

# *Enter the Cube*

*by Nicholas and Daniel Dobkin  
January 2002 to ?*

## *Chapter 13: Don't Change Keys*

"Are we dead?" said Cane. He was immersed in a soft white fabric like a cloud; perhaps this was heaven?

"The only thing dead is your brain," Clara replied.

"Wow, this is great," said Erin, the sound of his voice somewhat muffled by the plush stuff. "Like our old red recliner chair except it isn't broken. Speaking of which, why aren't we broken?"

"Maybe we are," said Brian. "I can't get up. What is this stuff?"

Clara pushed herself up from the unctuously forgiving surface. She rose to a sitting position with difficulty and looked around. All she could see was blue sky over a curving featureless white surface. Nearby were kid-shaped depressions with a hand or a knee sticking out of the fuzzy fabric. "That's a good question. What the heck is this thing?" she wondered aloud, as she awkwardly crawled to the nearest lump. It was Tennyson: she grabbed his shoulders and helped him up.

Nicholas had managed to get up on his own. As he was reaching to lend Brian a hand, he suddenly turned and pointed behind Clara. "They're Pokefloats! Look!" Rising slowly over the edge of the fabric in which the kids were immersed was a huge, dark blue soft-edged figure with immense thick wings: a Butterfree. As the kids watched, the Pokemon-shaped balloon performed a leisurely roll to the right, its vastness lending a certain dignity to the uncontrolled motion.

The kids gathered themselves and their stuff, getting the hang of moving on the compliant surface of the balloon. All around them, floating monsters appropriate only to the pockets of a supergiant danced up, down, and over, tumbling randomly yet gracefully in the seemingly gentle breezes. Nicholas identified a Snorelax, a Psyduck, a Bulbosaur, and a Meowth all in close proximity to whatever figure they rode; other Pokefloats straggled off in an easterly direction where they merged indistinctly with patches of cloud floating in the distance.

Nicholas collected the kids together for a council. "I guess this is better than being squashed and drowned like I expected, but we're still stuck out in the middle of nowhere with no food, water or shelter. We've got to get some help!"

"Does the train return on the same route?" asked Brian. "Maybe they'll come to look for

us."

"Gee, I don't know," said Tennyson. "They didn't seem too concerned about their live passengers, judging from that announcement. Besides, we're hundreds of feet below the track. Would they see us even if they were looking?"

"This is outrageous!" said Cane. "Dropped in the middle of the ocean with no lunch! I had a reservation! I want a refund! I want compensation! I want an apology and 20 free anytime minutes!"

"Hey, hold on," said Clara. "That's a good idea."

"Good idea and Cane in the same sentence?" said Tennyson. "You sure you're okay?"

"No, no, I mean the anytime minutes. What we need is a phone to call for help."

"Didn't we try that before?" said Nicholas. "Besides, I don't have a cell phone. Even at home. Nobody got a phone at the Mansion, did they?"

All the kids shook their heads, but then Erin slapped himself on the forehead: "Just a minute. Let's take a look in Mr. Saturn's bag -- you never know what kinda stuff he can walk off with." The bag, being lighter than a kid, had bounced off the surface of the balloon and landed some distance away. While Erin struggled over to recover Mr. Saturn's grab bag, on Nicholas' suggestion the others bounded awkwardly around collecting their backpacks and weapons.

"Let's see," said Erin, carefully laying out objects one by one as he withdrew them from the sack. First was a blood-red stone about the size of Erin's fist, inscribed *To Zelda for a truly magical evening -- Harry*. "Oh, the Philosopher's Stone," mumbled Erin, putting it aside. Next was a book of sheet music entitled *Melody's Ignorable Songs for Mealtime*; a box labeled *Ectoplasm Repair Kit*, containing (according to the list on the back) spirit glue, impalpable patches, and guilty tape (guaranteed to adhere to your conscience indefinitely); a very long list, obviously by Neville, this one entitled *Things the Master Wishes to Dispose of As Embarrassing or Compromising Which Have Been Retained Nevertheless Due to Neville's Absent-Mindedness*; a pair of boxer shorts with a monogrammed *LM*, a little box labeled *Nose Wax*, and a golden dog bone. "Oh, this is interesting!" Erin held up a leather-bound book: *SECRET DIARY, VOLUME III* was imprinted on the front cover, and below that was written *Luigi* with what looked like a black marker. The book was held shut by a locking clasp.

"What good does that do us?" asked Clara. "Who wants to know about Luigi anyway?" She lost interest and started off to explore whatever it was the kids were riding on.

"Besides, it's locked up, we can't read it," added Cane.

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Erin. He turned the book around: a small silver key, strung with a round tag labeled in block letters *KEY TO DIARY, DON'T FORGET!*, was taped on the back. He peeled the key off, unlocked the book, and opened a page in the middle marked by a small card: "June 27. Professor walks right into my bedroom, can you believe it? And just when

Daisy and I were getting friendly, it's a shame, now she went home. He's goin' on about needing more space, I told him he can have the whole shack but that's not enough, he wants it bigger. Then he tells me if I won't give him space he'll just go talk to Mario. Everybody always wants to go to Mario. Mario, Mario, Mario, always Mario! It makes me so mad! I make the shack bigger, I told him, that's all, bigger than Mario ever would, bigger than Mario's whole house, only don't tell me about my brother any more! It's okay, I'm not upset. Really.' Oh, and look, the bookmark is Luigi's library card! I don't see how Mr. Saturn is going to use it though -- he doesn't look much like Luigi."

"Enough, enough!" interrupted Nicholas. "We were looking for a phone, right?" Erin went back to work. Next came an inflatable travel pillow, a jar with something disgustingly alien floating inside, a plastic bag filled with loose chess pieces, and finally --"Aha!" -- what was obviously a sort of mobile phone. The handset flipped open to reveal a sizable glowing screen -- apparently the unit was activated when opened -- and a number of large and small buttons. Erin had played with his mother's cellphone often enough to have some feel for how to navigate the menus; it took a couple of tries to get to the address book section.

"Let's see...Nook Financial Services-- we don't need a loan... Skolar, that's interesting ... Peach's Castle Library, don't want to call them -- Fourside University School of Plumbing and Sanitation, hm, didn't know he had a degree -- Saturn Snowboarding School , no snow around here -- yeah, here we are. Emergency Road Service."

"Oh, really," said Nicholas skeptically. "I hate to bring this up but I don't see any roads in the vicinity," he continued, pointing towards the blue ocean extending to the cloudy horizon in all directions.

Erin shrugged and pressed the button on the phone, ignoring Nicholas. After a brief set of beeping noises, he heard a click and: "*You have reached Conker's Emergency Road Service, where we are constantly dedicated to your satisfaction. Yes, at Conker's pleasing our customers isn't just a style, it's a way of life. We are devoted to serving your every road service need. For us, every day is a good customer day! Our staff of trained drivers and mechanics can guarantee tip-top performance for your vehicle no matter what its operating principles. We offer our no-hassle guarantee with every service order...*" Erin rolled his eyes as the greeting droned on.

"What's going on? Did you reach anyone? Did you leave a message?" asked Brian.

Erin held the phone up for her to listen: "...*We have eight repair centers, so there's one conveniently located near you. We offer free transportation to and from our repair center and complimentary chocolate lon lon milk while you wait...*" "I would leave a message if they would shut up!"

Finally there was a telltale beep. Erin started talking immediately: "Hi, my name is Erin. We fell out of the ghost train and we're stuck here on the Pokefloats. We're on a -- a -- hey, Nicholas! What are we on?"

"Clara, isn't this a squirtle?" shouted Nicholas. Clara was partway down the sloping edge of the thing by now.

"Yep, that's it," she shouted back.

Erin nodded and finished: "On the back of a giant squirtle. We have lots of coins so we can pay the bill if you'll pick us up. The phone number here is -- um --" Unfortunately there didn't seem to be any indication of the number, if any, assigned to the phone. "Well, just call Information for Mister Saturn. Come soon! Thanks."

"Okay, I guess now we just wait for somebody to come by," said Nicholas. He looked at his watch: it was a bit after 11. "I'm hungry! Hey, everybody, I think we might as well eat our lunches now." He reached into his backpack and pulled out a little container about the size of a juice packet; tugging the tag on the top caused it to go *poof!* and expand into a little self-contained, self-heating lunch tray, with an entree pocket, side dishes, a roll, a drink cup, and dessert. "I wish my Mom could give me these for school!" said Nicholas as he took a bite out of a maple-flavored rice ball.

It didn't take long for the enticing aromas to induce the rest of the group to follow Nicholas' example; even Clara, having found little of interest, bounced back to sit by Tennyson. Each of the kids had received a lunch pack as a parting gift from Bonapa T., except of course for Cane. "Hold on, what's the deal?" he complained. "I want something to eat! Didn't somebody pick one of those up for me?"

"You weren't coming, don't you remember?" replied Nicholas.

"I believe your words were, 'I'm not leaving until I find that parrot!'," added Brian, between mouthfulls of cocoo salad.

"I think it was, 'I'm *sure* not leaving until I find that parrot'," added Erin. He was eating his dessert first: chocolate mint flowers.

"Right, sorry," said Brian.

"I can't believe this!" said Cane. "What a bunch of friends. Stuck on a balloon in the middle of nowhere with nothing to eat!"

"Oh, come on, we can share some," said Clara. "Here, have a carrot." She held out a largish orange stick with some white dip on it.

"Carrot! You trying to poison me? I HATE vegetables. Too many nutrition things in 'em. Oh, forget it, you guys are no help." Cane opened his pack and started tossing stuff onto the balloon surface, looking for food: out came a sock, a used tube of toothpaste, an empty pillow cover, a book light, and a stuffed frog. It was obvious that he had hurriedly grabbed whatever was at hand in the bedroom that morning in his haste to depart. "Not one edible thing. Man. Oh, yeah." He turned to Brian, holding a large device with a glowing dial. "Hey, Brian, I grabbed this clock radio thing on the way out, but I can't figure out how to set the time and it runs backwards, it like says it's almost noon now and that's not right, could you figure it out?" He tossed the object into Brian's soup.

