! they’ll think twice before messing with Cane!” he shouted, reaching for another clip only to discover that he had used the last one. “Oh, man, I’m out!”

“What about your automatic?” shouted Clara.

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

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

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

“I’ll be right behind you! Go!”

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

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

Her reflection was interrupted as the remaining soldiers attacked. They were moving carefully this time, using their dead and wounded colleagues for cover, with accurate fire to force Clara to keep her own head down. By the time she repelled the assault, she was down to two clips on the pistol and three blasts on the Q-laser. If there are any more of them I’m done for. Curiously, instead of being depressing, this last desperate defense somehow appealed to her. She glanced down the hall, crowded with perhaps thirty or forty dead or moribund soldiers testifying mutely to her prowess. A door suddenly appeared past where the soldiers had come from; five garishly-dressed figures leapt out, bearing swords instead of rifles. Hyrulian, she thought. Idiots. The first group rushed down the hall towards her, ignoring the fallen soldiers. She waited until they drew close and then stood up, framed in the hall, pistol in hand, and felled them with five shots. The last one came so close that his thrown sword struck the cable bundle next to her. She retrieved the weapon and retreated to the better cover in the corner by the blasted transport tube, as arrows banged and bounced off the walls.

She could hear heated arguments from down the hall, as she rummaged in her pack for any remaining armaments or munitions. They’re afraid of me. Good. They’d better be. Hmm... what the

heck is that? She could feel a puzzling oblong lump underneath the bandages and first aid supplies. Maybe an extra grenade? She worked it free and pulled it from the pack. "Oh, the ocarina!" she exclaimed aloud. "I forgot I brought that."

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

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

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

Suddenly clear from the hall came the recognizable voice of Princess Zelda: "You're being held off by one little girl? I WANT THAT CONTROL ROOM!" The familiar figure appeared as Zelda rushed down the hall ahead of her surprised troops, armed with a blaster and a broadsword, charging towards Clara's little sheltered spot. Clara knew she should pick up the pistol but somehow the song seemed more important. Zelda kicked a corpse aside and reached the doorway. Her eyes widened as she simultaneously recognized Clara and the plaintive tones. "SHE HAS THE OCARINA! DAMN THAT LUIGI!"

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

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

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

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

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

"They are still so close and so new, my dear, and know so little." The woman seemed to sing as she spoke, a lament so timelessly sad that Clara's eyes were filled with tears indistinguishable from the

torrent around her. "We grow more distant as we grow more wise, so that we love but do not touch. Only one who finds the thread of my song, as you did, can reach me now."

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't know, she was supposed to be right behind me!" said Cane.

"You abandoned her!" shouted Tennyson.

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

"Calm down, calm down," said Kent.

"That's easy for you, she's not your friend!" said Tennyson.

"No, no, he's right," sighed Nicholas. "Can we go back for her somehow, Brian?"

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

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

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

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

"Well, let's look around. Maybe we can find a name, or some batteries, or somebody." Kent, having had little responsibility for the defense, was less exhausted than the others. The room was occupied by nothing more interesting than a dozen small tables, each with a lamp, and a dart board with a much-perforated photograph of Mario against the back wall. "Let's see what's in here," he mumbled, poking his head through a swinging door set to the right of the dart board. There was a second, similar chamber, this one equipped with a full bar. Half-empty bottles and used glasses testified to the sudden

departure of the occupants. A television set in the corner was still on. "Hey, Cane, it's the Calipers of Fate!" Kent shouted. "I thought you said you liked that?"

As Cane barged through the swinging door, a cracked voice came from one of the booths at the right wall: "My Goddess, who's screaming? Oh, my head. Keep it down, for the love of Sega." Nicholas and Tennyson followed Cane, as a head popped over the fake-leather upholstery, fingers stuffed in ears against the squeaking of the door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, great. Heat some of that up, would'ya, and put it in one of them beaker things."

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

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

"Kent," said Nicholas, interposing himself between the bar and the booth, "make him a cup -- but you don't get it until you tell us where we are, you got that, mister?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Sake," said Kent.

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

"Come on, follow them, it might be our only chance!" shouted Nicholas, grabbing the Q laser, his last functioning weapon. Kent leapt over the bar, shattering wine glasses, to join the others as they flew at top speed down the hall, though pathetically slow compared to the trio they pursued. Nicholas directed

himself by sound down a long corridor and up a ramp, which terminated abruptly in a truck-sized portal into nothing. Nicholas waved his arms desperately to regain his balance at the edge of the artificial precipice until Tennyson, following shortly behind, grabbed his backpack and dragged him back.

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

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

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

"Who's Alan Raymond?" asked Nicholas.

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

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

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

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

"That's ridiculous," said Tennyson, sitting down next to Nicholas. "Erin isn't dead, he left on his own. He's probably having ice cream with Wendy, watching the battle from one of those outlying buildings you go to in Sonic Adventure. And anyway that wasn't your fault."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lance knelt down in front of a Raichu, one of two remaining from what had been a squadron. Three arrows protruded from its belly; it was coughing up blood as it labored to breathe. Lance stroked the neck fur, still crackling with the remanant static of that last desperate defense: "You're going to be fine, you just rest now." Nothing I can do for you. I'm sorry. Let's see if there are any we can save.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Can we blast through the wall?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Princess turned to deflect a blaster bolt with her sword. Zelda’s forces were attempting to retreat from a slow-moving but determined assaulting force of Toads, as boos from the ghostly auxiliary,

sliding through the corridor walls, surrounded everyone, creating a harmless but very confusing ectoplasmic mist.

