

Enter the Cube

by Nicholas and Daniel Dobkin
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Chapter 9: Victual Reality

Nicholas pressed the whale's tail and was rewarded with a satisfying spray of air and mist from the blowhole. The bath tub was huge and round, deep enough to stand up in the middle and with a bench around the rim to sit on. A bubbler on the rim provided a continual stream of suds. Nicholas had spent some minutes experimenting with the agitator machine, arriving at a curious but entertaining mode in which a pair of waves oriented along a diameter continually rotated around the tub, slowly removing the scum of pie filling left behind on the wall by Erin's previous sojourn in the bath. Nicholas had finished scrubbing the persistent stuff out of his hair and was taking his time getting out. It turned out that there were three guest bathrooms, each with similarly elegant appointments, so even with Clara appropriating one for her private use sufficient cleaning capacity remained for the boys.

Mr. Saturn slid open the door and waddled into the room. Floating behind him were a pair of clean black woolen pants, white underwear with *Seamy Textiles Ltd.* written on the elastic band, and a white shirt with dark purple lapels, courtesy of the ever-thoughtful if ineffectual Neville. Mr. Saturn wiggled his nose and the clothing obediently laid itself out on the ample countertop next to the sink. "I should have thought you would have had enough of immersion by this point, Nicholas. Neville was by again wondering pointedly when we are going to be down for supper. Not that I'm nagging. I'll leave that for Clara."

"We? I thought you didn't like formal dinner stuff?" Nicholas spent a moment giving the whale a push so it could surf on the radial waves as they washed by.

"That's just at Peach's place," replied Mr. Saturn, hopping onto the counter and polishing his nose on the mirror. "Luigi and I get along, at least well enough to make me welcome in the dining hall, though on reflection I doubt that Luigi will be present at dinner. I went to one of his pitch meetings some time ago; once you let him start talking about his idea of the month, it's very hard to get him to stop. He'll be at it until midnight at least. Did you ever stop to consider the interesting problem of shaping the depth of the bath along a radius to allow azimuthal propagating modes?"

"No, even if I knew what you were talking about," replied Nicholas. He was just about to test the floating construction blocks when the door slid open again and Clara stuck her head in. She wore a simple but charming white gown, modestly arranged in front but with a low-cut

back, with a long skirt swirling around her ankles. "Are you still in the bathtub? Come on, Nicholas, everybody's waiting for you!"

"Geeze, Clara, do you mind?!" said Nicholas, stepping off the bench and immersing himself up to his neck. "You've got your own bathroom, this is for the boys!" He tried to splash some water in her direction but got Mr. Saturn instead.

Clara wrinkled her nose and, grabbing two towels from the rack, tossed one to Mr. Saturn and threw the other towards the pedestal next to the tub. "Let's go, lazy!"

"I'm not getting out of the bath tub with you standing there!" said Nicholas. Clara rolled her eyes and spun on the heel of a very elegant new shoe to exit. It was probably just as well that Clara wasn't old enough to wonder about the well-stocked closet she had found waiting for her in her room. Nicholas returned to his building project, but a moment later was distracted by the sudden appearance of a fist-sized hole in the wall next to the tub. With a squeaky cry, a tiny whiskered face poked out of the opening, and then disappeared again. Just as Nicholas was about to investigate more closely, out flew a tiny surfboard-shaped object upon which was perched a creature resembling an upright mouse. The board landed just before the onrushing wave at the tub rim, and Nicholas watched in fascination as the tiny surfer skillfully latched onto the face and skimmed back and forth around the edge of the bath. From the hole he could hear faint music:

*If every mousehole had a bathtub
with waves that curl just right
And every mousehole had a soap board
all waxed and polished bright
Then every mouse would be surfin'
instead of stealin' rice
And everyone would have a tube ride
□ and we'd be surfin' mice.*

"All right, I guess it's time to get out!" said Nicholas, laughing. Mr. Saturn jumped down to the tub and turned up the wave machine, so that the spinning swell started to foam and curve. High-pitched whoops could be heard as Nicholas carefully stepped out onto the platform and grabbed the towel Clara had deposited there, turning to splashes as the mouse wiped out in the curl and struggled up through the soapy foam.

"Erin, could you get me some juice?" asked Clara. This was the third time she had asked. She waved her hand in front of Erin's face and said "Earth to Erin, Earth to Erin. Juice?"

"Oh, yeah, right." Erin reached to his right to grab the carafe of purple fruit juice, but instead of filling Clara's glass, he picked up his own and began to pour the liquid into the already-full container, resulting in a purple flood soaking his borrowed pair of dress slacks.

Erin took no notice, as he was busy staring at Princess Zelda. The Princess was sitting across the table, a lovely sight even to less infatuated eyes than Erin's. Her long hair was arranged in intricate braids over her bare shoulders; she wore a glistening magenta gown with violet trim, a golden necklace strung with pearls, and a diamond-studded tiara. She was smiling at Clara rather than Erin, but he wasn't in a mood to make fine distinctions.

Clara reached over his lap to straighten the now half-empty carafe. "Erin, get a grip!" she said, but she smiled and gently tugged his shoulder.

"What? Oh," said Erin, looking down. "Oh, boy. Uh ... oh, no. Neville?"

However, it was Shivers the butler who passed through the table towards Erin. "Tarnation! Perfectly good juice gone ta' waste! Ya dang live ones ain't got no 'ppreciation fur what ya got, why we ghosts cain't even drink if'n we wanted to and you just pour the dang stuff right down on yer pants." Zelda laughed politely, while Erin turned red enough to illuminate the dinner table unaided by the candles. Shivers tossed a gravy-stained towel in Erin's lap, muttering: "Things 's different back when I 's alive. Weren't no cause to waste purfictly good juice, not nohow..."

Bonapa T. ignored Erin's contretemps and lifted Tails' dinner tray from the top shelf of a wheeled cart. The tray held a huge steel bowl which seemed to be filled with sand. Nicholas leaned over to Neville, who was floating next to him ineffectually attempting to supervise the proceedings, and asked "What the heck is Tails eating?"

"Oh, yes, I believe it is berries -- berry juice -- no, ahem, berry flavored? Let me think."

Tails floated up off his chair over the bowl, and asked "Okay already? I'm starved!"

"Un moment, s'il vous plait!" replied Bonapa. "Just let me get under ze shelter here, and zen you can, how you say, dig in?"

"Shelter?" said Nicholas. He noticed that Impa, Zelda's assistant, had unfolded a large umbrella and was holding it protectively over her mistress, and Jack and Ellie had risen from the table and were standing by the wall. "What is going on?"