"Geeze, Cane, could you be a little careful!" said Clara.

"Careful and Cane?" said Erin. "What in our history together would cause you to utter those words close to one another?"

Brian, having cleaned the splattered soup off his glasses, picked up the putative radio for an inspection. He jumped up onto his feet, spilling his lunch all over the place (including on Nicholas, who was sitting on his left) and bouncing higher into the air than he had intended. "Cane, this is a time bomb! And it's about to go off!"

"Oh," said Cane, grabbing it back from Brian. "Oh, okay, we'll just get rid of it, it wasn't mine anyway." He tossed it back over his head. It landed some distance away, bounced off the fabric surface and then rolled to a stop partway down the sloping edge.

Clara was on her feet (lunch tray carefully set to one side) in a flash. "How long do I have, Brian?" she said.

Brian counted in his head. "About three seconds."

"Oh." She reconsidered her options and flattened herself on the balloon, dragging Tennyson down with her.

**BOOOOOOOM!!!** (boom) (boom) (boom) The time bomb exploded, the sound resonating in a disconcerting fashion off the interior walls of the Pokefloat. As the reverberations faded away they were replaced by a similarly disturbing hissing noise. It was immediately apparent that the balloon was sinking and, worse still, turning over. Nicholas tossed his lunch aside: "Grab your stuff and follow me!" he shouted as he headed up the suddenly sloping surface.

"It's not my fault! It's not my fault!" said Cane, still planted face down in the cloth.

Clara dragged him up by the collar. "Shut up and move!" In a moment the kids formed a straggling, struggling line trying to keep up with Nicholas as he bounded towards the new top of the float.

In moments it became apparent that the quest was hopeless: the balloon was turning faster than the kids could run and losing altitude as well. "What now?" asked Clara.

"I'm not sure," said Nicholas, looking around desperately.

"Unknown!" said Erin.

"That's what I said!" said Nicholas.

"No, Unknown!" Erin repeated. He bounced up, grabbed Nicholas by the hair, and turned his head. Just below them on the increasingly sloped surface was a large floating Unown Pokemon.

"Oh, I get it," said Nicholas. "Very funny." He gauged their position: the squirtle was dropping rapidly and would fall below the other float momentarily. "Okay, looks like this is our only chance. Jump!" and he did.

Erin followed, shouting "No taxation without representation!"

"What?" said Tennyson, as he grabbed Brian and gave him a shove.

"Come on, didn't you read chapter 7? It was last weeks assignment," said Brian, flying towards the Unown.

"Jump!" said Cane. He grabbed onto the fabric. "That's crazy!" Clara stuck her foot on his chest and shoved, projecting him into space, before grabbing Tennyson's hand and jumping herself.

*Ploooooomph! Ploomph! Ploomph!* The surface of the Unown was harder than the squirtle: the kids bounced awkwardly as they struck but managed to hang on. They watched the deflating squirtle rapidly sink below them. It fell increasingly behind the other floats, and after some moments they could see the water far below glisten momentarily as the now-shapeless fabric struck the surface. The former creature bubbled and twisted as it slowly sank beneath the waves. "Good call, Nicholas," said Tennyson. "Now what?"

"Oh oh," replied Nicholas. The Unown was much smaller than the squirtle had been, and it seemed the weight of the kids was enough to unbalance it: it was beginning to tilt to one side.

"Seems like we've been here before," said Erin. "Who's writing this script? Can't they come up with a new peril?"

"Clara, do you think we could balance this thing if we move around right?" said Nicholas, casting about for some way to save them.

"We can try," she said, getting to her feet, but it was apparent within moments that even that course of action was doomed to failure. The balloon tilted more and more rapidly as their offset weight moved away from the top.

"Forget it!" shouted Nicholas. "Get down and hang on!" The surface was soft enough that it was possible to grasp a handful and obtain some sort of grip. Within moments the kids were dangling by their hands as the balloon continued to rotate, slowing as they passed the lowest point and then rocking back and forth.

"Hey, Brian, didn't you hang from the parallel bars for two minutes last month?" asked Tennyson conversationally.

"Yeah, I was second place in the Gymathon," said Brian. "Clara won the girls."

"Oh," said Nicholas. "I was last. My hands are tired already. Ouch."

"If you took your backpack off you'd be lighter," said Tennyson, trying to be helpful. He had come in fifth in monkey bars.

"How do I take my pack off without letting go?" said Nicholas, skeptically.

"You could do it one hand at a time," replied Tennyson.

"Hmm, one hand? I can barely hold myself up with two," said Nicholas. "I think we're really stuck now. Any ideas, Clara? Anyone?"

In reply, Erin began to sing:  
*Take me out to the fall game!*  
*Take me out where it's loud!*  
*After a while everything turns black.*  
*I know my body will never be back!*  
*And so even if I survive this, I'll be in serious pain,*  
*for it's jump, scream, splat and your dead*  
*at the old fall game!*

"In other circumstances," said Tennyson, "I might clap, but you know it's a little difficult at the moment to free up my hands."

"I'm just about at the point where I might as well," said Nicholas.

"You guys are crazy, my hands hurt, I'm gonna die!!!" screamed Cane. He tried to shake his body for emphasis. This was a mistake, as it caused him to lose his grip altogether and drop. There was a surprisingly brief "Aaaaaaa!" followed by a *plonk!* and an unfamiliar voice:

"Conker's Emergency Road Service; remember, we're constantly dedicated to your satisfaction. We're always ready to listen to your problems, so don't hesitate to--"

"Great," interrupted Nicholas, "are you below me, 'cause I can't hold much longer!"

"Just a second... there we go, you should be able to jump," said the voice.

"Ain't got no jump left, I'm just dropping," said Nicholas, and he did. He landed with a loud BANG! onto an empty metal cylinder about the size of a trash can, twisting his ankle but otherwise coming out unharmed. The cylinder was sitting in a blue open boat as long as the school bus, crowded with boxes, crates, tools, and piles of tires, wheels, and less recognizable parts. At the controls sat a gorilla wearing a blue uniform with red stripes and a beret marked with the outline of a squirrel. He waved at Nicholas and maneuvered the boat closer to the bottom of the Unown. Cane was still lying where he had fallen, on the deck between two canisters marked "FUEL CELLS". "Oh, my lumbago," he complained, "whatever that is."

"Are you okay?" said Clara, squeezing her head between her shoulders to look down.

"Ow! Yeah, yeah, I'm fine, I guess," replied Nicholas. He surveyed the situation, making sure that all the kids were safely over the boat, and then said, "Okay, everybody drop on my call. Be careful of where you land! Clara! Tennyson! Brian! Erin!" One after another the kids fell into the boat. Clara came down hard on some crates, and Brian dropped awkwardly on a deck chair, but Erin landed on fairly soft piles of rope and was unscathed. "Get off me!" complained Cane, although Tennyson had actually only half landed on top of him. Nicholas limped over to help the other kids up and then turned to the driver. "Geeze, thanks a lot, whoever you are! That was fantastic! You sure know how to show up on time!"

"Just another part of our friendly service! Remember, at Conker's we're dedicated to your every road service need. We have eight repair centers so there's one conveniently--"

"Okay, okay, we know that," said Erin. "Aren't you Donkey Kong?"

"Oh, wow, yeah, how did you know?" replied DK.

"Donkey Kong?" exclaimed Clara. "You're famous. What are you doing driving a tow truck? I mean, boat?"

The big gorilla looked away sheepishly. "Oh, well, ya' see I needed some money for -- well, Candy wants to go to Club Sixty-Four and I promised I would take her and it's really expensive -- and I asked Cranky but he wouldn't give me any money, he just complained, and -- well, so I got this job. Oh, but I'm not supposed to talk about that while I'm on duty! Where's your vehicle? I'll hook it up and we can head back to the shop."

"Oh, we don't have one of our own," explained Nicholas. "We were riding the Ghost Train, you know, the Jack O' Lantern 1, but then the fungibility generator or whatever failed, and it dropped us right out onto the Pokefloats."

"Again? Those guys are terrible. That's the third time this month. They ought to have a big sign at the train stations, it's just not right--" DK stopped himself suddenly in mid-tirade. "Oh, man, I can't tow anything, how'm I gonna' make any money?"

"Towing makes you money?" asked Nicholas.

"Yeah, you see, we normally pick you up for free 'cause then we tow your car or plane or whatever to the shop and fix it, and I get a ten percent commission for anything that I bring in, which is really good 'cause you can bet that I don't get much for my wages. Of course there isn't much to do either until somebody calls, and I do spend most of the time sitting around sending messages to Candy even though she hardly ever writes back, and stuff. Anyway what am I gonna' do here?"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," interjected Cane. "Do you have anything to eat on this stupid flying whatever?"

"Yeah, yeah, I got lotsa stuff in case I get hungry when I'm out on a long boring patrol or something." The gorilla knuckle-walked over to a neat pile of boxes near the stern. "Let's see, I've

got baked bananas, fried bananas, steamed bananas, plantain porridge, banana nut bread with banana frosting, condensed bananas, banana chips, banana dip, bananas with sour cream, bananas with yogurt, frozen bananas, candied bananas, chocolate covered bananas, bananas jubilee, banana cream pie, banana ice cream, banana milk shakes, and Manyabanamanania -- that's a frozen banana smoothie with a banana peel boost."

"Banana ice cream? That's disgusting! Great, I'll take it, I'm starved! " Cane pulled out a handful of coins and tossed them to DK. "Is that enough?"

"Oh, gee, thanks, I mean this is my stuff, it's not for sale," DK said, embarrassed.

"Fine, you drive a hard bargain," said Cane, emptying his pockets to produce another 10 coins (as well as a beat-up looking toothbrush and a 'borrowed' box of Madame Clairvoyant's Prescient Playing Cards).