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

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

“Are you okay, Nicholas,” said Kent.

“What?” Nicholas replied, puzzled.

“You were crying again,” said Kent.

“No, I wasn’t.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sure enough, there he was, sitting waist deep in mud, sobbing and filthy but apparently unharmed, surrounded by six huge plant-like creatures, similarly overwhelmed with sorrow, all gathered around a large flat-panel display. “What the heck are those?” said Nicholas.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cane looked puzzled. "Is that a trick question?"

"Fine, stay here, I give up." He turned his attention to the plants. "Do any of you -- um -- guys -- know where we can find a door the research station? The simulation thing? Should be underneath the floor?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why, looking for you, of course. The Princess specifically addressed the issue in her memorandum of understanding this morning; would you like to review it?"

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

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

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

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

“You got anything for breakfast in here?” asked Cane.

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

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

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

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

“Eeeuuu, hairball,” said Tennyson.

“Kapu kap kapuuu,” said the Kapu Kapu.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, yes, it will go faster if you can hold your questions and comments. The purpose of our get-together here is to formally disclose to the public for the first time some important accomplishments of the Ark Research, Security and Educational foundation. New developments in simulation technology, to which important contributions were made not only by my colleague Professor Ein and myself but also by many dedicated researchers here at the Recreation Center, have enabled us to demonstrate for the first time a phenomenon we predicted theoretically several years ago, in a series of seminal papers on insular emulation which fortunately no one read, enabling us to retroactively reclassify the subject matter as

secret to increase its apparent value. Until now, we've only discussed these results under the protection of non-disclosure agreements or when confronted by really nasty people who threatened to hurt us if we didn't tell. However, we are now sufficiently confident of the experimental data to make a wider disclosure appropriate."

"Tim Nook, Crossing News Network," shouted a large raccoon from the fifth row. "Are we supposed to believe that the fact that the space station is under attack has nothing to do with your decision to go public?"

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

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

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

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

"Shut up, Boo!" said the human.

"King, king!" said the ghost.

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

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

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

"Shut up, Boo. King Boo. Shut up. We can't trust him. We can't trust anybody."

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

"Tennyson," the boy replied, pretending to shake the chilly mist.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cane tried to lean forward to look at his subtitles while he added, “And it dumps you right into the mud pool at the OOOOF!”, the last being a response as the lengthening character string struck him in the nose.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Of course, the more recent ones are cleaner and don’t smell as bad,” added Professor Ein.

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

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

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

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

had had the good fortune to remain more or less unsoiled from the knees up, were able to achieve the same benefit from a more prudent partial immersion.

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

"Just don't touch anything!" said Gannondorf.

"Is that a garden or something?" asked Brian, following Kent's gaze.

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

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

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

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

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

"Okay, this is interesting. What is it?" asked Brian.

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

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

"What the heck is a dossier?" asked King Boo.

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

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

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

"Everything else?" asked Nicholas.

"Sure, this is the ubermodel, the whole ball of wax. Everything is in the model. You, me, the station, the planet, all the gameworlds, everything."

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

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

"How should I know?" replied Brian, puzzled. "This is the first time I've been here."

"Okay, okay, fair point." Gannondorf stopped typing for a moment to glance at Brian. "You're not a complete idiot after all. Well, Ein and Gadd couldn't debug a one-line subroutine between them."

We were only changing with the real world to test our theories about convergence criteria without having to account for positive feedback.”

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

“The what?” asked Nicholas.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Maybe these kids know more than they’re lettin’ on,” said Boo. “Lighten up, Gann’. See, that was the whole point of those experiments we were doing. If we work in the real world it can’t come

back to bite us. We just record. If we make a change here and it doesn't converge it might change us too -- then how are we gonna' know we've changed anything in the first place?"

shimmer. "Okay, okay, I don't think we need to understand all that," said Nicholas. "What do we do to go back home?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's more like it," said Nicholas, replacing the blaster in his holster. "Jones?"

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

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

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

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

"Thanks, son."

"Don't mention it, Dad," said Fox. The familiar cocky smile of Fox McCloud appeared on his video screen, beneath his signature mustache and tousled mop of orange bangs.

"And clean up your room!" added James.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, we'd better get back to base in any case. I'm just about out of juice and we need to be ready in case they try again. Good hunting, Father!" *shimmer...*

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

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

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

The towering chamber rang with the horrified gasps of the occupants. Some of the younger ladies took the opportunity to faint conveniently into the arms of favored gentlemen. Lady Dipsey, the High Priestess, rose from the lotus position to float above her pedestal and spoke in a magically amplified

whisper that reached every ear: “Heresy!” The crowd moved forward, many brandishing their weapons; it was all the Yoshies of the Guard could do to keep them from the audience floor. Shouts of “Annihilation! Annihilation!” began to echo through the room.

Nicholas, the Captain of the Guard, tossed back his blue bangs and glanced at the Queen, almost the only occupant of the chambers who remained calm. She lowered her sun glasses to meet his gaze and nodded slightly. He leapt down from his niche high on the Great Black Pillar of the Temple, closely followed by Marth and Roy. The sight of the three most feared swordsmen in the known worlds advancing shoulder to shoulder had its desired effect, cooling the ardor of the crowd for combat, at least for the moment. In the brief lull, the Queen stepped forward and spoke in a great voice: “It would seem the courtesy of our Hall is lessened of late, that the Wise may not speak without an unseemly cacophony arising. Be still! lest I require of my Captains that they clear the Hall.”

