

Enter the Cube

Nicholas and Dan Dobkin

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 dufus 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..."

"Uuurgh! 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 "Oooohmphh! blurrh! owww! 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 theera 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 upa, 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 say 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 an 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 my 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? Hmm. He likes Rivet's, if not maybe Cymbaline'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."