Bonapa, hiding underneath the serving table, cried out, "Allez! OK, Tails my friend!" At this signal Tails attacked the bowl vigorously, tossing fine white sand everywhere as he revealed something that looked vaguely like a plucked chicken that had been immersed beneath the silica. Tails ripped off a leg and began to carefully brush the sand and grit away.

"Oh, of course," said Neville. "*Buried!* Not berried. B-u-r-i-e-d. Dear, dear, how foolish of me to have forgotten."

"Sure, thanks," said Nicholas, who was covered in fine grit on every exposed surface. Impa shook the umbrella carefully, ensuring that no contamination made its way to the Princess,

and stored it gently away. At the piano Melody continued playing, unperturbed (*Raindrops keep Fallin' on my Head*). No one was listening. They never did.

"What was that about?" asked Cane, who continued shoving fried shroom chips into his mouth despite the dirt.

"Foxes like to bury their food," replied Brian, meticulously dusting his plate.

Clara turned back to Zelda to continue their conversation, not incidentally providing Erin with an opportunity to retreat gracefully from the dining table for a quick change of clothing, though the adherence of the fine white dust to the wet spot had actually made the damage less visible. "The VIP suite? I don't remember seeing that on Neville's list. Maybe it was written out? Very Important Person suite?"

"Oh, no, no, my dear: the Very Important *Princess* suite." Zelda flashed her *prettier-than-you'll-ever-be* smile. "Reserved for *important* princesses. I should certainly never sink to imposing upon you children to tidy up the suite; I have my own cleaning staff for that, under the supervision of my dear devoted Impa." The impeccably-dressed matron standing always to Zelda's right bowed stiffly, inclining exactly fifteen degrees from the vertical, and returned to inspecting the entrees received from Shivers before presenting them to the Princess for approval. She didn't smile.

"Are you often a guest here?" asked Clara.

"Hardly. I am here for certain highly privileged discussions with Professor E. Gadd. For reasons which I must say I find mysterious, the Professor prefers to do much of his work here. He and Luigi are compatriots of old, a consequence perhaps of their physical resemblance, as intellectually they seem to have little in common. I do find travel to these remote worlds difficult, but of course a ruler's obligations do not end at the throne room."

"I thought the Professor was out," said Clara. "We talked to Tails and he said the Professor was off traveling somewhere. Oh, at Ark. He was at Ark. Working on reality. That sounds silly, doesn't it?"

Zelda looked thoughtful. Impa looked disapproving but that was her usual demeanor. Zelda chose her words with care: "Well, one can't just go around believing everything one hears from Tails, can one?" Tails, hanging inverted a few feet over his plate, was dipping a chicken leg in a bowl of sauce thoughtfully filtered of sand by Shivers. Only the subtle movement of one huge furry ear betrayed his interest in the exchange. Zelda continued. "The Professor is at once an inventor of great ingenuity and a scientist of vast depth, with interests as wide as his knowledge. Of course, sometimes this causes him to overlook such mundane issues as his agreed-upon presence at a given time and place. Perhaps we should say his view of time is more multivalued than ours."

"Or perhaps you should say he's absent-minded," interjected Mr. Saturn. He was mounted on a kid's booster seat on top of the dining room chair, licking a curious concoction that looked somewhat like oatmeal frozen into a popsicle.

Zelda glared at him. "I should hardly think you of all creatures would find it appropriate to level criticism at the Professor on this subject. As I recall, you are -- let me see -- four years three months and twenty-one days overdue for your audience with the Assistant Minister to Rauru at Hyrule. Perhaps you've been busy working on your book. What was it to be called again? 'A Nose by Any Other Name'? 'Saturnalia'? In any case, twenty-two months past deadline, aren't we? And I suppose we shouldn't discuss the status of your library borrowings." Brian kept his head down, hoping to avoid notice from the combatants on either side.

Mr. Saturn met her eyes undismayed, chuckling. "I fail to see the connection, Your Highness. My behavior is a simple consequence of intentional irresponsibility. I haven't forgotten, I just don't care. The Professor cares about everything, but his passion is so intense that only one thing at a time can occupy his mind. Once his enthusiasm of the moment is passed, he will remember he's supposed to meet you and be suitably apologetic. But he won't change any more than I will."

"Ya' know, ya' hi'ness, 'da shrimp is right," said Tails, licking his nose. "Jus' last week da professor was sayin' how he was gonna be busy wid' you here an' all so he couldn't be helpin' me recalibrate the plasma diagnostic system after I got it pulled apart. But 'den da' next day he's got 'dis emergency message an' he's off." The fox ripped another wing off the dead bird. "Course he was also sayin' how delicate this is all gonna' be, ya' know, maybe he doesn't mind bein' called away, eh?"

Nicholas, seated at the end of the table, had just finished cleaning most of the particles of sand from his tableware so that he could sample Bonapa's culinary artistry. It was difficult to follow the conversation directed towards Zelda at the middle of the long dining room table, so he turned to Jack and Ellie, who were seated to his right. Jack was dressed in a cleaner and less wrinkled version of his bowling attire.

"So how was your day, Nicholas, after bowling?" asked Jack. "Your friend didn't seem too helpful with your work, now, though he was mighty entertaining, I have to say."

"Well, Mister -- gee, I don't usually call grownups by their first names."

"Oh, never you mind, Jack is just fine," Jack reassured him.

"Well -- Jack -- actually we didn't get as far as I thought we would, and it wasn't really Erin's fault. You see, we ran into -- what was his name? -- Jarvis. A ghost that collects jars. He tricked us into the Aquastar pool, and then we escaped into the bathroom but Erin jogged my arm while I was working the mirror and we ended up in the pipe room and got caught in an inverted flood to the roof."

"My oh my!" exclaimed Ellie. She wore a simple frock hand-embroidered with floral patterns. Age had converted the beauty of her youth into the warmth of her smile; she reminded Nicholas of his mother (when she wasn't mad at him). "You certainly went through a lot of trouble for the sake of cleaning. I wish my Betsy was so determined. She isn't much for tidying up."