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

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

“We occupants of Star Haven are fully aware that these observations strike at the very heart of our culture and institutions. It is obvious to any thinking creature that a frivolous debasement of what had heretofore been sacred is an invitation to the self-interested questioning of every social duty and obligation, unless icons of similar power and profundity are substituted for that which had been lost. It is with these considerations in mind that we therefore advance the following proposals, to be adopted jointly: first, that while worship at the Temple may continue for those who will, we should no longer teach or promulgate the doctrine that the Temple of Ark is the source and wellspring of Re-Creation, or that worship there will provide protection or advancement for the faithful. Second, that in order to fill the vacuum of reverence that may thereby result, we offer Star Haven, the premier center of knowledge and study for all of the worlds, as the proper goal of the Holy Pilgrimages, and agree that the inferior denizens of the other worlds may come to worship the Star Spirits as the incarnate paragons of wisdom and power. This, then, is our position. We thank you, Your Highness, for this opportunity to present our case.” The Star Spirit dimmed to his customary radiance, and retreated from the Scanning Platform to a mixture of hisses, insults, and scattered applause.

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

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

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

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

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

*It’s a world of sun
It’s a world of snow
You can get there riding a UFO
If for fun you should yearn
And you’ve got cash to burn
Come to Wen-dy’s World!*

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

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

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

How many of you really want to turn into Minister Brian the Dull? I didn't think so. Who knows if Skolar is right? Who cares? Let's face it, his world is a boring world, after all! How does he know he's right anyway? What if, for example, the whole world and everything in it is just a big computer model programmed to look like it evolved? What if, well, the worlds started out as video game worlds but then some out-of-control computer nerd got hold of the code and started messing with it, and of course he didn't remember which GO TO went where, and pretty soon the changes got out of hand, and then of course you have to end up with a world that looks like it has a magic temple instead of a computer model because if you can find the model somebody's going to change it, so that the only stable universe is the one where everyone thinks everything is inevitable and can't be changed even though it isn't and it can!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"He doesn't know anything, of course. It's just another of his wild flights of fancy. Only you and I remember." Shaken from her pointless reverie, Clara whirled and focused the SOCOM cannon embedded in her right glove while simultaneously extending the beamsword in her left, but the

diminutive armless creature that had somehow entered her private niche seemed to represent no immediate threat.

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

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

“What are you prattling about? I’ve never seen you or anyone like you before.” Have I? Whisps of recollection floated on the edge of her consciousness. She forced her attention back to the floor below, where Kent of Vineyard Town had taken the platform to speak. We’ve had reports of Conker attempting to enter Ark. The Masterspy. He is clever. I must be wary.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Good subjects and allied folk, the People of the Harvest are grateful for this opportunity to speak, and I am deeply honored to have been asked to speak for them. I’ll be brief, I assure you. Does Skolar speak the truth? I am but a humble vintner, no one to challenge the greatest mind of our age. I am not here to question the facts but to speak to the truth in our hearts. Let the wise explore the world as they will, let their knowledge grow broad and deep, for it harms no one to know that which is. But let us also preserve the ways that bring solace to our souls, for true faith is not derived or constructed, but founded in the love of the faithful. The beauty of the Temple is in the devotion of those who worship it. Our belief is not founded on fact and cannot be confounded by it, nor can reason ever supply the reason to supplant our beliefs. My good friend Sir Hollin said that imagination is more important than knowledge, but I will tell you that belief is mightier still, for without it imagination never becomes reality. We are good plain

folks, unafraid to change that which needs changing, but leave us also the room to preserve that which should be remembered by our children and theirs.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the general disorder the Queen was left undefended except for the area shield and the sidearms she always kept by the throne. As she drew her beam sword, Kent, apprising the situation from where he still stood on the Scanning Platform directly before the throne, rushed to take her side.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Near the dessert table, the key grip was struggling to keep his background lighting properly positioned as Cane, microphone in one hand and 9 mm automatic in the other, moved through a hail of gunfire towards the bundt cake with cinnamon swirl icing. "It's like a war zone in here, folks, between the proponents of these delectable (blam!) banana nut and oatmeal carrot bars, and the traditionalists holding out for (pow! spaaang -- blam!) almond-filled chocolate brownies on a bed of shredded coconut (whoosh --blam! spat - pow!). Whoah, that was a close one!" A small explosion shook the table, as

Cane whirled on his heel and fired twice: two green-garbed attackers fell to the floor. Cane's smiling face, spattered with red, turned back to the camera: "Mmmm, raspberry brandy sherbet," he said, licking some of the liquid shrapnel off his fingers. "Your correspondent is saddened to report that this is all that's left of the raspberry frosted pincushion torte. And now a word from our sponsor, Olimar's Olive Alternatives, when an olive is just too big."