"No, no, you don't understand--" began DK. Clara interrupted: "Look, just take the coins, he doesn't need them as much as you do."

DK reluctantly stuffed the currency in his breast pocket and dug into the pile. While Cane chowed down on yellow ice cream in yellow cones, he made his way to the prow. "Well, I guess we ought to get back," he said. "Oh, wait a minute, maybe I should take you guys where you were going since you lost your car, I mean train, I mean you didn't have one, you know. Where were you going, anyway?"

"Corneria," answered Nicholas.

"Where in Corneria?" asked DK. "That's a big place."

"We're looking for Starfox. Where was it Tails said we were supposed to go? Ummm... Symbols? Samples?"

"That's not right, we're supposed to go to a submarine!" said Cane between mouthfuls of ice cream.

"Submarine?" replied Nicholas, puzzled. "I thought Fox only flew R-wings. Besides, it's supposed to be some sort of music place or something like that, for grownups."

"Cymballine's," said Brian. "It's a jazz club."

"That's right!" said Nicholas. "Geeze, Brian, how do you always know this stuff?"

"You just have to listen," said Brian.

"Cymballine's?!" said DK. "Whoah! That place makes Club 64 look cheap. I've heard that just looking in the door costs 50 coins. I don't even know anybody who got in. Wow. Hey, do you think you could talk to Fox about getting me some tickets or something there? Candy would be so impressed if I could get her into Cymballine's!"

"Gee, I don't know, we really don't--" began Nicholas.

"Of course we can try," interrupted Clara. "If you can take us there."

"Yeah, yeah, I know where it is. Well, let's see if I can get this show on the road." DK swung himself effortlessly up onto a stay and traversed the rigging above the kids' heads to the front of the boat. He leaned over the prow and spoke to the figurehead, a wooden dragon with glowing jeweled eyes: "Hey, dragman, you think you're up for a little trip?"

The sculpture's eye squinted towards him and a puff of flame came from the mouth. "About time you asked. You never talk to me any more. You're just like everyone else. You think you can ignore me because I'm blue. Would you ignore the spirit of Red Dragon for twenty minutes to get a bunch of spoiled kids ice cream? I think not. I can't believe I'm stuck in this lame job with a lame dork for a driver rescuing lame punk kids." The head stopped for a moment and sighed, expelling a puff of smoke from its nostrils. "What did I do to be so blue and blue?" it hummed to itself.

DK rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, come on, we goin' or what?"

"Okay, gimme a stogie, I got maybe twenny thirty minutes left in me."

DK reached down to a little storage cabinet under the bulwarks and pulled out the biggest cigar the kids had ever seen: it was almost as long as Brian was tall. From a sheath mounted next to the foremast he pulled a longsword and, laying the smoke down on an air vent, with one *thwack* cut off the end. DK clambered out onto the rigging and stuffed the huge stogie into the sculpture's mouth.

"Hey, what's this, whatta about a light?" said the statue dragon, mouth distorted to speak past the cigar.

"Light? Light! Light it yourself! Oh, fine, I'll help." DK reached downwards, pulled the cigar out and held the end near the dragon's face. The dragon wheezed as it inhaled, and then a huge tongue of fire shot out from his mouth; the cigar burst into flame for a foot along its length. "Too much! too much!" cried DK as he damped the flames down with his cap. A brief struggle sufficed to return the now-smoldering ellipsoid to the dragon, who took a deep drag and then puffed out a burst of acrid smoke. Below their feet the kids could hear a rumbling and whining as whatever drove the boat came to life.

"Okay, let's go," DK said to himself as he swung across the ropes back to his little steering deck. The wheel and controls lay on a raised platform just forward of the stern, about where the steering board would have been found on a true Viking craft. Nicholas, taken with curiosity, limped and struggled across the crowded deck to join DK as the gorilla gracefully swung across a boom and down to his stool. Where the steersman sat, along with the little wheel, was some sort of compass in a transparent glass cover, a display screen with lines on it that looked like a navigation aid, a series of buttons and levers, and a telephone with a computer keyboard. A little rack held a hand towel emblazoned PROPERTY OF HOTEL DELFINO. Next to the controls was an ashtray

that looked rather disconcertingly like a human hand, holding a placard saying REVENGE behind it. In the front was a tall transparent windscreen protecting the steersman from the wind of the passage; dangling down on strings from the top edge were trinkets of various size and description: a tiny glass palm tree, a toy cannon of some sort, several little gorilla dolls, and a plastic tiger.

"Hey, that reminds me!" Nicholas said to himself. Nicholas pulled off his backpack and reached inside, taking out a little unopened brightly-colored box. "Hey, DK, I got this back at the gift shop. It's a Tiger Bobble Head toy, you could put it on your windshield or something. Would you like it?"

"A Tiger Bobble head! Wow, that's fantastic! I *love* Tiger bobble-heads. Yes, yes, yes. How much do you want for it?"

"No, that's okay, you rescued us, take it." Nicholas shoved the box into DK's hands, feeling a certain warm satisfaction in being able to do something for their benefactor.

The gorilla awkwardly removed the shrink wrap and ripped it open: a little tiger doll bobbed its head as if sickened by the motion of the ship, as the craft began to move away from the Unown. "This is great!" said DK. "I can't believe I got a Tiger Bobble Head!" He turned away from the controls and opened a cabinet mounted on the partition behind him. Looking in, Nicholas could see rows and rows of Tiger Bobble-head toys, identical as far as he could tell to the new one in DK's hand, filling the voluminous storage compartment. "Nope, no room there... let's see." Two more cabinets and a drawer later DK found a spot not already occupied with a bobble toy and stowed the precious addition safely away. Nicholas felt somewhat less pleased with himself than before but DK's appreciation was obviously genuine if inexplicable.

Meanwhile near the prow Erin had gotten the top off a huge plastic drum, perched precariously on a smaller wooden shipping container tucked behind a toolbox on wheels, which turned out to be full of some sort of wonderfully sticky sand. While the other kids were checking their packs and items for damage, he had started to construct an elaborate castle, using a pair of flat-bladed chisels from the second big drawer as shovels. Tennyson, who also retained an unashamed enjoyment of sandboxes, joined in, building a road to the castle and decorating it with rods from the carton marked *DIPSTICKS* next to the toolbox.

Brian accidentally discovered still another cabinet full of Tiger Bobble-head toys, which he began using to decorate the entry to the castle. "See, these are like the lions of Nebuchadnezzar at the gates of Babylon," he said.

"The what where?" asked Tennyson.

"That's not right," said Erin, ladling sand onto a corner tower. "It's the Assyrians who liked giant lions by the gates, and besides those are tigers. I've got it! This is the castle of the Legendary First Emperor Shin Shwang!"

"That's Qin Shi Huang," said Brian. "And he didn't use tigers, he used warriors made of clay." He climbed into the impromptu sandbox. "See, he would make a pit like this, and bury the warriors with their weapons to protect him in the afterlife." He started digging a little trench, and

carefully laying tigers in rows within."

"Really?" said Tennyson, kneeling over the trench. "This is cool. Like Egyptian mummy stuff. Did he have rows of tigers like that? Could you go see them?"

"No, no, I'm just using the tigers 'cause I don't have action figures," said Brian. "They were terra-cotta warriors, that means clay, they look just like they were alive. There's a museum in Shin Xiang or something like that."

Cane joined in, dripping the last of his ice cream onto the sand. "You guys have it all wrong. This is the castle of Doctor Caliglierio, evil mad scientist who turns teenagers into flying saucer aliens! Like my sister! See, lemme show you." He tried to climb into the drum to join the other boys, but this was too much weight on one side: the boys jumped out as the drum flipped off its unstable pedestal, spewing sand onto the deck.

DK looked up from the nav computer. "What are you guys doing? You're getting sand in my tigers! Oh, man, I can't believe this."

"Wait, wait, no problem, I can clean this up," interrupted Cane. He had grabbed the straps of a unit somewhat resembling a Poltergust and was mounting it on his back.

"What are you doing now?" said DK.

"Relax, I know everything about these, I'm an expert," said Cane. "I cleaned up the whole mansion with one of these." Clara looked away in disgust.

DK finally clued: "No, wait a minute, that's not a vacuum cleaner, that's a fl--!" but it was too late. Cane, directing what he thought was a carpet cleaning tool at the sandpile, had pushed a button on the panel. Two powerful blasts of water burst from nozzles on the bottom of the FLUDD jetpack, soaking Erin, Brian, and Tennyson, and propelling Cane straight upward head-first into the beak of a Psyduck, drifting at the lee of the pack of Pokefloats. When the boys were able shake the water from their eyes, they could see Cane's feet dangling from the bottom of the beak; from his shouts it was apparent that his head was sticking out of the top.

"Can we get him out?" asked Nicholas of Donkey Kong.

"Seems to me this is not a new question," Clara remarked.

"Oh, man, look at my castle!" said Erin. The water jets had sloshed sand all over the foredeck, leaving only a misshapen pile where his building had been.

"Now, don't you worry, at Conker's we always have the tool for the job, and a full staff of factory-certified technicians to get your vehicle back on the road," said DK, remembering his customer relations training. He opened a storage door and withdrew a long-shafted gun-like tool. "A Longshot ought to take care of this. Let's see..." He rested the shaft on an air vent and took aim: a rope with a hook at the end flew out of the Longshot, narrowly missed Cane's dangling foot, and continued past the Psyduck to latch onto the leg of a Kabuto drifting aimlessly beyond the

Psyduck. DK tossed the Longshot off the boat in disgust: it soared downwards in a long arc and back up, swinging pendulum-like a few times until it dangled below the giant floating insect. "We really only get two days of training," he whispered to Nicholas. "I have no idea how to aim this thing right."

A second shot with a new tool produced a similar result, though in this case the hook hit nothing at all and could be reeled back in. Clara stepped forward from where she had been brushing sand off of Tennyson's back and took the tool from DK's hands. "Let me do this. Geeze."

"Wait a minute, you're going to rescue Cane?" said Nicholas.