"Thanks, Mrs. -- uh, Ellie -- but we're just doing this so we can get some money to hire Starfox to get us to Ark," replied Nicholas. "We were just trying to clean up the Observatory. I didn't mean to go flooding the pipe room or anything, it just happened that way. But we did get some really neat stuff -- you see, we found Mario and Luigi's old tool chest, that was where I got the pipe wrench and I would've had everything fixed up if Erin hadn't opened the door." Nicholas realized how incoherent this must all sound, though Jack and Ellie were listening with the same intense politeness his parents would display when he regaled them with stories of his video game escapades. "Oh, yeah, I forgot! One of the things we found in the chest is a Golden Hammer! Maybe you'd like it?" He pulled the glistening tool from an inner pocket of the borrowed dinner jacket.

Jack's eyes went wide though his expression was otherwise unmoved. Ellie put her hands to her cheeks and sighed in amazement. "Son, you don't just go around givin' out things like that," said Jack. "That's uncommon kind of you to folks you hardly even know, though seein' as this was out of Luigi's tool chest perhaps you ought to ask him before you go handing it around?"

Nicholas looked crestfallen. "Oh, yeah, I should've thought of that. I guess I'll have to wait until he gets back."

Ellie put her hand on his wrist. "What a sweet thought, dear! It was so considerate of you to even think of us, when you have your own financial worries, as you said. Such an offer speaks of a generous heart in one so young."

"Ellie's right, she usually is," said Jack. "Son, such a kind thought deserves it's own reward no matter what happens to the hammer. Now, you said you were gettin' on towards Ark, I believe?" Nicholas nodded. Jack looked around to ensure the other guests were occupied and leaned towards Nicholas, beckoning him forward so that with Ellie the three heads formed a coterie shielded from observation. "It's not the sort of thing to be bandying about, but some of our folk might be found in that neck o' the woods, as it were. Jus' minding their own business gettin' on about their farming, you know, but quiet-like you might say. Everyone knows that space station was designed for folks to live on permanent-like, with a bunch of them hydroponic-type farms and plenty of the regular kind, and after that big to-do a few years back, well, it was a shame to have all that good rich farmland go to waste. Course, wasn't clear by then if anyone -- owned it, seemed a lot simpler just not to ask. You get my drift, son?"

Nicholas, though still mildly mystified, nodded. Jack continued: "If'n you happen' by that way, you just ask for Mary Ellen, she's an old friend; you just tell her Jack and Ellie sent you. That'll get you whatever they can provide."

Nicholas nodded again. "Mary Ellen," he repeated. "Tell her Jack send us, right?"

Ellie was looking around the table to ensure that their conversation went unnoticed. She said loudly, "Now don't you go tellin' anyone about that, who would eat my pies if everyone knew the secret?" she said, inserting her spoon into the meat pie on her plate while kicking Nicholas gently under the table. "If my husband wasn't such a fine cook on his own I'd 've had his hide long ago for lettin' my family recipes out that way."

Nicholas got the point and made a zipping gesture: "Yes, ma'am, my lips are sealed all right."

Tails let himself appear to be occupied with Cane, while keeping one ear cocked towards the political side of the table. "So ya' know I got 'da Portraificationizeh all fixed up, don't squash da portraits no more, an' the compression pelletizer is now just one stroke, no more smashin' n' bashin' like what happened to ya', ya' wanna try it again?"

"What?" said Cane, spitting *soupe a l'oignon* out on his plate. "No way! I'm not going near that thing! That was like puking up your nose and then shoving your foot down your throat backwards while having your eyeballs turned inside out, just so you can be stuck in a piece of paper with a scratchy coat you can't take off! You're crazy! You gonna' eat that chicken wing or what?"

"Fine, fine, be dat way," replied Tails, whacking Cane's hand away from the barbecued meat. "Okay, how 'bout you help me get one a 'dem ghosts ta try it out? Got any ideas? Pass 'da salt."

"Here, or is that pepper?" Cane licked the end of the shaker: "Yep, salt, here you go. Hey, what about like, telling one of the ghosts they won a sweepstakes and the prize is in your lab and then just zipping them in when they walk in the room? Or better yet, tell them the prize is in our room and then just sucking them up into a Poltergust when they come to collect it?"

Tails wiped the salt shaker on his fur and then spread the crystals with abandon over his meal. "Yeah, 'dem ghosts are suckers for that sorta stuff, they ain't too bright mosta da time." He chewed on some blades of grass thoughtfully provided by Bonapa T. "Which ghost you wanna' hit up first?"

Cane was busy snarfing up another slice of sausage and shroom pizza. "Whaddo I know? (*chomp chomp*) Let's ask Neville who's the stupidest one."

"Nah, 'dat might make him think we're up ta somethin', he don't like me much anyway."

"Hey, I think I can handle this," said Cane, shoving a fried crab cake into his mouth. "If I don't find a really stupid ghost to fall for this trick tomorrow (*gulp*)-- I'll eat my hat!"

"You ain' gotta hat, but I betcha you're right, you'd eat it if ya had one," said Tails.

"You know that Nicholas and Erin were floating in that, right?" said Tennyson, indicating the slice of berry pie on Mr. Saturn's plate.

"Don't worry, they took a bath first," said Mr. Saturn. "Besides, I'm not going to eat it." Tennyson's mom would have said that Mr. Saturn was playing with his food, though he regarded it as demonstrating a concept. "You can eat meat, and eat berry pies, all your life and never conceive of combining the two." He wiggled his nose and the slice of berry pie popped open; the filling slurped away and chunks of roast beast launched themselves on parabolic trajectories from the serving bowl, landing with tiny splashes on the bottom crust, replacing the fruit. "Innovation is dangerous, uncertain, unexpected, and indispensable. It leads to change. Change is always feared by those who find themselves on top of the pile as it is", he said, staring pointedly at the Princess, "because it is likely to be change for the worse, at least to them."

Zelda returned his glare. "Even those without fear can still love their hallowed traditions. Envy is not a basis for policy."

"So, Princess Zelda," said Tennyson, trying to direct attention away from Mr. Saturn, "if you don't mind me asking -- what were you going to discuss with Professor E. Gadd?"

Zelda's glance in reply reminded Tennyson of his mother sizing up a steak at the grocery store. "I had hardly expected an inquisition at dinner; truthfully, I hadn't planned on dinner, though the Professor's tardiness is well-known and so perhaps it is my fault after all." She seemed to come to a decision and changed her tactics. "I'm sorry, the introductions were so brief -- you are?"

"Oh, my name is Tennyson, Your Highness."

"Well, Tennyson, do you have your own room at the cas-- at wherever you live?"

"Yes, ma'am -- I mean, Your Highness."

"How would you feel if you had everything just the way you liked it and came back one day to find everything changed?"