As soon as Clara's form rounded the shrinking pile of sand, Zelda turned her attention away from destroying the Queen to the more immediate threat, launching an ice beam from the nose of her craft as she pulled it into a tight climbing spiral. Clara deflected the attack with a wave buster and fired a homing missile in response, the latter intercepted in turn by a plasma blast from the portable cannon Zelda wielded with her right hand. In moments the two were engaged in a battle the like of which had never been seen before: flamethrowers, charge beams, blaster bolts, wave beams, and phazon blasters followed in quick succession as the combatants wielded and dove, one moment high in the air above the audience, the next flashing at insane speeds so close to the deck that soldiers leapt into the air above them. At one glance, Clara had turned her suit into a morph ball and was rolling down the surface of the Millennium Pillar like an incoming meteorite, morph bombs falling behind her to discomfit the pursuing Zelda; the watchers blinked their eyes and the positions were reversed, the jet wing spiraling towards the outer walls in dizzyingly eccentric interwoven helices while Clara mirrored every evasive maneuver.

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

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

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

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

"Here you go. Ah, those were the days, alright."

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, I've never seen her miss so badly with Din's Fire," said Link. "She's already tried a Nayru, but it takes too long: Clara is so fast that she's firing behind the blast waves! Look at that --

missed the Princess' head by a whisker!" The battling pair headed straight for the cafe, flying low over the deck. Link reached into a cloth bag next to his pack and withdrew a bundle of arrow-shaped missiles. He stood and tossed them as high as he could in the air as Zelda's craft screamed over his head. "Here you go, Your Highness!" Clara boomed by a moment later, her rocket blast nicely roasting the outermost beans in a pile of Avalanche Valley Blend. Link sat down and turned back to Gannondorf: "She never remembers to reload the projectile launcher."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Their spirits glisten like waves in the sun
As they cross the wide river when their day is done
We cannot hold the water that flows to the sea
Though we cherish our friend in our memory
They have travelled the road to where the soul is laid bare
They will come to Ka Forya and depart from our care.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"STOP HIM!" shouted Saturn.

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

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

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

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

“No, no, that was after I saved us from falling from the Pokefloats but before I defeated Conker and his bodyguards in the big battle outside Simba’s -- hey, there you are!” Cane, still covered with mud, appeared in the doorway, accompanied by a Toad wearing a headset and carrying a clipboard, with a camera-bearing Yoshi just behind. Behind them Tennyson could see a number of other creatures familiar from the auditorium: apparently the press conference had either terminated or grown dull, freeing the attendees to search for additional footage and background. “Hey, this is great! Wow, Clara, did you bring me something to eat?” He charged into the room, followed by his pair of attendants. “This is Vanna T., she’s a reporter for the Food Channel!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Scanning room,” said Nicholas.

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

momentarily at loose ends, offered to hold a reflector panel just out of camera. The rumbling thunder of a series of explosions shook the walls.

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

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

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

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

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

"Experience, son," replied Mr. Saturn.

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

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

Vanna and Cane were soon immersed in a description of the battle with Wolf in the asteroids, though the details seemed wildly variant from Nicholas' memory. "Didn't Clara blow the kon-brite thing up?" he said to himself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the hallway outside a squadron of armed soldiers rushed by the door, followed closely by several camera-bearing creatures. Gunfire and laser blasts echoed through the corridor, then grew more distant. Trailing behind the combatants was a slower-moving team led by a youngish fellow in a floppy green hat, carrying a note pad: his colleagues bore a collection of cameras, long microphones, dishes, and other recording gear. The young fellow stuck his head into the scanning room: Nicholas’ hand tightened on the beamsword but the invader ignored his presence: “Gannondorf! Gannondorf! Just the person I was looking for.”

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

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

Gannondorf clenched his fists in frustration. “Geeze, I can’t get anything done without someone interrupting me.”

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

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

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

“Wait a minute!” said Brian. “Aren’t you going to help me with the transfer?”

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

“Zelda is coming here?” said Nicholas.

“Not again,” said Clara.

“What?” said Tennyson.

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

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

“A very confusing Star Spirit,” said Tennyson.

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

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

“Wait!” said Brian. “I haven’t scanned you yet.”

“Ah, it’ll just take a minute, I’ll be right back,” said Kent.

“Tennyson and I have been scanned, we’ll go with you,” said Nicholas. “Do you have anything left that still fires?”

“Maybe a quarter-charge on my blaster,” Tennyson replied.

Brian tossed him a pistol from the workstation. “About a half a clip left!”

“Thanks, Brian!”

“I’ll come, too,” said Clara.

“No, you need to get scanned first,” said Nicholas, following Kent out the door. Mr. Saturn waddled as fast as he could after them.

The hall was littered with spent shells and power cartridges. Most of the light fixtures were broken and dangling from the ceiling. Two wounded raptors bled in the doorway opposite the vending machines, but Nicholas grabbed Kent to prevent him from going to their aid and pushed him towards the hydroponics room. “Come ON! We’re too close to blow it now!” But his best urgency wasn’t urgent enough: as the door hissed open, a swirling cloud of water and steam and plants and shattered plumbing exploded through it.

Kent fell backwards, a long piece of steel pipe protruding from his chest, into Tennyson’s arms. Nicholas grabbed the pistol from the floor and fired a burst into the chaos, but was knocked out of the way as Mr. Saturn, mysteriously airborne, flew by him into the glowing yellow obscurity. “I’ll hold him as long as I can!” he shouted; the door slammed shut with a pneumatic hiss.

“I’m done,” said Clara as she came running down the hall, armed only with a stolen Hyrulian sword. Tennyson turned towards her, exposing Kent’s quivering form, bleeding profusely from the chest. “Oh, no, not again,” she gasped. Some sort of whirring sound came from behind the door. “What’s that? Where’s Saturn?”