"Well, it would be better if his head was showing instead of his feet," replied Clara as she balanced the ungainly launcher against a bulwark, exhaled, and slowly squeezed the trigger.

*FWOOOSH!* The hook flew out, struck Cane on the knee and wrapped itself around his feet. "Owwww!" came the distant sound of Cane's complaint. "That huuurrrts!" Clara gave a perhaps unnecessarily hard tug to make sure the hook was secure, prompting another round of complaints from around the beak of the Psyduck, and then handed the Longshot back to DK.

"So now we reel him in and cut him out, right?" she asked.

"Well, not exactly," said DK, lashing the Longshot onto a deck winch with a length of line. "We're supposed to have a balloon cutter but I didn't have room for it on the boat after I put in the freezer for the banana ice cream, so I left it behind at the shop." He glanced conspiratorially at Nicholas and Clara. "You won't tell my boss, will you?"

Clara patted him on the shoulder. "Of course not. What do we do now?"

"Well, we'll have to tow him back to the repair station. It's not that far, maybe an hour since we can't go too fast dragging a Pokefloat behind us."

"You won't get into trouble showing up at the shop like this, will you?" asked Clara.

"No, I'm supposed to be towing something back to the shop. Looks better this way."

"Okay, thanks," said Nicholas. "You know, we really are pretty good at cleaning up, we'll get all this sand back in the drum." He walked forward to collect the other boys and start picking up, then stopped and turned back to DK. "Hey, would you still be able to get us to Corneria?" he said, hesitantly.

"No problem, dudes! I mean, sir. At Conker's the customer's wish is our command! We're always ready with a helpful hitch and a tow rope."

"I would say it's more of a foot rope," said Tennyson, looking up.

"Get me outta here!" cried Cane, as the Spirit of Blue Dragon began to move again,

sculptured figurehead contentedly puffing away at the half-burned stogie, dragging the ungainly Psyduck by its beak. The rising smoke from the cigar swirled around the Pokefloat. "And stop poisoning me!" yelled Cane between coughs.

The boys plied towels and collected sand, while Clara pumped the gorilla for the details of his bumpy relationship with Candy. As they slowly left the fleet of Pokefloats behind, Erin poured the water from a carton of banana nut muffins onto the remnants of his sand castle and sang off key:

*By the waters  
the waters  
of Babylon  
We lay down and wept  
and wept  
for Qin Shi Huang.  
We have soaked  
our history book so  
we've forgotten  
who he was.*

- - - - -  
"But you guys already paid me a lot, you don't have to do that," said Donkey Kong, as the DeLorean hover car settled down next to a big yellow sign that said *LOADING ZONE: 2 MINUTE PARKING*.

"Don't be ridiculous!" said Clara. "I'm sure we'll be able to get tickets for you, it's the least we can do." The gull-wing doors popped open and she jumped out onto the sidewalk. She turned back to DK and shouted over the noise of the traffic and talk: "Are you sure you're not going to get into trouble for borrowing your boss' car?"

"No way! I'll just use the time reverser and be back a minute after we left." He looked up into the traffic zipping by overhead. "I just have to find room to get this thing up to 58 mph... should be okay. See ya!"

"Oh, how will we send the tickets?" asked Clara.

"Just call me at the shop!" said DK, pointing at Erin, who was slinging Mr. Saturn's bag across his shoulder as he clambered out.

"Okay, bye! Thanks again!" Clara waved, a bit wistfully, as the doors hissed closed and the hover car merged into the stream of vehicles zipping restlessly above their heads. They watched as the silvery vehicle accelerated into the fast lane and then disappeared in a bright flash. "What a nice guy," she said to herself as she turned back to the others. "I mean, gorilla. Oh, well."

Just then there was a *pzzzooooopp!* sound and the DeLorean reappeared next to the curb. DK was inside, looking puzzled. Clara walked back over to the window. "I thought you were

going back to the shop?"

"So did I. Let's see, six-three-one-two, set accumulator, adjust to peak field strength...hmm, it should have worked. I'll try again. See you!" The sleek car rose once again into the sky and hummed away, this time proceeding a bit more slowly and perhaps methodically. The boys had already lost interest, but Clara watched until another flash signaled DK's departure.

Nicholas was busy organizing the unruly troupe; when he was sure that everyone's packs and supplies were accounted for and Cane had temporarily stopped complaining, he turned around to try to figure out where they were.

It was early evening in Corneria. Skyscrapers towered above their heads, windows glowing yellow and orange. The hover cars were turning on their headlights, making long lines of flying blue-white twinkles through the air. There was an elegance about the architecture, a thematic dignity, quite distinct from the garish visual polyphony of Fourside. It was a place of wealth that placed value on beauty. But when Nicholas turned his eyes back to ground level, it was still pretty intimidating for a bunch of kids on their own: all manner of creatures walked, ran, and leapt from place to place, conversing loudly in unfamiliar tongues. Signs and advertisements, some readable and some mysterious, glittered above the windows of shops, restaurants, theaters, and recreational centers. As the cars flew above pedestrians, there was no need to make provision for their travel on the surface, which was thus a complex of walking areas at various levels, with elegant stairways, ladders, and climbing structures suggestive of a giant playground leading from one level to another. There were no recognizable streets or street signs.

Just as Nicholas' stomach began to drop with the thought that they were lost again, an elegant cursive sign, glowing bright green against a deep blue background, caught his eye: *Cymballine's*. Below the script was a model of a saucer-shaped craft embedded in the end of a horn or trumpet of some sort, with a huge stick or tree trunk sticking more or less through the center; a little purple-and-yellow figure seemed to be sticking its head (or something vaguely resembling one) out of a saucer window and shaking a fist (same remark) at the obstacle. The sign hung unsupported in the air above a small building some distance below where the kids stood; two absurdly tall creatures with fox ears and long snouts flanked a pair of doors upholstered in red leather. Smaller windows at the side revealed a dimly lit, crowded room. Nicholas could see silhouettes of figures seated before a stage illuminated by colored spotlights.

"Okay, come on!" he said to the kids. "Keep together, it would be pretty easy to get lost here." No one seemed to be noticing them, but even so Nicholas felt uneasy. Maybe it was just the crowds and the tall buildings, but he decided to be extra careful. "Weapons out just in case." He pulled his beamsword out of his backpack but left the blade retracted. Tennyson made sure he could reach the handle of his bat in the pack. Cane got his ray gun out and made to shoot passersby.

"I'll go first," said Nicholas. "Then Brian, Erin, Tennyson, Cane; Clara will watch our backs."

"Okay but I'm not holding Clara's hand like a kindergarten kid!" said Cane.

"Fine, I will," said Tennyson, switching places. Clara smiled briefly but refused the offer; she wanted both hands free for her Superscope. She shared Nicholas' apprehension; something didn't feel right, though she couldn't identify what was bothering her.

The ragged line of kids started down the first stairway. It wasn't easy to keep together as they were jostled by the crowds. A group of five bird-like bipeds singing very loudly to music from a floating spheroid without obvious support or guidance strode heedlessly right through the kids, almost knocking Brian over. Along the walkway doorways led into dimly lit halls; in some of the doors poorly-dressed, rough-edged creatures held little bowls up to passersby: "Alms for the gameless!" said a fox with one ear. "Could you spare a coin for a hungry SuperNES veteran?" this from a dog-like creature who looked as if it had once been brilliantly colored but then was left out in the sun. "Hey, kid, whatcha want for dat homerun bat, I give ya coins you betcha!" said a bird with one patched eye. By the time they reached the entrance they were all a bit jumpy, but no worse for the trip.

Up close, the two doorwardens were even more improbably tall and quite intimidating. Nicholas was afraid of dogs anyway, and these foxes gave the appearance of combining human cunning and canine viciousness. He repeated his mother's line about "It never hurts to ask" several times to himself but his feet seemed reluctant to go. After a couple of minutes the kids were growing impatient and somewhat anxious, when suddenly one of the foxes noticed the kids loitering by the door. It growled and reached menacingly into its bulky leather jacket. "What do you want?" it said in a raspy grumble. "Get outta here, punks."

At that point Nicholas was ready to retreat and regroup, but Clara strode forwards to address the guard. "We're here to see Fox McCloud," she said. "Tails sent us."

That was enough to make the guard pause. Nicholas noticed that the other fox, rather than participating in the discussion, stepped out past the clump of kids to maintain a clear view of the approaches to the club, and continued to scan the crowds. *That's military discipline. Wow. What kind of place is this?* he wondered to himself.

"You sure about this? Does Fox know you're coming?" inquired the warden, skeptical if not outright suspicious.

"No, I guess he doesn't." Clara looked momentarily stumped.

By this time it seemed likely that the fox guards weren't going to bite. Nicholas gathered up his courage to opine in the discussion: "But he knows us! Tell him it's the kids he fought with at Fourside. He'll remember." Nicholas rubbed his thigh. "I sure do."

The guard spoke into a microphone attached to his coat, and then listened intently, his eyes scanning the crowds all the while. "Okay, right," he mumbled. He turned back to Nicholas and Clara. "Yeah, you can go in. It's twenty coins per person cover charge, that's 'cause your kids, half-price night. Pay at the door inside. Lemme see your weapons first." The fox nodded nonchalantly at the bat, ray gun, and Superscope, but was taken aback by the beam sword. "That's a beauty. Who'd you kill for that, punk?"

Nicholas was offended enough to forget to be afraid. "Princess Peach *gave* me that sword! Go and ask her."

"All right, all right, I -- *get down!*" The tall fox shoved Nicholas to the ground and crouched behind him, firing a tiny gun that made an implausibly loud *BOOM* with each shot. The other guard opened fire less than a second later. Clara had dragged Tennyson and Brian to the ground immediately, and Erin and Cane had ducked into the doorway. People and creatures all around fled for cover as a pack of wolf-like bipeds wearing some sort of armor charged towards the door. One of the wolves carried a banner saying simply "I IV V". The wolves' armor seemed to be no match for the weapons of the fox guards: one after another they fell, punctured or even dismembered, while their return fire zinged and spat but did no damage other than to punch out a stripe of Erin's hair. The attack was over almost before the kids had time to be frightened. Within a minute a crew of weasel-like creatures had driven some sort of street cleaner machine from a nearby alley to the scene and were slurping up the remains.

