

# *Enter the Cube*

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## *Chapter 10: X Marks the Yacht*

"D-d-d-o-o-o y-y-y-o-o-u-u s-s-s-s-e-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."

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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.

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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 *senor* he is so wise. He knows where to go in de midst of the Labyrinth. He knows where de secret chamber of de Olmec kings lies. Perhaps he can explain *how he got us lost in de 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, de *senor* should be careful of guns, dey can be very dangerous. Fsst- crack! So, de *senor*, he knows much about de books, perhaps, but he does not know de whip, yes? Fsst - crack! De learning process is painful, no? You vile betrayer! Ah, *senor*, 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 de priests teach de children how important is de heart of gold, and now de true heart of gold -- the Heart of the Jaguar -- it is mine! Not to mention de rubies and de 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*, though Erin. *I usually have to imagine this sort of thing.* "Look, Dr. Jones -- de giant stones are perfectly round and dey'll still be perfectly round *after dey crush you like a roach!* Aaah!! run!!! Aha, de 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 *harrummphed!*, 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 Yoshi. 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 Yoshi. 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 be 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.

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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."

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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 one, 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, anda 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's a time for lunch, or maybe it's a the phone call, well anyway let's a 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 dobble!!* 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! Awwwk!"*

"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."