“He’s inside,” said Nicholas, turning from the door. “What happened to -- no no no, not another one.”

“Shhhh!” said Tennyson, putting his ear next to Kent’s pallid face. “I can’t hear.” Kent’s voice was barely a whisper. Tennyson nodded. “Sure, sure.” He took a deep breath and cleared his throat. Then, incongruous amongst the echoes of gunfire from down the hall and the throbbing moans of the psychic battle being waged in the next room, he began to sing:

*Have you heard tell of sweet Betsy from Pike
She crossed the wide prairie with her lover, Ike
With two yoke of Oxen, a big yellow dog,
A tall Shanghai rooster and one spotted hog*

Kent's eyes curled slightly in the ghost of a smile. Clara sank to her knees next to Tennyson, tears filling her eyes once again just as before.

*Sweet Betsy got up in a great deal of pain
Declared she'd go back to Pike County again
Ike, he just sighed, and they fondly embraced
And she traveled along with her arm round his waist*

Shouts and screams were now clearly audible amongst the sound of blaster bolts and explosions from the direction of the lobby. Erin appeared around the bend of the hall carrying a partially-eaten sandwich. "Wendy and I have to go, are you sure you -- what happened?" The three ignored him as Tennyson finished:

*They swam the wide rivers and crossed the high peaks,
And camped on the desert for weeks upon weeks.
Starvation and hard work and mountains so tall--
They reached California in spite of it all.*

The pallid boy's mouth moved slightly as he mouthed: California. Then Tennyson reached down and gently closed his eyes. "I was going to show him the mountains," he whispered.

"Wow, great, that's a wrap!" said Link.

Nicholas, looking up, realized that three cameras were pointing at them. Clara took an irritated swing at Saria, who dodged backwards but kept the camera on Clara's teary eyes. A blaster bolt zinged down the hall above their heads. Tennyson leapt up and ripped the camera from Malon's shoulder; Nicholas and Clara grabbed him and pulled him away. "Come on, we've gotta go!" said Nicholas. "You guys can go film them if you want," he added to Link and his crew, pointing down the hall towards the atrium.

"Naw, that's already covered," said Link, as a three goombas carrying shoulder-mounted cameras appeared around the corner, covering the action as a group of Black Hole Army soldiers retreated under fire.

"Where's Mister Saturn?" said Erin. "Didn't he come with you?"

"In there with Skolar," said Clara. "Come on." She led the way back to the scanning room.

"What? Are we just going to leave him behind?"

"Nothing we can do," said Nicholas. He grabbed Erin and pulled him along.

Inside the scanning room, Brian stood on the scanning platform talking to Wendy while she typed. "So, I've been thinking, what happens to us here when we go there? Do you think we just disappear? Can you be two persons at once?"

"That's a really good question. Do you want me to, like, kill you here after you do the file transfer so you'll only have one soul?"

"Maybe, I don't know. And maybe we're really still at home. Or maybe we're dead in the real world!"

"Interesting. Oh, where do I direct the file pipe?"

Vanna T. and her Yoshi assistant finished their sandwiches, thanked Wendy and Cane, and ducked back into the corridor to reach a data link in the conference room where they could upload their footage.

"Dash dash backslash temp backslash ansatz, that's a-n-s-a-t-z," said Brian.

"Got it." The lasers flashed on and off.

"Thanks, Wendy, that was great." Brian's cut was bleeding again, turning most of his tee-shirt red, but he ignored it and stepped off the platform.

"Erin, there you are," said Wendy. "We've got to make a delivery of medical supplies to the Pokemon trainers trapped in the Millennium Pillar; they're paying triple hazard fee!"

“Great work, Wendy!” Erin reached up above Vanna T. to grab a box marked EMERGENCY from its shelf on the wall. “This ought to do it. Hey, you guys, I never knew how much money you can make during a war!”

“Really?” said Brian, sitting back down at the workstation. “Tell me about it. Why don’t you sit down right there?” he added, pointing at the platform just behind Erin.

Wendy stepped out into the hallway, pushing the food carrier ahead of her. “Coming, Erin?”

“In a minute, Wendy! So Brian, we were getting twenty-five coins each for these drinks, even the ones without any high-fructose corn syrup, and over a hundred for the sandwiches for the reporters, and the soldiers pay double that. That’s a gross margin of, um, over eighty percent! At this rate we’ll make enough to take a vacation next month to Dark Summit, instead of waiting until the end of the year.”

“Very interesting,” said Brian. The lasers flashed on and off.

“Hey, what did you just do?” said Erin.

“We’re all scanned!” Brian said to Nicholas, ignoring Erin. “That’s the first approximation, now we just need to gather around here and I’ll bring the keyboard over for the final scan.”

Nicholas’ communication link, which he had assumed was dead inside the metal of the station, buzzed and crackled. Mr. Saturn’s voice was barely audible over a frightening whining sound: “That’s it, up to you n--” it said, followed by a rushing noise. “Okay, everybody gather around, let’s go.”

“What?” said Erin. “Wait a minute, I don’t want to go back home! Wendy! Wait.”

He started for the door, when suddenly the whole hallway grew intolerably bright. From a distance, over a roaring sound and the screams of battle, they heard Zelda’s amplified voice: “You fool, you’ll melt everything! Calm yourself!”