"What the heck was that?" exclaimed Nicholas.

"Ain't nothin'," rasped the other guard. "Just a gang of Fundamentalist Punk Rockers. They hate us because we modulate."

"You what?" said Cane. "Sounds gross."

"Change keys," said Tennyson. "Musical stuff."

"Right, kid," said the guard. "Don't pay them no mind, though, just one-key trash is all. Go ahead in." The guard pulled one of the big leather-covered doors open and shoved the kids through.

A kid-sized creature that looked for all the world like a giant frog sat on a large pedestal inside the door. It was hard to tell what the frog was looking at, but it grunted and then said in a surprisingly lovely feminine voice, "Welcome to Cymballine's. Here you'll find matchless melodies and versatile verse to transport your thoughts while we lighten your purse. Children are half price on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Twenty coins each please." Nicholas and Tennyson pushed Brian to the front. Brian pulled some coins out of his backpack and looked around puzzled for a repository in which to deposit them, when the frog's tongue leapt out suddenly and wrapped itself around the coins, removing them from his grasp; with another *sluuuooooop* they were deposited in a drawer against the opposite wall. "Thank you, you still owe ninety coins." Brian, better prepared this time, counted the remaining fee and placed the coins in his open palm. *sluuuooooop!* "That was 130 coins, did you wish the excess to be considered as a gratuity?"

"A what?" said Brian, nonplussed.

"That's a tip," whispered Tennyson.

"Oh, right, sure," said Brian.

"Thank you for your consideration," said the frog hostess. She tucked the extra coin into a

pocket on the pedestal. "A poetry reading is in progress in the performance space; please refrain from discharging your weapons unnecessarily during the recitation. You will find Fox McCloud at table 11, to the left of the bar at the lower level. Rest rooms, recharging stations, and dueling alcoves are at the back, two coins for fifteen minutes. Ayumi will be your waitress, remember to consume our exquisitely expensive food copiously and please don't forget to tip generously lest she launch into song and we don't want that, do we? Enjoy your stay."

Tennyson seemed uncomfortable. "Are you sure kids are allowed in there? It's a bar, you know. I never get to go into one of those at home."

"Yeah, Tennyson's right, we're not supposed to go in there," said Brian.

Nicholas sensed the same awkwardness, but he also hated having Clara rescue him at the doorway, and was feeling unusually assertive in compensation. He addressed the frog: "Is there any problem with kids being there? Against any rule?"

"Not since you've paid, young Master."

"Are we supposed to drink alcoholic beverages too?" said Clara. She was never permitted this at home, though her father drank a glass of wine with dinner most nights, and found the thought enticing if a bit frightening.

"At Cymballine's we have every beverage and narcotic known to gamespace. From fruit juice to freebase. You don't need to indulge in anything but you are free to indulge in everything. Your waitress can provide suggestions if you like."

"Oh. Wow. I'm not sure I'm ready for that," she said, half to herself.

Her hesitation gave Nicholas a chance to take back leadership of the group. He thanked the frog and led the way through the short hallway into the nightclub. The spotlight stage stood out over the dimly lit tables and the crowded bar. At the back of the room, illuminated by the reflected glare of the spots, Clara noticed a reptilian-like creature in leather armor looking up to meet her eye: it spat out its drink in surprise and immediately rose and walked out of the back of the room. On the platform was a huge, frightening-looking scaled creature with vicious claws and a long whiplike tail, wearing a helmet and glistening yellow-and-blue armor, holding a little microphone in one hand, reciting as he paced back and forth across the stage:

*...I walked in the field of dreams  
craven to an opiate desire*

*I gave my feathers to the awakening flowers  
I broke my fangs asunder  
And cast my lot with a falling star  
With cruel and shocking thunder*

*Who now repairs the hearts that once pulsed  
Warm in the morning dew?*

*Who now remembers joy reduced  
To bones in a petroglyph glue?*

The raptor lowered the microphone and slowly bowed his head. Enthusiastic if scattered applause broke out through the room.

"What the heck was that?" Cane asked Tennyson as they descended the short staircase into the performance space, speaking loudly even for Cane in order to be heard over the noise of conversation and bustling waiters and waitresses. "I didn't understand a word."

"It's poetry, you dufus," said Tennyson. "It doesn't, like, mean something literally. It's images and stuff. Pictures in your head." Erin, forgetting the other kids, wandered towards the stage to listen.

"Come on, come on, let's get to Fox," shouted Nicholas. The bar was crowded with creatures talking, shouting, playing games, eating and drinking, as well as waiters and waitresses bustling back and forth with trays of new and used refreshments. The occupants, if not hostile, were self-absorbed and not particularly polite. It wasn't easy for the kids to make their way across the room to where Nicholas had gotten a glance of Fox from the entry.

As he bumped into a rushing ceratopsian, he heard Clara apologize behind him: "Oh, sorry, sir." He turned to see what was going on: standing at a tall table was a human-sized squirrel-like creature, its bushy tail taller than Nicholas: it was like a giant stuffed animal, absolutely adorable. Its face was dripping with some sort of liquid -- apparently Clara's accidental impact had knocked the creature's drink over. "Oh, my, let me find you a napkin," Clara added as she noticed the results of the encounter.

"Sorry's not enough, you little slut!" rasped the squirrel in a gravelly bark quite at odds with its endearing appearance.

The creature's tablemate, a cat-lady with multicolored whiskers, tried to intervene: "Conker's having a bad fur day, dear, you'd best--"

The squirrel turned viciously on her. "You stay out of this. If you were a dog you'd be a bitch." Clara had started to back away, thinking about her Superscope but not really wanting to start a fight in a bar (what would her father think of that?). The squirrel jumped at her and grabbed her shirt in its claw, pulling her off the ground. She kicked at it ineffectually. "Maybe I should *rip your head off* and feed you to my goats. If I hadn't eaten them already."

Nicholas was getting worried, but once again tried to think of how Mr. Classen handled kids having an argument: "Okay, calm down, Mr. -uh - Conker, we can buy you another drink, I'm sure. Brian, coins?"

Instead of being mollified, the squirrel was further enraged: "Another drink? You brain-dead ignoramus, she *drenched my fur*." The squirrel flicked its huge tail at Nicholas, knocking him over, and started to drag Clara away.

Nicholas wasn't thinking too clearly at this point, but he certainly wasn't going to allow one of the kids to be taken away; after all, having one of the group get captured was always the start of all the problems in movies. He shouted, "That's enough! You just wait a minute, Mister!" and reached into his backpack for his beamsword hilt. He meant only to wave it around threateningly, but the guard got stuck in the zipper, and in his rush to brandish the weapon he pulled harder. Suddenly the guard came loose, and at the same moment his index finger engaged the button that extended the blade as he lost his balance. The squirrel angrily threw Clara to one side and turned to berate Nicholas: this was an unfortunate decision, for it caused Conker's neck and a portion of his shoulder to intersect a chord of the arc described by the blade as Nicholas unintentionally spun to his right. The beamsword made nothing of the obstacle: the decapitated squirrel stood for a moment headless and then fell backwards into the tall table, spewing blood onto the cat-lady as she tried to escape.

Nicholas stood shocked for a moment: the noise of the bar had vanished suddenly as all eyes were turned towards him. *Now I'm in trouble* he thought to himself, but it also occurred to him that no one else knew he hadn't intended to attack the squirrel. Mr. Saturn's voice seemed to whisper at his side, *what they don't know -- can be used to your advantage*. He looked around in what he hoped was his meanest glare and said in as low a voice as he could manage, "Anybody else wanna try?"

Clara was shaking and partly covered in blood, but she recovered herself almost instantly, and in a moment stood at Nicholas' back, Superscope at the ready. Tennyson was slower on the uptake, but in a moment he was flanking the little group with his bat held prominently on his shoulder. Clara jabbed Cane with the butt of her weapon several times before he realized what she wanted and drew his ray gun.

"I didn't know you could do that," Clara whispered to Nicholas.

"I didn't either," Nicholas whispered back. "What now?"

Brian came to the rescue. He calmly strode in front of Nicholas' glowing blade as if nothing had happened and said to the crowd, "We'd like to talk to Fox McCloud. Over there, at table 11. If you don't mind?"

In two seconds a wide path was cleared through the crowd to Fox's table: Nicholas could see the familiar canine flirting with a very attractive female fox. Brian whispered to Nicholas: "You can put the blade away now." He reached into his pack and withdrew a handful of coins, pushing them into Nicholas' fist; "Give them to the bartender."

Nicholas tossed the coins up onto the bar as he walked by in his best imitation of confidence: "Sorry about the mess."

The barkeep, an iguanodon in a striped apron, picked the coins up and stuffed them in the register drawer. "He had it comin'. Here, kid, have his Margarita. On the house." He reached over and handed Nicholas a tall glass containing something that looked like a smoothie but smelled more dangerous. Nicholas figured it would be uncool to refuse the drink; he took it in his left hand while continuing to wave the beamsword hilt meaningfully with his right. After one lick his tongue

was tingling; after two, he was beginning to think that Conker wasn't such an accident; after the third, he was ready to take on the whole bar at once. Fortunately, Brian tugged on his sleeve and pushed him down the steps towards Fox and Crystal.

While this was happening the dinosaur on stage returned to his recitation. Erin was planted in a comfortable recliner just out of the glare of the spots, sipping sparkling cider from an elegant glass flagon; he hadn't even noticed the disturbance.

*...Ah we could share  
long conversations in the twilight  
And we could soar  
long peregrinations in the high light  
And we could bore  
long penetrations lit with my light  
Until reality intervened  
with its wry light  
And made us long for our dreamscape  
no more.*

"Urrrgh!" said Fox. "I liked him better when he was trying to kill me."