"Oh, that happens every couple of months, any time my dad gets up the energy to clean up the house. He's always organizing stuff so you can't find anything. Puts it all down in a file in his computer, but nobody else can figure out how to read the file so we just have to dig everything out again as soon as he goes on a business trip."

"Exactly. Now imagine the same sort of disruption on a larger scale, throughout your world, changing your life in unpredictable ways. We in Hyrule, and others allied with us, have lived with this scourge for too long. We are resolved to end it, using whatever means are at our disposal. We are no longer willing to listen to the starry-eyed idealists who counsel restraint and caution." She paused with a chuckle. "Starry eyed! Oh, my, I had not meant to joke." Her

expression grew stern again. "I am not joking. We shall take measures to ensure the continuation of our beloved kingdom and our way of life."

Just then Erin came back in the room, sat down in his chair, and then jumped up again, whacking the table and spilling juice all over his pants again: "Oh, man, I left it in my room!"

"What are you talking about?" said Clara.

"The Shadow Medallion! Oh, geeze, I was going to show it to the Princess and now I forgot!"

"Excuse me, young man," interjected Zelda. "Did you say you had the Shadow Medallion?"

"Yeah, yeah, we found it in the pipe room! Right, Nicholas?"

Nicholas politely finished chewing his roll and then replied. "You mean that man hole cover thing?"

Zelda's face darkened with anger until she looked rather like Impa always did. "The Shadow Medallion a man hole cover? How dare you!"

"It wasn't me, it was Mario. At least it looked like his writing. Anyway, yeah, it was with the tool kit in the pipe room. Erin stuck it on my vacuum cleaner and we had it when we fell in the pie filling. Did you pick it up?" the last being addressed to Erin.

"Yeah, I left it in the room!" said Erin in distress.

"Oh, never you mind, I shall provide it directly," said Neville, disappearing into the ceiling. In the background Melody played *I'll Be Seeing You*. Soon they did: Neville popped out into the room easily enough, though whatever he was carrying seemed to have gotten stuck inside the wall.

Erin rose out of his seat in anticipation, rambling nervously to Zelda: "You'll see, it's really cool, I'm sure it's the real medallion, Your Highness." Neville gave a final huge effort, arms stretching out to twice his length, and then with a sudden *POP!* there appeared -- a large glass jar containing a bizarre and fairly repulsive, very dead creature with two red eyes on pods surrounding a circular mouth covered with purple teeth. Neville handed the jar to Erin: "There you are, Master Erin! The perfect gift to impress a Princess!"

"That's not it!" cried Erin. "That's a -- a -- what was that?"

"*Sinoglyphygyus obnoxious*," said Mr. Saturn. "A large-mouthed parasitic eel from the Metroid worlds."

"Yeah, right," said Erin, nervously. He was unsure of what to do with the jar and fiddling unhappily with the lid. "I picked that up in the Observatory while we were arguing with Jarvis. It was going to be evidence, I mean I was Sherlock, you see, and -- and--"

"Excuse me, young man," interjected Zelda, "but you were talking about the *Shadow Medallion*, were you not? I'm afraid I have no interest in astrobiology."

Erin grew more agitated, twisting the jar in dismay, which caused the lid to pop off. The eel then slid out of the jar in a flood of foul-smelling preservative solution and landed on Erin's plate. Nicholas wasn't sure but had the strong impression that the sinowhateveritis was still moving on its own. He didn't really want to know.

Shivers stepped forward, passing through Tails on the way ("Cut 'dat out! Ya' know I hate dat!") "Tarnation, whatcha doin' handin' off anything important to that nincompoop Neville," he complained as he picked up the eel, dripping preservative everywhere. "What the heck does this medall yun thing look lak anyway? I'll git it fur ya, you just let ol' Shivers handle things!"

"Oh, it's flat like a coin, but about so big," said Erin gesturing with his hands, "and black with a sort of triangle and some circles on it." Zelda looked upset again but thought better of commenting on Erin's ignorance. Erin tried to remember the proper names and descriptions but somehow his brain was stuck. It was easy to see that he was *not* impressing Zelda. Meanwhile Shivers had disappeared through the ceiling and Melody was playing *If You Could Read My Mind*.

By the time the song was over they could hear Shivers mumbling to himself down the hallway. "Durn empty-headed ignorami, how'm I gonna git the dessert out when I'm a' chasin' fur dumb kids what cain't fahnd anythin' I don' know, this'd just burn me up if'n I wasn't so afear'd o' fire..." By now everyone at the table had turned towards the door in anticipation; the disappointment was therefore all the more embarrassing for Erin when Shivers came round the corner and handed Erin the cover from one of the guest bathroom toilet seats: it was round and (approximately) flat, and decorated with an abstract pattern composed of triangles and circles (among other geometric figures) etched into the ceramic, but it wasn't the Shadow Medallion. "Oh, gosh, I'll just go get it myself," said Erin. Zelda was no longer paying much attention.

Mr. Saturn said "Sit tight, son, I owe you at least this one," to Erin. Melody launched into *Someone to Watch Over Me*. Mr. Saturn wiggled his nose and then floated up to the ceiling above the chandelier, where he did some manipulation no one else could clearly see. A trap door popped out and the Shadow Medallion floated gently down to rest on the table next to the Princess' plate. She picked the disk up carefully -- one might even say reverently -- and handed it to Impa. The older woman carefully inspected the surface, turned it to various angles in the light, sniffed several places, and licked two spots on the bottom, mumbling some sort of incantation. She nodded in approval and made a hand signal. Another older lady, unnoticed heretofore by the kids, stepped out of the corner of the room and handed a sort of leather cover to Impa, who slid the Medallion safely inside and then tied the whole thing to her wrist. "By

your leave, My Lady?" said Impa in a gravelly baritone. The Princess nodded and Impa made her way to the door, presumably to place the precious object in safer keeping.

"So it *was* Mario. After all his representations to the contrary, too!" mumbled Zelda, apparently to herself. "That man is incorrigible! How could I have let him deceive me yet again--" She seemed suddenly to remember the guests. "My manners have escaped me, no doubt a consequence of Impa's absence. Young man," she said, turning to Erin, "Young man, you have returned to us an heirloom of our house, as well as a token of power. I did you a disservice in my heart, discrediting you unjustly. How can I make amends?"