A second voice replied, like an avalanche with the gift of speech: “THIS ONE IS NOT WHAT IT SEEMS! WE MUST DESTROY IT IMMEDIATELY BEFORE IT DESTROYS US!” Erin retreated reluctantly back towards the platform.

Cane finished the final bit of his roasted blowfish as he joined the group at the platform.

“Nicholas, I’ve been worrying about this,” said Brian. “I mean, Gannondorf isn’t here to ask. Can we have two souls? What if we have to destroy the bodies here when we--”

“It’s a little late to worry about it now,” said Nicholas.

“But, what if we--”

The absurdly bright form of Skolar appeared in the door, making the room so bright Tennyson felt as though the image was being burned into his retinas: “STOP!”

In the roaring rush of the gathering Star Storm, Nicholas shout was barely audible: “PRESS THE BUTTON, BRIAN!”

“NO!!” screamed Erin. Clara felt him leap across her trying to reach Brian, as the faintest clicking sound reached her (or did she imagine it?). The faint figure of a familiar lady seemed to glimmer between her and the attacking figure in the door, as the Star Spirit roared and everything turned white.

Chapter 20: The Black Bag

“Ow! Get off me!” said Cane, pushing Erin from where he had landed on Cane’s face in the attempt to reach Brian. Erin rolled off of the pile of kids and landed on the floor.

“I can’t believe you did that, Brian,” said Erin. “We’re back. It’s so boring. Then again, what did I expect from Brian?”

“I’m not so sure we are,” said Tennyson, sitting up. The kids were more or less in the middle of the room. A large five-shelf video rack stood next to a plasma flat panel display television, the bottom three shelves filled with neatly stacked game disks in carefully-labeled jewel cases, the fourth with alphabetized movie disks. The GameCube and three controllers lay on the floor in front of the television, the control cables running in precise parallel lines up the back of the TV rack, held in place with plastic cable ties. The top two book shelves held board books ordered by size, and the bottom four were respectively occupied by paperbacks, comic books and manga (that was the shelf that was too short for books to stand upright), school texts, and oversized and reference books. On the desk there was a plastic rack labeled SCHOOLWORK, with the three trays marked IN PROGRESS, COMPLETE, and OVERDUE, neatly stacked on top of a DVD player, next to a little metal-mesh can containing the pencil sharpener, three pencils, a blue and a red pen, and a ruler/protractor. “Is this my room? Did I have a plasma display? And a DVD player? And Virtual Fighter Nexus? [‘the Nexus’ added Brian] that’s not even out yet.”

“Okay, if it’s not yours, then I got dibs on the teevee!” said Cane.

“It’s your house,” said Brian, pointing out the window to the treehouse. The big hole in the flimsy plywood wall, the remains of Nicholas’ attempt at elevated bowling the previous summer (he had tried to run away before Tennyson’s dad found out, and had never gone back to pick up the 7-10 split), was clearly visible. Next to the window, the fake pendulum clock chimed the half-hour: 4:30.

The sound of a key in a door came from down the hallway. Clara leapt to her feet and reached for her magnum, before realizing that the only weaponry in the room was the plastic Winchester sticking out of the toy box. Nicholas had rolled to prone position as his hand searched for a non-existent assault rifle. Their eyes met and they laughed, embarrassed. The door could be heard swinging open. Tennyson’s mom, her arms filled with shopping bags, bustled down the hall past the entry to the playroom. “Afternoon, dear, how was school?” she said without actually looking, as she made her way to the kitchen. Erin had gotten to his feet and turned back to help Brian up when the clip-clop of her heels on the linoleum suddenly terminated with a double THUNK, accompanied by the dull sound of glass breaking inside a bag. Mrs. Jones, shopping bags absent, reappeared in the entry, paying attention this time. “Good Lord! What have you done to your clothes?”

This seemed a curious question to Nicholas, requiring a pause for inspection. While Erin’s attire was substantially intact, the other kids could only be described as a mix of filthy and tattered, with a bit of blood thrown in for effect. Mrs. Jones’ gaze reached Brian, whose cuts were bleeding copiously again, turning his shirt a dripping crimson. “And what in God’s name happened to you, Brian?”

“I’m fine, I’ll be fine,” said Brian, trying to press the bandages back in place. “Just cut myself on some -- plants.”

“Just a cut? Just a cut? Why, you look like you were bitten by a lion! Is this the same Brian Chang who hid in our closet for two hours when a butterfly landed on his face?”

“Brian is a very brave boy, Mrs. Jones,” said Clara, helping Tennyson to his feet.

“Really? You’re Dr. Dumont’s daughter, Cary, Cara--”

“Clara, Mom,” said Tennyson, embracing her possessively. Mrs. Jones’ eyes widened and a wisp of a smile crossed her face, immediately replaced with her mom-in-control persona. “Well, explanations can wait, we need to see to Brian immediately. Into the van, everyone, we’ll deal with the groceries later.” She took Brian with her left hand while removing her cell phone from her purse with her right.

"I'd better call Mrs. Chang. Are you certain you can walk, Brian? Tennyson, dear, grab a towel from the bathroom, at this rate he'll soak right through the seat covers."

Ten minutes and several phone calls later, a properly solicitous nurse was carefully slicing Brian's tee shirt off with a pair of surgical scissors while the attending physician inspected the damage. "Son, you're gonna need a bit of surgical repair here," the doctor said, dabbing Brian with gauze while reciting a list of required supplies to the nurse.