"Brain-dead male!" replied the female fox. "Listen to the imagery! The calculated ambiguity of expression. Use your imagination!" McCloud licked a little chocolate mouse from a tray on the table and appeared unimpressed. "Oh, forget it, all you think about is eating."

"Come on, Crystal honey, that's not all I think about," said Fox, nuzzling the back of her neck with his long nose.

She pushed him away with a smile. "Not here, everyone's watching."

"Sounds exciting," replied Fox, looking up. "Is there a mirror on the ceiling?"

Crystal slapped his muzzle with her cap. "You are impossible! I'm going to talk to Scales."

Fox hesitated for a moment, trying to decide whether to follow Crystal or finish his drink. Brian took advantage of the momentary lapse in the conversation to step forward. "Excuse me, Mr. McCloud, I wonder if we could have a moment of your time?"

Fox looked over, distracted, and then nodded. "Oh, yeah, I remember you guys. Coupla' days ago at Fourside. You ain't still hangin' with Ness and his crowd, I hope." He looked at Nicholas. "That was nice swordsmanship takin' out Conker, kid. You been practicing? Looked a lot better than the last time we met."

Nicholas tried to decide what to say, but before he could decide whether to be honest or cagey, Brian jumped back in: "We've learned quite a lot in the last few days, sir. Among other things, we've learned that we need to get to Ark as soon as we can. Your friend Tails suggested that you might be able to help us out. We can make it worth your while."

Fox leaned back in his chair, suddenly more attentive, sizing Brian up. "Ark. Hmmm. Asteroid field. Security robots. Guns on the towers and surface. Don't have good maps or plans. You're right, you'll need to make it worth my while all right. What do you want to go to Ark for anyway?"

Clara helped Nicholas to take a seat next to Fox and sat down in what had been Crystal's chair. Tennyson sat on the table, legs dangling, next to Clara, while Cane picked up a menu and tried to figure out what grilled filet of coelacanth in lemon caper sauce would taste like.

"We're trying to get home," said Nicholas.

"You live on Ark?" replied Fox, puzzled.

"No, it's that reality thing," said Nicholas. He was still floating slightly from the drink, which he had ill-advisedly continued to consume.

"You mean reality TV? Are we on a game show?" Fox looked around for a camera. "I thought they went broke."

"Only the quiz show underwriters," said Brian, kicking Nicholas under the table. "We have reason to believe that there are people at Ark who can help us return to our homes. In the real world, you know."

"Yeah, we were born!" said Cane, looking up from the menu. "Years ago. We're not made like you guys out of somebody's computer program -- we came from a real hospital! I even saw one. The babies come out on little green tables with plastic boxes and lights. Ugly, I can't believe I started like that. But then I ate a lot. Speaking of which, is there a waiter around here?" He waved at a passing bulldog-man laden with two large trays of snacks, who ignored him.

"That's all very interesting, I guess, or would be if I cared," said Fox. "What people? Who are they working for? What skeletons are they storing in the closets?"

"What business is it of yours?" said Clara. "We'll pay you, that's all you need to know."

Tennyson picked up the glass in front of Clara, simultaneously moving between her and Fox. "It looks like you've run dry here. What were you drinking, friend?"

"I don't know if I'm your friend -- yet -- but I like your style," said Fox, leaning back in his chair. "Brandy Alexander, double, crushed ice."

Tennyson somehow managed to make eye contact with a bustling feline on his first try, frustrating Cane who had still not been able to gain the attention of a server. The cat lady was dressed in a scanty version of the green-striped blue Cymbaline's uniform; she leaned over and sniffed Tennyson's cheek. "Suhiro was right, you are a cute one!" she said. Then she did a little courtesy and licked Tennyson's cheekbone. "I'm Ayumi, remember me in your will, dear. Are you ready to order?" Clara's eyes were flashing unfelt lightning into Tennyson's back, while Ayumi

rubbed her side against Tennyson's and purred loudly.

"A refill on the Brandy for Fox. I'd like a lemonade. Nicholas, did you want another margarita?"

Nicholas' eyes were crossing. He shook his head vehemently, but stopped immediately as it made the room spin.

"Hey, what about me?" interjected Cane. "I'm hungry! thirsty too!"

Ayumi paid him no attention. Tennyson stroked her under the ears and asked over his shoulder: "What did you want, Cane? Quick."

"Gee I don't know, I don't recognize anything. Gimme whatever the house specialty is and a Coke."

"Are you sure you want Coke?" asked Brian. "Remember what the frog at the door said."

"What are you talking about? You're still worried about that science fair experiment?" Cane had done his third-grade science fair experiment on the baby teeth he had saved as they came out, demonstrating graphically that little remained of one after a week in a bottle of Coca-Cola. He had regarded this as proof of his hypothesis that a Coke should always be drunk with french fries, inspiring a memorably incomprehensible lecture from Miss Anders on the meaning of the term *non sequitur*.

"Never mind, just get a lemonade, trust me," replied Brian.

"You'd better do as he says," added Fox. "Speaking of which, dinner does sound good. Get me a ornithomimus flank cut with the sweet peppers and worms, and a bowl of archeopteryx stew."

"So two lemonades, ornithomimus, stew, special, brandy," Tennyson repeated to the apparently insensible Ayumi. "Brian? Clara?" Clara glared back; Ayumi's eyes were closed as Tennyson rubbed the fur on the back of her neck. Brian shook his head. "Okay, that's it."

Ayumi popped up, suddenly distant and businesslike: "Drinks will be right up, sir. About ten minutes on the meals." She bustled off into the crowd, but was as good as her word: within two minutes she returned, beverages tucked into the pockets of a sort of tray arrangement balanced on her head. She distributed the refreshments and rubbed against Tennyson's legs and purred loudly while she spoke: "That's two hundred twenty coins, sweetie, minus twenty coins special discount for heavy petting." Tennyson looked at Brian, who fished out the money and handed it to him. Following Ayumi's glance, Tennyson deposited the coins into the little apron-pocket Ayumi wore between her un-feline breasts. Ayumi ran her raspy tongue over Tennyson's hand and then popped back up again. Clara pictured what Ayumi would look like after a beamsword treatment.

With what Brian assumed were the necessary preliminaries taken care of, he went back to work on Fox: "Clara was right. We can pay you generously for your services."

"That really wasn't the point," said Fox, leaning back in his chair lapping the creamy drink up with long tongue. "Just at the moment we're doing pretty well, don't really need the money. I wouldn't be spending weeknights at Cymballine's if I was broke, now, would I?"

"Gee, if you can always get somebody to pay like this, it's not that expensive," said Nicholas, honestly puzzled and now definitely alcoholically fogged. Brian kicked him under the table and turned back to Fox. "Would you stop that?" mumbled Nicholas.

"Besides, you haven't answered my question. Who are we trying to help? Who are we up against? Basically, why should I risk my neck for a few coins? I'm doing fine the way I am. Or would be if Crystal would get her cute little behind back here and you kids would go to bed, it must be late."

"That's a heck of way to behave when we're buying you drinks and dinner!" flashed Clara. "We worked hard for those coins you're guzzling away."

"Actually," said Brian, "those are from the treasure chest stash, so technically we didn't earn them, we stole them."

"Oh, come on," said Clara. "I thought Luigi straightened you out."

"I agreed it was impractical to return the money. It's not the same."

Tennyson tried to defuse the dispute and get the conversation back to Fox. "Look, Mr. McCloud, I think we ought to let you know what's at stake here."

At that moment Ayumi returned with a sizzling platter containing a slab of steaming aromatic meat surrounded by little things that looked like earthworms, still wriggling. "You said it, mate!" said Fox, digging into the dinosaur remains.

"Come on, let's get serious," said Tennyson.

"That's my line!" said Nicholas.

"Look, Fox, this affects everybody," Tennyson continued, refusing be distracted. "You need to understand what's going on at Ark. It's not just a space station, it's --"

Brian interrupted: "Tennyson, Nicholas, come here for a minute. Excuse us, Mr. McCloud?"

"Sure thing, kids," said Fox, applying himself to the stew bowl Ayumi had just placed on the table. "Ayumi, love, another brandy and a schnapps on the side?" Ayumi hissed at the canine but nodded, while she laid Cane's plate in front of him: it was a tiny bit of root looking like a deflated carrot with a single leaf on top, lying in a puddle of brown sauce the consistency of mud.

"That's three hundred eleven, dear," Ayumi said to Tennyson.

"Didn't we already pay?" asked Brian.

"That was for the drinks, darling," she replied. "I can run a tab if you like." Brian wasn't sure what that meant but it sounded like it would make her go away for a moment so he nodded.

Brian pulled Nicholas and Tennyson off to a vacant little round table a few paces away. "I don't think we should just go around letting Fox know about everything. What if he's not such a good guy?"

"What do you mean by that?" asked Tennyson.

"I mean, what if he's working for the other side?"

"Well, if he's working for the other side, he already knows what they're up to, it doesn't make any difference if we tell him," said Tennyson.

"Don't you get it?" retorted Brian. "If he knows we know, he'd have to get rid of us!"

"What, right here in the middle of the restaurant?"

"Of course, right here in the middle of the restaurant? Did you see any police coming to pick up Nicholas?"

"Police?" said Nicholas, looking around. "Where? What did I do?"

"What did you do? You killed a giant squirrel! And nobody cares. They rewarded you. Do you think that would happen at home?"

"I don't know what goes on in bars at home," said Nicholas. "We're not allowed to go in. You know that. Besides there aren't any giant squirrels in the bars at home."

"How do you know?" said Tennyson. "You can't go in."

"Oh yeah, right," said Nicholas. By now he had forgotten about the police.

"The point is, nobody cared about what Nicholas did. Nobody would care if Fox wiped us all out, as long as he pays for the cleanup. We can't just tell him everything!"

"But we already know that he knows that we know," said Tennyson.