Becoming the focus of Zelda's attention had caused Erin's brain to go blank again. He mumbled something unintelligible and looked rather like a kindergartener trying to explain what he was doing in the halls during class time. After some consideration Zelda reached back behind her head and undid the clasp holding her glistening necklace. She beckoned Erin to stand, and leaning across the table, fastened the necklace around him, delivering in the process a chaste kiss on his cheek. Erin turned glowing red from a combination of embarrassment and confusion, a condition only worsened when he looked down and saw that in inclining towards the Princess he had put both his hands wrist-deep into the berry pie. "Seems like I've been here before," he mumbled.

Just then Neville bustled into the dining room carrying a telephone handset with the wire dangling behind him. He placed it on the table next to the Princess and pulled on the cord, which had wrapped around a leg of the soup tray, precipitating two bowls of consomme onto the floor with a crash. "Oh, dear, where is my list?" muttered Neville to himself, and started to walk through the far wall towards the study, stopping halfway. "By Jove! I've forgotten again," he said with another attempted slap to his head. He reappeared from the wall and returned to the task of finding a phone jack to plug the handset in, passing through the table holding the cord (which knocked over two wine glasses and a gravy boat before Shivers, trailing behind, could pick it up out of harm's way) and then dropping down and crawling through Clara's legs on his way to the other wall. "Oh, dear, who spilt all this soup? I must mark it down on my list!"

"Zut alors!" said Bonapa, who had recovered a towel from the kitchen and was trying to repair the mess. "Plug in ze telephone and go away! To ze devil with your precious list!"

"Telephone, oh, yes, of course," replied Neville. It took several tries with the plug in the incorrect orientation, with Neville repeatedly trying to put on his reading glasses before remembering that he was a ghost and didn't need them, but finally the cord was seated. He floated back to the table and pressed the SPEAKER button, then disappeared towards the study without a word of explanation.

"Tell 'em you don't need another credit card!" shouted Cane in the general direction of Zelda. He turned back to Tails: "That's what my dad always says when people call at dinner. Then he hangs up. Doesn't even ask who it is! He's always hanging up on my friends that way. I'm gonna' be just like him when I grow up!"

"Right, kid, a chip off da' ol' block if I evah saw one," said Tails.

"Credit card? I don't need no credit card, I gotta coins!" said the voice on the phone. It was obviously Luigi, though his speech was uneven and somewhat slurred. "Isa dat you Princessa Zelda, I was gonna call you to see how you wasa doin', it'sa so sorry I'm a late to my meeting, we're workin' so hard, you know." In the background the kids could hear laughter and the tinkling of glasses.

Zelda made a visible effort to restrain herself from whatever she was tempted to say and replied diplomatically: "Why, Luigi, we are doing very well. One of your young guests has discovered the Shadow Medallion here in the mansion, apparently mistaken for a manhole cover, and returned it to us; I hope you don't mind?" the last phrase being delivered in a tone of voice that clearly showed that no amount of minding on Luigi's part would cause her to part with the Medallion again.

"Da kids dey gave you a manhole cover, whatsa dey thinkin? Well its only a kids you know, they'ra real nicea kids, how's thata Clara my little sweetie?" Cane opened his mouth to comment, but Clara, too quick for him, tossed a large olive right in ("Three points!" laughed Nicholas, "and with the left hand!").

"I believe Clara is doing very well also," said Zelda, nodding approvingly at her marksmanship. "Let me take this opportunity to thank you again for your cooperation, and to assure you that my staff is doing their utmost to reach the Professor, so that we can complete our mission promptly and have no further need to impose upon your hospitality."

"It'sa no problem, you stay asa long asa ya likea, itsa so lonely ina the mansion when nobody'sa there."

Brian, who was seated on Zelda's right, adjacent to the phone, could hear two voices in the background: "He's completely plastered!" said one. "Yeah, this is a roll! Let's get him to eat more flowers!" There was a slight scraping noise and more laughter.

"Can't ya see I'ma talking on the phone," said Luigi's voice again. "Whatsa you -- oh, you got me a salad, you know I likea the salad after the meal, itsa so nice." The amplified sounds of slurping and chewing could be heard-- apparently Luigi was holding the handset near his mouth while consuming whatever he had received. "Bonapa Tee," he said between slurps, "you gotta learna disa recipe, witha da yellow lettuce witha da red in the middle, itsa so tasty!" Brian could hear guffaws and snorts interspersed with Luigi's munching.

Zelda's patience was wearing thin. "Was there anything else you needed to talk about? We are also in the middle of dinner here at the mansion, another remarkable repast for which we humbly thank your amazing cook and kitchen staff." Bonapa T., rising from his knees carrying the empty soup bowls, blushed and bowed.

"What'sa for you calling me up a you're not even finished with dinner, eh?" said Luigi.

"I believe it was you who initiated this conversation," replied Zelda.

"Initablated? Whatsa you talking about?" Just then the phone emitted a pair of beeping sounds, and another light went on next to one of the buttons.

"Pardon me, Luigi, but we seem to have another call coming in," said Zelda. Then to herself: "Now how do I switch this blasted thing?"

"Oh, allow me, Your Highness!" said Neville, who had returned from the study carrying his parchment and a dip pen. He placed the ink bottle on the table next to Tennyson and floated through the potato plate to the phone. "Just press here, like so, very simple indeed, would you like to see it again?"

"Yes, thank you, Neville, and no, that was quite clear," said Zelda.

From the phone came a quite different, more nasal voice: "Hello? Is that Neville? Can you get me the Princess?"

"It's da Professor!" said Tails, popping up into the air and hovering upside down towards the phone, his fur shedding bits of chicken and sand over the other diners.

"Hello, Professor, I'm here," said Zelda. "It's indeed a pleasure to hear from you at last. I hope everything is going well." Nicholas mouthed *E Gadd?* to Brian, who nodded silently.

"Yeah, great, we were just putting some final touches on the physical rendering engine; we achieved greather than five nine's validation yesterday with a test environment. We are essentially ready to initiate the first test protocols, except that there are still some concerns about allowing free-running daemons, especially during memory defragmentation periods."

"Yes, yes, thank you, Professor," said Zelda, "but as you recall my curiosity doesn't extend to that level of detail. Were you going to be back here at the Mansion soon?"

The voice on the other end sighed audibly. "It's really hard to leave right now -- you know we don't have any usable data links back to here, I really can't supervise the work without being present. I thought you were the one who wanted to get these initial protocols completed? It's very delicate, you know: we need to employ a pseudorandom sequence approach so that our perturbations are perfectly orthogonal to normality-- that means the results are unambiguously detectable to our instruments while remaining intrinsically invisible to the inhabitants. We don't want to make any mistakes, you know. Who knows what would happen if the real world were to figure out what we're up to?"