Mrs. Jones shoo'd the rest of the kids into the waiting area near the entrance of the Urgent Care center, just as Nicholas' dad strode in through the automatic doors. "Hi, Dad!" said Nicholas. "Wow, this is great!"

Mr. Brunell put his briefcase down on the magazine rack. "Hi, Nicholas. Hmm. I think you need a shower when we get home. Hello, Elaine, thanks for taking them in. Hello, Clara, how is your father?"

"How should I -- I mean, he's fine, isn't he?" she said, suddenly disconcerted.

Tennyson mussed her hair affectionately. "I'm sure he is."

Mr. Brunell completed his inspection of the kids. "Brian?"

"He's in with Dr. Lee," replied Mrs. Jones.

Mr. Brunell nodded. "Okay, Erin, looks like you're the only one who, shall we say, kept your nose clean. So, just how did the group get this messy in the two hours since school let out?"

"Well, it all started when Cane and Tennyson pulled down the tee vee set with the control cables, and then Gannondorf got angry -- you see, he was doing an experiment in Tennyson's room, and we were messing it up, but of course we didn't find all that out until much later -- and projected us into the Mushroom Kingdom. Of course, I knew immediately what had happened, but it took a while for everyone else to figure it out. Anyway, we headed off to Peach's castle. Of course we had to get past the Yoshies, and after Tennyson knocked the last one into the water with the Home Run bat, I rescued Mister Saturn from the platform -- he ended up coming with us almost the whole way, I wonder what happened to him? Anyway, we took a warp tube to the Quiz Room, where Brian whipped Spiky Tee, and then we had dinner with the Princess!" Erin began to pace the room, warming to the opportunity. "It was a social whirl, of course. Everyone who was anyone was there: Samus Aran, who we met later in Casinopolis, Kirby -- did you know he once tried to romance Princess Zelda? didn't go well -- Doctor Mario, and of course Luigi couldn't keep his hands off Clara until the Princess scolded him about it. He gave Clara the ocarina, which was fortunate for us though we didn't know it at the time, and Nicholas got a beamsword from the Princess herself. Did you ever notice how everything you get in the game later turns out useful?" The audience for Erin's tale grew, unnoticed, as one or both of the parents of the rest of the kids arrived, greeted their children, and inquired after Brian's status. "...Then Wendy and I had a romantic dinner under the stars, until Dave showed up and wanted to return the sleigh, and I talked him out of thirty thousand bells..." The story continued while the nurse led Brian, garbed in a paper hospital gown as there wasn't much left of his tee shirt, back to the lounge area. Mr. Jones finally showed up, carrying two packs of ice cream sandwiches that were just going to melt sitting in the van: the famished kids consumed them in short order (Cane having three in the time it took for Erin to describe how he had rescued Brian from certain death through ingenious use of the His Dark Materials trilogy -- particularly the third book as it was heavier than the others -- while Brian rolled his eyes in dismay). "And do you know, we were making twice as much money delivering sandwiches during the battle as even eel smuggling! What a business! And medical supplies, triple hazard fee! But then I made a critical, no, a tragic error of judgment -- I foolishly stopped to explain to poor Brian how gross margin works, you see, and while I was doing it, Brian scanned me -- without even asking! -- and then Skolar appeared in the hall -- gee, I hope Wendy got away, I wonder if she's okay? -- and he melted right through the door, and I tried to stop Brian but it was too late, and just as I flew across the platform he pressed the button -- a knife straight into my heart, I tell you! -- and we were back."

The room filled with applause, not just from the kids and the parents but the receptionist, the FedEx delivery fellow (it was a slow day), and Dr. Malamud, who had stopped for a cup of coffee.

"Well, Erin," said Mr. Brunell "you've spun some tall tales before but that one sets a new standard of

extravagant incredibility. Jane, if that boy doesn't have a career in the theater it's a waste of a great talent."

"Wait! wait!," exclaimed Erin. "No, no, you've gotta' believe me, that's exactly how it happened! Right, Brian?"

Brian paused thoughtfully. "Well -- not exactly." The adults burst into laughter, just at the moment when Mrs. Chang finally arrived (she had been at a meeting in south San Jose with her phone off, and when she finally got the message she was so frantic she got pulled over by the Highway Patrol on 101, only escaping a sizable speeding ticket by playing the voicemail back for the sympathetic officer). While Cane licked the melted ice cream cake from the last sandwich off his fingers, Nicholas, Tennyson, and Clara formed a kid wall to protect an embarrassed Brian from his alternately frantic and upset mother, as Mrs. Jones and Mr. Brunell helped calm her down.

The doors slid open again and Dr. Dumont entered. Clara's eyes filled with uncheckable tears as she ran to embrace her father. The tall, slightly graying man politely greeted each adult and then each child by name, and then knelt to speak to his daughter. "I distinctly recall requesting that you be home by five, young lady. It is now almost a quarter after, and this is not home." Clara nodded, biting her lip.

"But sir, she had to help Brian!", interrupted Tennyson.

"I see, Tennyson, thank you," replied Dr. Dumont gravely. Then turning back to Clara: "I was not aware that you and Brian were socializing with any regularity, nor that it was your habit to come to the aid of boys harmed in the course of what I believe you have described as their 'stupid' activities. Is it perhaps the case that you bore some responsibility for his injuries?"