"But he doesn't know that!" said Brian. "Besides, what if he knows that we know he knows we know? We might try to get rid of him, or at least he would think we might, so he'd want to do us in first!"

"If he already knows, and he already knows that we know, and that we know he knows, what difference does it make if we tell him?" said Tennyson.

"I'm confused," said Nicholas.

While the three kids were huddled together, Cane stared at the plate. "That's the special? Especially pathetic, that's what it is. I wanted food!"

Fox took a moment off his stew slurping. "You ought to give it a chance, it is really good, and remember I'm a carnivore who says it."

Cane reluctantly picked up a fork and took a slice off. "Holy cow! You're right. This is great stuff!" He went to work with a vengeance on the defenseless root. "So, anyway, you're right about this Ark stuff, it's really dangerous and stupid, I wasn't gonna' go at all except that those Whirlindas were after me. I never get to do what I want in the real world, why should the game worlds be any different? We'll just be doing what somebody else tells us, it's just like some other bunch of grownups. I say, one bunch of nerds is like another one! Let 'em take over the reality modifier or whatever it is -- they'll just mess everything up like the grownups always do anyway!"

"Oh, really, you're probably right," said Fox, pricking up his ears over the food. "What's that modifier thing?"

"Oh, we heard about that when we were listening in on Professor Gadd, he was talking to Zelda, you know, but we were all there, I practically ate Clairvoya before she gave me my fortune! I didn't understand it anyway. So he said he was messing with the real world and Zelda just had a cow, like he wasn't allowed to pee if she didn't approve of it. Princesses are all like that. A guy can't even burp around these people."

"Yeah, you're right about that, son."

"So Brian figured out it was that they have this thing at Ark that you can change the real world with, or maybe it was Mister Saturn? And then you could make your game world better. Like they could get all the kids to like the Stupid Ghost Show Game best, then I'd be famous!"

"So you agree we shouldn't just up and tell him everything?" said Brian. Tennyson reluctantly nodded his head.

"I don't see the point of worrying about when to tell him," said Nicholas, who had tuned out on the Brian-Tennyson argument. "Cane just did."

"WHAT!" said Brian. "Cane!!"

"What? You want some of this, no way! Get your own!"

"Now you've done it," said Brian.

"Done what?" replied Cane.

“Never mind, it’s okay,” said Tennyson. “See, I told you we might as well let him in on everything.”

“Not that way! Now we’re stuck. What if he doesn’t help us? I don’t like him.”

“You just don’t like dogs.”

“He’s a fox. Besides you’re the one that’s scared of dogs.”

“I am not. Any more. Hardly.”

Nicholas summoned an effort to stop his head from spinning and broke in: “You guys, it really doesn’t matter what we meant to do. Let’s just try trusting Fox. If he’s gonna get us we’re doomed anyway. Oh, my head. I don’t know if it’s so bad to be doomed. At least my head wouldn’t feel so awful.”

Brian reluctantly nodded agreement. Tennyson said, “So now you understand more or less as much as we do. If they can control the real world at Ark, then we care because it’s our home that’s in danger. But who knows what they’ll do to the game worlds, too? I think it affects everyone.”

“Fine, so it’s a danger to me, maybe. What am I accomplishing by getting you to Ark? Are you going to take it over? If so, how can I trust you? Or are you just going to go home and leave us to whatever fate we encounter?”

Tennyson was nonplussed; he hadn’t thought that far ahead. “I guess you’re right; we were just hoping to get home. We don’t even really quite know how to arrange that. Maybe if we destroy the equipment we’ll never get home. I guess we just counted on hiring you. We weren’t looking out for anyone but ourselves, were we?”

“Look out for number two, that’s what I say!” Cane interrupted. “Oh, I mean number one! That’s me! Even though I hardly ever actually get number 1 in anything. I sure don’t care what happens to some dumb fox in a game if I get home. Unless I can use him to get Melissa off my back. Can I get another of those special root things?” (the last to Ayumi as she paced past the table, ignoring him).

“I guess that’s what you were all doing,” said Fox. “Refill, honey?” to Ayumi. The fur on her back rose, but Tennyson nodded and rubbed her belly fur until she relented.

“We were not,” said Clara. “We had a simple straightforward deal. We’ll pay you and you’ll get us there. Don’t try to make us look dishonest. You’re the one who’s doing sneaky stuff.”

“Clara,” Tennyson said. “We’re trying to convince him to help us, why are you insulting him?”

“I don’t trust him. Why do you think they call them foxes?”

“You’re just mad at me because of the waitress.”

“You’re right I’m mad at you. You can’t take your eyes off her. To say nothing of your hands.”

“But I like cats.”

“Not cats like that!”

“I think you two are little young to be having this kind of spat,” said Fox. “You leave that to Crystal and me. I haven’t said no yet. I haven’t decided. It’s an intriguing problem. You know I can’t do this myself; we’ll need every hand if we’re going to fight our way into Ark, and Slippy and Peppy can’t come.”

“Why not?” asked Nicholas. “I wanted to meet them.”

“Oh, you can meet them,” replied Fox. “But they’re not allowed to do mercenary work. Insurance rider. So that means you’ll have to fight. You guys were, to be blunt, pretty pathetic back last time I watched you. Although I have to say Nicholas, at least, showed me something back there a minute ago. But you’d better lay off the sauce, kid, it doesn’t agree with you.” Fox stared at them with calculating eyes. “I’d need to teach at least three of you to fly an Arwing properly, the others have to be gunners. Then we have to break through the surface channels -- that needs some real skill with a handgun as well as agility and smarts. Takes guts and training. We’d need, oh, three four months to get you up to snuff, if you’ve got what it takes to begin with.”

“We haven’t got three months,” said Brian. “We’ve got three weeks.”

“You said that, why? What’s the deal?”

“Well, we have reason to believe that somebody is going to attack the place in -- um -- 25 days. If we don’t get in before that we’ll get caught in the battle, and who knows if the station will survive the assault? We figured the only safe way is to be there first.”

“Who’s attacking? who did you hear this from?”

“Well, we think it’s a Star Spirit or a Star Kid, and maybe soldiers from Bowser, and they said also Giovanni.”

Fox laughed. “Star Spirits. Academics. No danger from those jerks, they’ll spend six months arguing about the whichness of the who before they do anything. Bowser’s a posturing puff ball. Giovanni an infantile egomaniac. I can deal with these guys. No need to hurry. Anyone else?”

“Well, I think they were negotiating with the Tom Nooks.”

“The Nooks?! Holy crap. That is scary! Nooks in control of anything is a crisis.

Conformity out the wazoo. Hurts my head even thinking about it. If you're sure about this I'm your man."

"Erin found this from a Star Kid," said Tennyson. "He said -- the Star Kid, that is -- they were negotiating with the Nook guild. Course maybe he was just claiming that to try to get Bowser to help him."

"Geeze, don't say that!" said Brian. "You're trying to convince him."

"Kids, you're not up to lying at that level yet. Just stick with the truth. So it's not certain that the Nooks would end up in control. I don't know. Thanks, Ayumi. (*slurrrp*) I think I'll have to reflect on this over another brandy. Who's Erin? Oh, yeah, I remember, the kid hanging with Saturn. Where is he?"

"Oh, he's over there by the stage," said Tennyson. "Talking with a fox."

"Talking with a fox -- he's talking with Crystal! What's goin' on over there?" Crystal, Erin, and Scales were engaged in some sort of heated discussion. Crystal's arm was around Erin's shoulders and her head next to his. It looked compromising.

"Oh, don't worry, he's sworn off pretty girls," said Brian.

"Maybe not foxes, though," said Tennyson.

Just then Erin and Crystal got up and started to make their way through the crowded bar towards the other kids. "Oh, Fox, you have to meet this boy. He and his friends are so brave! They volunteered to come to the game worlds, knowing they might never get back, just to rescue a dromeosaur in distress. And they were all world-famous game experts in the real world, and had perfect grades in school -- why, they even have a motto, 'one for all and all for one', isn't that touching and original all at once?"

Tennyson's jaw dropped; Clara was left blankly staring at Erin. Brian put his head in his hands. Nicholas said, "Wait a minute, I thought my head hurt."

Cane looked up from his second special: "About time somebody realized how important we are. Who are you, anyway? I'm Cane, you know. Everybody back home knows me!"

"Crystal, honey, it's a little more complicated than that," interrupted Fox. "Here, sit down, have a drink. Tennyson, get a vodka gimlet for my foxy lady, will ya?"

"Don't try to distract me, Fox McCloud! You're trying to weasel out of anything that involves work, I know you. If you don't fly these children to Ark to rescue that dinosaur I'll never talk to you again, I swear it!"

"Calm down, darling, of course I'll help them, did you doubt it?"

Brian dragged Erin off to the side. "What the heck is this stuff about a dromeosaur? How

could we rescue a dromeosaur? there aren't any in the games!"

"Are so," said Erin. "I whacked one with my staff when I was fighting with Trixie." Crystal pricked up her ears and went to Erin's defense, leaving Clara and Fox together at the other end of the table.

"So you're going to help just because she said so, is that it?" said Clara.

"Did I say that?" replied Fox, sipping his drink. "Oh, yeah, I did. I was just calming her down, she gets excited sometimes. High-strung."

"So you're just making it up. I thought so. I don't know why we're talking to you anyway."

Fox laughed. "You don't like me, do you, little girl? What was your name again?"

"Clara. You're right. I don't like you and I don't trust you."

"Do you want to know why you feel that way?"

"What? I know why I don't trust you. It's cause you lie!"

"No, that's not it. Course I do play fast and loose with the truth when it serves my purposes. So do you. You don't like me because I'm like you. Determined. Self-centered. Unscrupulous. Undiplomatic. Amoral, you know what that is?"

"I'm not like that at all. I'm not unscru- unscrapaless. You know what I mean!"