"Professor! Please. I am *at the dinner table with our guests!*" Zelda was visibly distraught. Neville, misinterpreting her distress, pressed a button on the phone as she continued: "When were you going to get back here *in person* to the Mansion so we can talk?"

"Oh, wherea did ya go, it'sa so nice you wanna talka to me, you always ignoreda me before, don't think I didn't notice you likea Mario better, so whatsa new everybody does?"

Luigi sounded if anything worse than before. There was a sound of slurping and swallowing; Brian could hear the same voices in the background: "Hey, let's give him another black shrimp cocktail! That was a crack-up!" "Naw, I'm outta cockroaches -- wait a minute, there's one!"

"That is hardly the case, Luigi," improvised Zelda, recovering quickly. "I must say that it sounds as if you should consider having a large glass of water and then getting some sleep. Perhaps you've had enough entertainment for one night."

"I'ma not so sleepy, my friends gonna get some more to eat, (*slurrrp*) then we go to a club twenty-four, oh wasa that club sixty five? Whatsa dat twenty three minus fifty six, maybe it's club forty three, no itsa minus, how you gonna have fun at a club datsa so negative, whatsa so negative, I'ma not so sure, I'ma gonna take a rest to figure it outta..." There was a *thunk* and the sound of snoring, with raucous laughter in the background. Zelda addressed Neville: "Can we *please* return to the conversation with the Professor?"

"Oh, certainly, he's ever so much more coherent if perhaps less colorful--" said Neville.

"Without the commentary, if you please."

"Quite so, quite so," said Neville, knocking the ink bottle into the fondue pan as he reached for the phone and pressed the *call waiting* button. "There we are." Tennyson withdrew a cube of bread now black on one side and cheesy on the other and contemplated whether to find out what ghost ink tastes like.

They had apparently entered the middle of a conversation between Professor Gadd and an unknown third party. "--can't go on hiding this forever. The results are perfectly conclusive; we can be much more aggressive than the Eine limit without attracting any attention at all."

"I told you that was unauthorized work!" This was the Professor's voice again. "The methodology is inferior, we had no peer review on the experimental design, it doesn't prove anything." Zelda was obviously torn between a desire to interrupt for security's sake, and an intense curiosity about the topic under discussion. "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence! It's not just dangerous, it's contrary to our instructions. What would happen if the Committee knew we had made uncontrolled changes?"

The Princess could no longer contain herself. "Professor! After all the lectures you've given the Committee! I am aghast! So you've been making changes all along and not letting on? I must say this puts your status as a neutral arbiter in doubt, to say the least. I demand that you return here immediately, and be assured I shall arrange for a meeting of the Committee at the soonest practicable time."

"Calm down, Your Highness, calm down, no need to get excited. One of our staff did - - perform some experimentation without approval. Very dangerous and completely inconclusive. We have--disciplined the individual involved. It is the considered opinion of the

Principal Investigators that the protocols agreed to within the Committee should be adhered to and that data obtained outside this framework is to be discarded from further consideration. I don't think you need concern yourself any more with this matter." There was the sound of a large object dropping and a sort of booming. The Professor's voice became urgent: "I'm sorry, Your Highness, I have to -- um, I have to go right now, I'll get to the mansion as soon as I can, goodbye!" *click*

The table burst into simultaneous talk, stored up during the polite silence imposed by the phone conversations: "What was that about?" asked Tennyson. "Changing what world?" puzzled Nicholas. "I told you we couldn't trust that man," said Impa. "Durn crackpot, I always said he was," mumbled Jack to Ellie. "Dat's da Professor, he ain't too swift on da political side," sighed Tails. "Gee, Neville, I hope Luigi's ok," said Clara. "Hey, Tennyson -- you gonna eat that bread cube or what?" said Cane.

At that moment, Shivers appeared from the kitchen pushing a large cart upon which were a number of plates each carrying an identical round, deliciously dark brown tort, each with a curiously-folded brown object at the top. "Shut yer yaps, a fella cain't even hear himself think!" said Shivers irritably. Impa looked at him as if he were a spider and probably would have sliced his head off had she not remembered that he was already dead. "Gol' dern it, lessee now, this one in the corner is fur Billie, er, Ellie, then Jack, now the next un's fur that durn highfalutin' Princess... Ryan, Uranus, Neptune -- now wait a gol' durned minute, hmmm..." Shivers continued to mutter to himself as he walked around the table carefully selecting one plate for each guest.

Bonapa T. was standing behind Clara watching Shivers to make sure the right dessert reached each guest. Clara turned to him and whispered, "What's going on? They all look exactly alike," referring to the cakes.

"Oh, la la! Ce n'est pas vrai! Zese are the famous fortune cookies of ze Madame Clairvoya, each is very carefully prepared for one and only one fortune, ze particular one for each of you! Of course, to ze untutored eye ze cakes zey look ze same, but it is not so! I have prepared them each one for ze taste, un grand travail. Maintenant, bon appetit from Bonapa T.!"

Cane, not waiting for explanations or clean silverware, was already smeared with frosting. Tails, who was obviously familiar with the routine, carefully popped the cookie out of the chocolate confection and broke it open. Instead of the slip of flimsy paper Clara had expected, a tiny figure grew from the broken cookie, floating at eye level before the inverted fox. Clara couldn't see it very well from her end of the table, but it looked like a tiny human figure dressed in a melange of brightly colored textiles. It moved, seeming to look up at Tails, and a tiny voice could be heard: "All that is gold does not glisten, not every dog is a fox; you would do better to listen to the ghosts that you stick in a box." Then there was a little *pop!* and the figure disappeared.

Tails gobbled up the cookie halves and, hanging inverted over the cake, took a stripe of frosting off with his long tongue. "Mmmm. She's always politickin' for da ghosts, dat's cause

she's a spiry sort o' gal, as well as bein' a ghost anyway, ya know. Don't mean nuthin. She ain't never yet given me a real fortune but the cookies 'r always pretty good, so it's OK."

"Cool!" said Nicholas. "Can I go next?" As no one contradicted him, he popped his cookie in half, and was rewarded with another tiny, colorfully-attired ghostling. The miniscule figure regarded him for a moment and then said: "When destruction threatens all, don't forget the party ball! There's no need to cry or grieve if you know just when to leave." *pop!*

Nicholas looked puzzled. Tails nudged him with a frosting-smear paw: "Don't worry about it, kid, she hardly ever makes any sense anyway. Da cake is fantastic! Chow down!"