"No, no, she wasn't even there!" said Nicholas. "It was my fault, I was too slow. I should have sliced -- I mean, I should have stopped Brian from, uh, climbing the fence, it was too sharp. Clara came back -- I mean, came later."

"Is that true, Clara?" She nodded but said nothing. "I have told you repeatedly that I expect you to be true to your word in every case. However, to come to the aid of a person in need, even in default of other obligations, is sufficient cause for actions otherwise improper. And to do so in the absence of bonds of affection shows both courtesy and judgment." The slightest smile crinkled the eyes behind his thick glasses. "Clara, I'm pleased to see that you are finally showing some signs of maturity. You've done well." Dr. Dumont stood up again and turned to Brian. "It appears that the invalid is sufficiently recovered to be able to complete his convalescence without further medical aid?"

"He'll be fine, but nothing more vigorous than walking for at least three days," said Dr. Lee, clapping Brian on the shoulder. "Here's a flyer, and Miss Clausewitz will give you bandages and some Neosporin. Bring him in right away if you see any signs of infection or he starts running a fever; otherwise schedule an appointment for next week." The doctor turned to Brian: "You're a real trooper, son. I've seen a lot of adults who would have shot me for putting them back together without topical anesthetics everywhere."

"Thank you, sir," Brian replied.

"Well, in that case, since I have seen many of you all too infrequently of late, and as we are all gathered together if only by chance," continued Dr. Dumont, "may I suggest that we make it a happy chance and repair to, say, Fresh Choice together for dinner?"

"Cottage cheese and ice cream!" shouted Cane. "Yes! Clara, your dad is even better than Wendy!"

"Better than Wendy?" said Mr. Brunell, raising a quizzical eyebrow as he and his son made their way to the car. "Okay, Nicholas -- what's really been going on here?"

"Gee, Dad," Nicholas replied, cinching his seat belt. "Do you want the truth or something you'd believe?"

It didn't take long for old habits to reassert themselves. The kids wandered out impatiently to hand out in front of the restaurant while the adults talked.

"How 'bout we get some ice cream?" said Tennyson, leading Clara to the neighboring shop window. "It's been a while."

"I'd rather not ask my dad for money," she replied. "He doesn't think I need stuff like that."

"Hey, don't worry about it, I've got lots of coins, didn't I tell you?" said Cane. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a little dark felt bag tied at the top with a golden string.

"Yes, the archetypical artifact, the supreme souvenir, the unique Designer Marble Bag of Death!" said Erin.

"I remember that bag," said Brian. ("Redundant!" interjected Erin.) "You picked it up in Luigi's treasure room to put coins in. Are there any left?"

"That would be cool," said Tennyson. "Though I don't suppose they're worth anything here. Come on, Cane, let's see."

It took Cane a moment to untangle the knot. He upended the bag onto one of the deserted outdoor tables. About 20 of the familiar bronze coins rolled out onto the food-speckled plastic. "Hmm," said Cane. "Feels like there's still something in there." He shook the bag and out dropped first one, then a series of objects that glistened brilliantly in the fading sunlight.

"Whoah!" said Tennyson. "Golden diamonds!" He picked one up. The faceted jewel, nearly the size of his thumb, scattered blinding bronze-tinted rays across the amazed faces of the group as he turned it in his hand. "Geeze, where did you get these, Cane?"

"I dunno, they must have been in the bag. Well, it's okay, Mr. Luigi said we could keep anything that wasn't put away, I heard him!"

"I think that's the fourteenth time you've reminded me," said Brian. "Mr. Luigi isn't going to do anything about it now anyway."

Cane counted the jewels. "Look at that! Seven! One for everybody and one extra for luck!"

"Geeze, Cane, you don't have to do that," said Nicholas. "I mean, they're yours, you found them, you can keep them if you want."

"Naah, I mean, you guys helped. Even Clara, except when she spoiled my perfect shot at that Beauty Bummer--"

--bomber--" said Brian.

"That's what I said. Well, it's okay, anyway, you're my friends, I want you to have them." He handed one glistening treasure to each of the kids.

"Thanks, Cane," said Clara. "But I don't think they take diamonds at Baskin Robbins," she added. "We still need money."

"I could trade in Virtual Fighter at the game store," said Cane, pointing at the next set of windows past the ice cream store, garishly decorated with cover scenes and posters that seemed to Nicholas more nostalgic than enticing.

"Where'd you get that?" said Tennyson. "Is that the one in my room?"

"Yeah, you said it wasn't yours!" said Cane.

"I think a huge diamond is a fair trade for a video game," said Clara, taking Tennyson's arm.

"Even one that's not out yet," said Brian.

"All right, go ahead," said Tennyson. "You think you can get enough for ice cream for everybody with that, Cane?"

"No problem!" Cane replied, holding the package in front of him like a talisman as he strode confidently into the game store. "And seconds, too!" Just inside, at the GameCube demo rack, two fourth graders were staring fixedly at the display.

"Whoah, how did you find that, Alvin? I wonder if that's in the game. Just imagine what Sonic would be like if he was drunk! Oh, hey, Cane, look at this! A new cut scene! Have you ever seen anything like it? Oh, and here comes Shadow and Metal. Oh, man, I gotta find how to play this part, that would be so cool."

"Play it?" said Cane. "Play it? I don't need to play it -- I lived it!"