

Enter the Cube

by Nicholas and Daniel Dobkin
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Chapter 5: Copter, Copter, Overhead, I Choose Fourside for my Bed

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

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

“Oh, you can just jump,” said Clara.

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

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

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

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

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

Erin immediately grabbed an imaginary microphone: “In this cornah, weighing in at three hundred fifty three and two thirds avoir du poises: Tennyson Kipling Byron the Poetic Pounder! Floating like a butterfree, stinging like a beedrill! And in this cornah, weighing in

at way too much, Cane Whacker, the Poke In Your Eye with a Sharp Stick of which you've heard so much! Twenty-seven rounds of chaos and confusion -- brought to you by Peach's Pears, Royalty in Arrears!"

"That's not my last name," said Cane. "You ARE a dufus," said Clara.

"Erin, that's not helping. Come on, what are we going to do?" said Nicholas.

"Why don't we ask Mr. Saturn how he got up there?" said Erin.

"Oh. Good point," replied Nicholas. "Hey, Mr. Saturn! What's the trick?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Destination, please.”

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

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

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

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

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

“WHAT?” shouted Erin.

“HOW LONG IS THE FLIGHT?”

“GOT ME. ASK MISTER SATURN!”

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

“WHAT?”

“HOW?”

“WHAT?”

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

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

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

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

EARTHBOUND
POKEMON STADIUM
KANTO
JOHTO
MUSHROOM KINGDOM
ICE CLIMBER MOUNTAINS
DK ISLES
HYRULE
MARIO’S ATHLETIC CENTER
PIKMIN PLANET
GOLDWOOD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What?!” said Nicholas.

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

PAULACOPTER PILOTING SERVICES
WE FLY BY PSI

“Geez, you’re right, there’s no pilot!” said Nicholas.

“I’m not getting back in that copter,” said Cane, back from the bathroom.

“She got us this far,” said Clara.

“Who?” asked Tennyson.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Now what?" said Clara.

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

"Say hey," said the figure as it strode out into the light. It was indeed a kid: he was wearing a red hat with the visor turned to one side, blue-and-yellow striped shirt, and blue shorts. He was flicking a yo-yo around in the air with his right hand, so fast it was difficult to

see in the flat lighting. In his left hand he carried a baseball bat. “It’s about time you showed up.”

“Excuse me?” said Nicholas. “Showed up for what?”

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

“I’ve got a Home Run Bat,” said Tennyson.

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

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

“To whip Fox! Obviously. Is that a Superscope?”

“Yeah,” said Clara hesitantly. “So what?”

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

“Falco? I thought you said Fox. What’s going on?”

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

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

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

“Oh, I get it, you’re Ness!” said Erin.

“Duh,” said Ness. “Duh,” repeated Mr. Saturn in a perfect imitation of Ness’ curious accent.

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

“It is certainly not,” said Ness, as unperturbed, continued to fling his yo-yo rapidly in complex intertwined trajectories. “To be a UFO, an object must both be flying and unidentified, and while this object is most certainly flying, it is not at all mysterious, as it is transportation provided by the despicable alien scum, in which we will most certainly find that Fox and his opponents have secreted themselves.”

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

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

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

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

“Home? Did you grow up in Fourside?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Falco bowed to Fox and pulled a stubby pistol similar to that borne by his adversary from a holster. The two turned their backs to each other and took several paces, then pivoting

back face to face. The purple-cloaked swordsman -- Roy? -- raised his glistening sword near vertical to signal that the combatants should take a ready position.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The battle between Fox and Ness was the most intense and evenly matched, as Fox snapped off shots that narrowly missed while dodging the flying yo-yo and equally quick

baseball bat, while Ness advanced relentlessly to try to keep the fight in close quarters where Fox's pistol was vulnerable.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Come on, I want to show you something," said Mr. Saturn, and led Erin straight across the roof, paying no attention to the combatants' flying swords, yo-yo's, bats, and blaster bolts. Erin followed a step behind, and they continued their conversation: "The economy here was

traditionally based on the export of manufactured goods (pow! swoop!) to less advanced worlds, like Hyrule or the Mushroom Kingdom (woosh!).”

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

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

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

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

“Yes, the past can hurt,” replied Roy, advancing again with a swinging arc of the sword across his body, “but as I see it, you can either run from the past,” as they once again clinched

together hilt-to-hilt, “or -- learn from it!”, trying the same cut again. Nicholas wasn’t able to parry but had the sense to twist as he retreated, keeping his injured leg barely out of reach of the flying sword tip.

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

“That’s the University, the one with the yellow cone top,” said Mr. Saturn. They had reached the opposite corner of the roof, near the brick building. “You can imagine what it was like for a kid like me from a small town, who had never seen more than a one-room school. (pskow! foosh!) But then there wasn’t much chance they would let a long-nose in the building, much less admit one as a student.”

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

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

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

Tennyson was more cunning this time, swinging the bat low to force Marth off his feet and then launching a vicious home run stroke -- but the wily warrior was still too quick. He did a somersault in the air and spun around on landing, sinking a spinning rounhouse kick into Tennyson’s solar plexus: “I don’t need to try, I succeed!” said Marth as his show sunk into Tennyson. That was enough: Tennyson sunk to the ground, unable to breathe and clearly *hors de combat*. Marth backed Cane to the edge of the roof, and Cane put hands up shouting “I

give up! I give up!” as he looked over his shoulder and contemplated the extremely long vertical drop one step behind him.

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

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

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

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

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

“What happened to Ness?” asked Clara.

“Bring your Superscope and I’ll show you,” said Brian. He had stayed out of the way near the heliport. Now he was leaning over the short retaining wall. Clara walked over and

handed him the Superscope. He knelt down and stared through the big eyepiece on the weapon. “Yep, that’s him. Ugggh.”

He handed the Superscope back to Clara. She leaned over and stared through the scope. The high magnification image revealed a walkway far below them; she could see the tops of several heads as people walked back and forth through the city streets, though no cars or vehicles were visible. Directly below them was a rather gruesome lumpy object with red spattered around it. She didn’t look too closely. The people in the walkway seemed to pay no attention, but after a moment she noticed some sort of wheeled cart being driven by something that looked rather like a clone of Mr. Saturn driving over to the stain. It drove back and forth several times, and then went away, leaving a patch of blue in the walk. “Well, that’s the end of Ness, I guess,” she mumbled to herself.

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

“Replaced? Replaced. Does he remember getting squashed like that?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, that,” said Fox, smiling ruefully. “Let’s see, what haven’t I done lately? I was running down the corridor and bumped Falco on sore arm -- I teased Roy about his girlfriend’s -

- umm well I can't really explain that, you're too young. And then I told Marth his cape was silly. And that was just today. Take a lesson from this, youngster: life brings you enough enemies, don't make it worse with a big mouth."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, sure. Just a second. Is that better?" Now water dribbled out the end. Nicholas picked up the pill bottle (which he had fortunately closed, preventing all the medicine from

becoming waterlogged), and distributed megavitamins to Cane and Tennyson, who carefully took drinks from the end of the hose. Then he sat down and sighed.

“What’s with you?” said Clara.

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

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

“My brain hurts,” said Cane.

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

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

“Annihilated? They got discombobulated!” said Erin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Jump. I guess,” replied Brian.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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