Cane had to dig his fortune cookie out from the mess he'd already made of the cake; the little Clairvoya ghost that arose was smeared with chocolate, and stopped to lick some off her headscarf, then launched into her speech: "A faster brain would pierce the ruse of your desire for faster shoes." *pop!* Cane stared at his feet as he licked up the last of the torte.

Erin went next: "Lucky in love is love best lost when eternal exile is the cost." *pop!* Cane snickered (mouth still full of chocolate); Zelda smiled courteously but looked relieved.

Clara took her turn: "Wisdom is best when hard-learned, improvement of self is so when earned; with temptation you needn't bother, there's no easy way to please your father." *pop!* She blushed and tried to pretend to be interested in the cake. Tennyson cracked open his cookie to direct the group's attention away from her, not without some trepidation: "Songs and friendship given freely last long after the last note fades; the last song sung will be remembered even when the last debt's paid." He looked at Nicholas with hands open in puzzlement. Tails laughed: "Told 'ya she's makin' it up!"

And finally Brian, as Mr. Saturn ate his cookie whole without giving Madame Clairvoya an opportunity to express an opinion on his fate: "Don't follow the stars unless you want to stay here; their spirits seem kind but they'll make you pay here. Keeping your head when others are maddened, you'll get them all home, safe but saddened."

The Princess seemed disinclined to indulge in dessert; she sampled a forkful of frosting as a courtesy to Bonapa T., and then rose and bowed to each of the guests. "It has been a great pleasure to make your acquaintance, children, but I have many responsibilities still to attend to and must take my leave."

Clara rose from her chair. "Your Highness, could I -- talk to you for a minute on the way?"

Zelda smiled and nodded, then swept out of the room followed by Impa, with Clara struggling to keep up. Nicholas turned to Neville and asked, "I guess Mr. Luigi won't be back tonight?"

Cane laughed. "Weren't you listening? He's more plastered than the cafeteria walls! We'll be lucky if he's back tomorrow."

"I am afraid I am in accord with Master Cane on this matter," added Neville. "The Master will most likely return tomorrow morning, perhaps less cheerfully than is his wont in other circumstances."

"Well, I guess we'd better get to bed, then," said Nicholas. "We're going to need some rest if tomorrow is anything like today was!"

"Why?" said Erin, looking as if he had just noticed where he was.

"Well, according to the list our team still has eight rooms to clean up, and that's only because we got so much help from the ghosts," said Brian. "I'm pretty tired. Aren't you?"

"Oh, yeah, the list," replied Erin. "What happened with that? Did we clean up anything?"

"*We* didn't clean up anything, *I* did," said Nicholas. "And Brian is right, I'm going to sleep."

"I wouldn't worry too much about it," said Mr. Saturn, waddling towards the door. "By tomorrow Luigi will have some completely new scheme in his head and will have forgotten all about cleaning the mansion. I'm going to read; the *I Ching* seems apropos. Coming, Erin?"

"Somehow I suspect you actually know what's going on," said Erin, following him out the door.

"Well," replied Mr. Saturn, "I imagine that Madame Clairvoya is considering changing her name to Cassandra after tonight; who am I to move in on her turf?"

Nicholas was sitting on the bed contemplating the Party Ball, but looking at it didn't help resolve any of his questions. He was sharing one of the guest rooms with Cane and Brian; there were three curtained four-poster beds and a separate dresser and desk for each of the kids. He yawned and stowed the Party ball back in his backpack, and stretched his legs under the covers with great relief. "Brian, you asleep?"

"That's kind of a dumb question. If I was I wouldn't hear you, would I?"

"Sorry. Did you get what that stuff Professor E. Gadd was talking about meant? I was totally lost. Are they inventing demons? What are they changing?"

"The one thing I'm certain about is that we weren't supposed to hear any of that! Zelda was caught off guard. She didn't mean to discuss it in front of us. Beyond that I'm pretty lost. I've heard my mom and dad talking about demons once but they were discussing computer stuff,

so maybe that's some sort of software thing and not a monster. I have no idea what sudo noise is or ogogonality but it sounds pretty technical."

"Yeah, maybe it's nothing important but the Princess seemed pretty riled up. Well, I'm tired, see you tomorrow."

Cane was sitting on the bed fidgeting. Finally he spoke: "This is crazy! How can you guys go to sleep? There's no TV! No video games to play! NO T.V.!"

"I thought you were going to check out the projection room?" said Brian.

"Naw, I tried that already. You were right, it's just those plumbing videos, they're really boring. Who wants to know how to close a shutoff valve?" Nicholas smiled but held his tongue. "I want to watch TV! I want to go back to Fourside! At least they had good channels there."

"You're the one who's crazy!" said Nicholas. "The Pro Trucker's Channel is not worth getting blown up for!"

"Oh, man, you had to remind me. Now I'll NEVER know whether he got the last parking place or not. There's got to be a TV in this stupid mansion somewhere, and I'm going to find it, or my name isn't Africanus!"

"Afri what? You never told us that," said Nicholas. Brian said nothing but smirked into his pillow.

"Ooops. Did I say that? Never mind, I'm off. I'll let you know what great shows you missed tomorrow," Cane said as he slammed the door shut behind him.

"Don't open any doors you don't know!" yelled Nicholas after him, but he doubted that Cane heard.

"I guess I won't count on any help from him tomorrow," said Brian. "But then I got through today, it's all right."

"You're not mad at me for pairing you with him, are you?" said Nicholas. "Not that Erin is much better. I couldn't put them together, they'd never get anything done."

"Of course not, what else could you do?" replied Brian. "We'll get it done somehow. We have so far." He paused. "You know, Nicholas, if you think about what we've gotten through in the last couple of days, it's pretty amazing. You know me, I've always been – well, I'm a chicken. I'm usually scared of just about everything. But that Inky made me so mad! It was wierd: I was just too mad to be frightened of him. I should've been; that blade thing was really dangerous! But we won, we fooled him and we won. And now – it's different. I kind of feel like we're going to get through everything. Like somehow we're going to get home despite

it all. Between you and Clara and Tennyson and Mr. Saturn, someone always finds the answer. Well, I must sound pretty stupid. Anyway, don't worry about it. Good night."

Nicholas thought for a moment. "I hope you're right. I hope you're right and Madame Clairvoya isn't. I think. Oh, never mind, good night."

"What were you discussing with the Princess?" asked Tennyson. He and Clara had smaller, adjoining rooms next to the Master Bedroom. They had left the connecting door open so they could talk. "If it's not private, that is."