"Really? All right. I'll call it realistic. You're not impressed with Fox McCloud, we know that. You don't believe these kids can make it to Ark, with or without my help. You're worried about where the next meal will come from. You're worried about spending too much money tonight. You're worried that you gave your heart prematurely to a fellow whose attention can wander. What you need is your own stash and I can fix it. You see that twit -- I mean, that wolf over there?" He pointed to a canine two tables down, engaged in a heated discussion with an armed human. "Does some work for Andross. A friend of Conker's, you know, the squirrel that was hassling you until the other kid -- uh, Nicholas -- until Nicholas saved you. I don't much like him. I'll give you two thousand coins if you take him out right now."

"What?" said Clara.

Brian thought she was responding to Erin's remarks: "See, even Clara can't believe that. You can't just make these things up!"

"What do you mean?" replied Erin. "How did we get here in the first place?"

Fox recaptured Clara's attention with a glance. "Two thousand coins. And I'll help out your friends, though you don't really care about that. Here, take it, payment up front." Fox reached into his pouch and counted out twenty large striped coins marked *100*. He pushed them across the table

to Clara.

"But -- the Superscope just hurts, it can't kill anybody."

"After you train with me you won't be caught dead exposing that much ignorance of your weaponry." Fox pointed at the Superscope, resting against the table. "Gimme that for a second. See here?" Fox popped a little panel on the side of the weapon, exposing a dial. "All the way to the right, little angel. Fatal. One shot on the mark and it's over. You need to charge it up after that, of course."

Clara's eyes widened, absorbing the implications. "So you're saying I should challenge this wolf to a duel?"

"Oh, I never said that. I'd just whack him from here if I were you. Wait until you get a clear look. You're supposed to be a good shot, right? Two thousand coins. Take it or leave it. This is what it's going to take to survive on your own here in the game worlds. Think about it." Fox handed her back the Superscope and sipped his brandy, waiting.

Brian was trying to prevent Tennyson from correcting Crystal's misunderstandings; the discussion was growing tense. Clara paid it no heed. "Fine. Fine." Clara scooped the coins into her backpack and put the sighting scope to her eye. Fox watched. Nothing happened for a moment. She started to drop the gun and then returned it to firing position. Erin said "That's not true, why, don't you remember when I trashed ten dodongos in one shot, just like this!" and tossed the ashtray he was holding in his right hand like a frisbee, right into Clara's back. There was a buzzing pop, almost lost in the crowded noisy room. Two tables away the wolf slumped forward onto his drink. His table mate slammed down its glass in disgust and walked away. A waitress passing by, another cat lady, hissed at the wolf, and then signaled to the bouncer. Clara dropped the Superscope onto the table and sat motionless, her eyes fixated on nothing.

Just then there was a burst of applause from the audience. Nicholas looked up at the stage to see a familiar little round figure waddle towards a short stool in the center: it was Mr. Saturn! Or at least, it looked just like the Mr. Saturn he knew. In the shadowed back of the stage a bird-like creature sat down at a keyboard of some sort. The room grew silent as a microphone floated over to the little guy:

"Thank you, thank you, great to be back here at Cymballine's. Everyone's having a good time, I'm sure, because you're certainly paying for one. After my friend the General's descent into the depths of palindromic profundity, I figured we'd better indulge in some lighter entertainment. Here's one I wrote back on Pop Star, it's called *Parrot*"

The keyboardist played a short introduction, way too chromatic for the kids' taste in music, and Mr. Saturn launched into song. He had the remarkable ability to sing three-part harmonies by himself. The song went like this:

*Parrot  
don't pair it with ferret  
that's a pair with no merit*

*enter the cube*

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*it's like mixing haiku and bowling*

*Parrot  
it means imitation  
a thieves' adaptation  
to powers beyond controlling*

*No need to think  
    you can copy  
No need to skate  
    on the brink  
        of creation  
No need to wait  
    for a late  
        inspiration  
No hope of breeding  
    a great  
        innovation*

*Smart bird  
just to speak what is spoken  
don't fix what ain't broken  
    it's a token  
of what you might learn  
    if you had awoken  
A fire of creation  
    that you could be stokin'  
to fry that bright plumage  
    and beak that was pokin'  
in places that you weren't aware of  
in faces that you weren't scared of  
in pretensions that you could make fun of  
in defenses that you could be one of*

*Take the old cloth and wear it  
Hide your dream and don't bare it  
Live a lie and don't tear it  
    scare it  
Parrot.*

The microphone dropped to the floor. Applause and an assortment of whoops, barks, and squawks filled the room. Mr. Saturn did a sort of a bow and then waddled off the stage, disappearing into the crowd. Within a minute he popped into view again next to the presumably dead wolf: he stopped for a moment, inspecting the creature. Clara's heart pounded as he met her eyes. Without a word Mr. Saturn made his way towards table 11.

"Saturn!" said Fox. "Still writing in parallel fifths, don't you ever learn anything new?"

*enter the cube*

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Better than Scales, at least."

"Those who can't shall be critics," Mr. Saturn replied. "Great Fox ready to go? These kids need to start first thing tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I remember!" said Fox. "Slippy and Peppy are greasin' the gears while we speak. I'm thinkin' that'll take us through Arwing training, then I'll need to find a good ground site for the rest."

"Wait a minute!" Brian exclaimed. "Do you mean you already talked with Mister Saturn about us?"

"Sure, this morning," said Fox.

"I got everything arranged during my sauna," said Mr. Saturn. "Didn't he tell you?"

"Yeah, how was the train ride, Mister Saturn?" asked Erin.

"No, no, shut up for a minute," said Brian. He was looking at Fox with his hands on his hips, about as frightening as Brian could manage (which wasn't very). "You mean to tell me that you already agreed to train us this morning? We've spent I don't know how many coins on food and booze --"

"That's nine hundred fifty-four, dear, did you want to pay it off now?" said Ayumi, who had stopped at the table to take up the empty glasses and rub against Tennyson.

"Nine hundred coins!" Brian shouted.

"More than that," said Tennyson. "Remember you paid some before she started running the tab." He was stroking Ayumi under her ears.

"Son, look at it as a quick course in practical diplomacy, and cheap at the price," said Fox. "Or ask Clara for a refund, if you prefer. Up to you."

"Clara?" said Brian, puzzled. Tennyson glanced at her; Clara stared at the stage and refused to meet his eye.

Mr. Saturn stepped in. "Children, children, you forget we're still amply equipped for any occasion." A familiar little square of plastic floated from his pocket over to Ayumi. "Miyazaki Ayumi-sama, would you be so kind as to record the charge against this account?" The waitress scanned the card through a little box dangling from her belt, nuzzled Tennyson again, and bounced back up to finish clearing the tables. "My friends, we'd best make our way to the Great Fox before the punk rockers regroup; it's such a pain sneaking out under fire."

Fox nodded. "Slippy should be bringing her into the plaza in about 5 minutes." He emptied the last of his creamy refreshment and stood. "Crystal, honey, you gonna' come? Slippy and Peppy will get these kids rolling, I don't really have any need to get up early tomorrow. You

can share the suite again."

"I certainly will come, to keep an eye on you!" Crystal said. "And I'll stay in two-sixty if you please. You can snore by your lonesome, dear." But she allowed Fox to take her arm.

Cane whipped out his ray gun and ostentatiously led the way towards the front door; memory of Nicholas' beam sword was still fresh enough for the crowd to make way for the children. At a hint from Mr. Saturn, Brian tipped the doorwardens twenty coins each as they made their way out. With Fix and Crystal leading the kids quickly arrived back almost where they had started two hours before. Looking up, they could see a sizable craft descending slowly through the skyscrapers, stopping repeatedly to wait for the flying traffic to clear before dropping to the next level.

Suddenly there was a loud *pop!* from behind them. Nicholas tried to spin around and fell down: he was still feeling the effects of the alcoholic smoothy. Clara picked her Superscope up, then remembered that she had used up its charge. She turned to see Donkey Kong sticking his head out of the DeLorean, looking puzzled and frustrated. Relieved, she walked over to talk with him.

"I thought you were going backwards," she said. "This is two hours later."

"It is? What is going on here?" The gorilla scratched his head with his foot. "I read the manual twice this time. I'm sure I got everything set right."

"Maybe you should let Brian help," Clara suggested. "He's really good with that kind of thing. Reading manuals, I mean." Brian stuck his head in the passenger window; DK handed him a small leather-bound book. Soon Brian and DK were immersed in discussion over the DeLorean control panel, while Fox simultaneously scanned the crowd and nibbled Crystal's ears.

"Oh, okay, I got it," said Brian finally. "It's this little thing here."

"What, that? A dash?" said DK.

"No, no, it's a minus sign. It means this number is negative."

"Is what-a-tive?"

"It's less than zero. Minus. You have to put in a negative number to go backwards in time."

"I don't get it," said DK. "Numbers count things. How can there be numbers less than zero? How can you count things that aren't there?"

"Trust me," said Brian. "It's really simple. Just stick this little minus sign -- it's right here on the keyboard -- put that in before the delta time setting."

"Okay, okay, right, I got it, I can handle this," said DK, waving Brian out of the car. The gorilla punched numbers in as he hurriedly gunned the engine. "I gotta get back, or I'm gonna be in

real trouble! Thanks, Brian! Thanks, Clara! See ya!"

"Oh, geeze, I promised DK tickets to Cymballine's," said Clara. "Can we go back to get something for him?" she said to Fox. "Do we have time?"

"But you can just change the delta number!" shouted Brian to DK. "You got all the time in the--" he cried as the the silver sports car leapt back into the air and streaked away -- "world," he finished quietly.

Just then a pack of banner-bearing canines rushed into view from a stairway and headed straight towards the kids. "Well, we don't," said Fox. The Great Fox had settled onto a clear grassy spot. "Looks like they're onto you, Saturn ol' buddy," said Fox. "I told you not to use augmented fourths, did you listen?" The animate Fox turned to the kids as blaster bolts whistled by his head. "Training starts now, and your first order is to get your butts onto that ship before I kick them! Move it, move it, move it!"

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