"No, I guess not. I asked if it was ok – I mean, I told her about how we're trying to get to Ark to see if it would get us home, and seeing as how upset she was about the professor and everything, was that all right?"

"Go on. What did she say?"

"It was kind of strange. She knelt down, like she didn't want to look down on me, and said something like 'Child, perhaps you shouldn't have trusted me with that knowledge.'"

"Was that all?"

"No, then, um, like 'A ruler must make difficult decisions. Sometimes people are hurt as a result. Often those that you have nothing against, even those you like.'" Clara paused. "'Even those you love.' I remember her very distinctly; her eyes looked distant when she said that. Like she was thinking of something else. Remembering something. Then she asked me if I was ready to live the rest of my life here."

"You mean that we might never get home?"

"I think that's what she meant."

"What did you say?"

"I started to say that I was ready for anything, but she was looking right into my eyes – I felt like she was looking inside me, like I shouldn't pretend with her. So I told her how much I would miss my Dad." Clara laughed nervously. "I guess I started to cry a little. She asked about Mom, you see, and..."

"You don't have to tell me this, Clara."

"No, it's ok. Then she hugged me and told me that if it turned out we couldn't get home – well, she said she would be proud to – have me as her daughter. Tennyson, I don't know what to do. We're just kids. How could we win if the grown ups are against us? This is crazy. What if we don't ever get home?" She was crying and trying unsuccessfully to conceal the fact.

Tennyson had come to sit on her bed. He took her hand and smiled. "Of course we'll get home. Just look at all the people – well, whatever – that have helped us. Winnie and Dr. Mario, and Princess Peach, and Tayce T. and Tails. And Hedley, and even Fox. We don't have to do this alone. Besides, how could we fail when we have someone as brave as you?"

Clara pressed his hand against her tear-streaked cheek. "Thank you." She drew a deep calming breath and put his hand back on the covers. "Good night, Tennyson. Sweet dreams."

Tennyson laughed. "Sweet dreams to you too. Night."

"So what do you think? Does she like me?" asked Erin.

Mr. Saturn waddled over to the left-hand bookshelf. "Erin, I'm afraid it's time for a character-building experience. Here." He wiggled his nose and a moderate-sized volume slid out of the shelf and onto the table.

Erin read the title out loud: "'The Big Book of Zelda's Love Life'. Oh. So I guess I'm...uh...not the first guy to be – interested in her?"

"Hint, kid -- you're in chapter three."

"Oh, all right. Let's see... table of contents...Chapter one: Official Suitors... Chapter two: Affairs and Relationships... Chapter three: Crushes, Obsessions, and Stalkers: pages sixty-two to one hundred twenty-three." Erin began to flip through the listings. The Chapter One entries had a large photo and biography of the individuals, along with a blow-by-blow account of their Zelda-related adventures, the whole often occupying several pages. Erin skimmed several entries and then put the book down abruptly: "Wait a minute. What have these guys got that I haven't got?"

"Where should I start? Accomplishments. Athleticism. Charm. Etiquette. Good looks. Haberdashery. Height. Judgment. Maturity. Money. Muscle mass. Political connections. Reputation. Romantic -- ahem -- experience. Savoir faire. Social graces. Shall I go on?"

"No, I get the point. What else is in here?" Chapter two blokes received a one-page writeup with a postage-stamp photo, leaving one paragraph each for the lowly chapter three entries. Erin read one: "Kirby had never been known for social skills, and his pursuit of Zelda was entirely consistent with his reputation. He showed up one evening uninvited at Hyrule Castle trailed by a huge gift-wrapped box carried by Waddledee. As he arrived at 6:07 PM, the bridge was up; in order to cross the moat, Kirby decided to inhale the water temporarily, leaving the crocodiles high and dry, and the fish flopping. When he spat the water back out after crossing, he eroded the foundations of the bridge; repairs cost the kingdom over a million ruppees. One can also imagine the sort of halitosis that would result from filling your mouth with a few thousand gallons of fetid swamp water, hardly conducive to romance. He then

barged into the ball room, where a formal dinner was in progress, and Waddledee plunked the gift box in front of Zelda's throne, squashing several large plates of expensive shellfish and causing one leg of the table to collapse, spilling onion soup on several of the guests. There followed a brief and for the most part incomprehensible speech to his erstwhile beloved, after which the box popped its top and sides to reveal a huge platter of over five hundred McDonoghue's octopus burgers. During transport the buns had separated from the patties and toppings spread over everything, resulting in an unappetizing mixture of bread, ketchup, and seafood. Needless to say, the Princess was unimpressed, but Kirby, far from being distraught at his rejection, calmly sat down at the broken table and in one breath inhaled the majority of the burgers (as well as the table cloth, several napkins, and two candlesticks), packing the rest back into the box to take back to his friends. The Princess was not broken-hearted when he left."

Erin stopped for breath. "Well, looks like someone is even worse than me."

"Never said there wasn't," said Mr. Saturn. "Keep looking."

Erin found himself listed on page 122. "Wow, there're already four guys, a girl, and a Penguin listed after me!"

"There's usually a burst of entries after her talk-show appearances air on the Hyrule Public Affairs Network," said Mr. Saturn. "I think they had a tape running last night."

Erin sighed. "You know, Holmes was always a bachelor anyway."

"I'm not sure that's the right role model, Erin. He was also addicted to morphine. Any other inspiring platonic lives?"

"Gee, let's see. Queen Elizabeth the first?"

"I don't think you'll get much peer group support for that. Besides, wrong gender. Erin, it's probably time to remind you that you're only ten years old. It's a bit early to resign yourself to a lifetime of technical journals and romance novels. Let's just try to get to where we don't spill liquids on our clothes during dinner."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. You know what, Mr. Saturn? I think I like imagining better than I like reality."

"Erin, some folks just get on with the world they find, some try to change the world they live in, and some withdraw from the world altogether," said Mr. Saturn thoughtfully.

Just then Cane barged into the study, looking frustrated. "Is there a TV in here?"

"Nope," said Mr. Saturn. "None in the mansion far as I know."

"Oh, man. I need a snack!" Cane left as abruptly as he entered.

"You forgot the ones who just want to know what's for breakfast," said Erin. "Maybe life is simpler if you don't stretch your dreams too far."

"We are of such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded by a sleep," quoted Mr. Saturn.

Erin yawned. "I don't know if it's time to round out our lives but sleep is a thought. I'm off to the gallery. Night."