

The Boardscape

for Ben

Clois couldn't understand her current predicament. All it usually took to calm her little brother down was to pull back his underwear and let it snap. "Fruit of the Looming Finger," she called it. Today, however, he was particularly persistent in trying to bully her off her own laptop. He banged on her door, fully knowing her planned afternoon of "Clobbering Club" with her online friends. Along with the banging, he insisted that he needed to study history.

She took off her headphones. "Use your own computer!" She didn't answer the door. Last time, he'd charged in and attempted to nab the thing.

"But mine's full of viruses!"

Up until now, Clois had attributed all of his behavioral problems to her parents' abusive naming conventions. But the absurdity of his excuse was so glaring that she asked her online friends for a break, and grudgingly opened the door.

"Cubs, do you really think—no, stay outside!" She blocked his intrusion by putting her foot on his chest, "...that I'd lend you my own laptop when you can't take care of your own?"

"But I need to study history. It's a very important subject."

"I'm sure. Read out of your textbook." And with that, she slammed the door. She went back to her computer to find her player character robbed of all her coins, weapons, and items. Also, she was dead, which meant she'd have to start all the way back from the cradle (this was one of those impractically realistic character development games).

Too angry to calculate how long catching up to her friends would take, she slammed the laptop shut and stormed into Cubby's room, where Tripp sat living it up with his unfair share of Clois's booty. He started and took off his headphones.

"Before you tear into me, let me offer—"

"—To put your trecherous butt down our garbage disposal? I told you to wait!"

Tripp whimpered. "You know how easy it is to manipulate me! Peer pressure upsets my integrity!"

Some scampering nearby set off an alarm in her head, and Clois returned to her bedroom to find Cubby on her computer, not studying history, but trying to delete her account. "It's for your own good!" He cried. Yes, he did indeed cry, but not nearly as much as he was going to.

"And this is for *your* own good." She grabbed a handful of his shorts and dragged him out the door. She made it as far as the living room when she noticed Ivy Lee Nicolson on the couch, upright with her hands folded on her lap. She was Cubby's age. She looked happy and content, which was all wrong for a girl of her academic caliber.

"I assume you're here to study with Cubby?" said Clois.

"Nope. I just walked through a portal that led directly to your living room couch. I may have disoriented the time and space continuum on my way over, though, so if you wake up tomorrow in twelfth century Ireland, accept my apologies beforehand."

"Whatever. If you find a portal that leads to a polar bear's den, let me know so I can throw this idiot through it." She also wanted to dispose of Tripp, but she didn't have *him* by the shorts quite yet.

She tossed her brother through the door. "You need some fresh air and sunshine."

"Yeah, said the lady who plays—"

She slammed the door. As she passed Ivy Lee, the younger girl gave her a frightened look. "I hope you were kidding about the polar bear thing. That sounded vicious."

For that matter, the portal thing sounded suspicious. She dismissed the rebuttal, though. Tripp needed a dressing down. On her way back to the bedrooms, she passed the library, where another uninvited guest stood browsing the shelves.

"If you're looking for Cubby, I just threw him outside."

"Oh, I'm not looking for anyone in particular. Every April's dawn, the illustrious Jamie Damon dismounts his high horse to mingle with the financially unendowed."

There were lots of things wrong with Jamie Damon. Clois hazarded a guess that, underneath the business suit and extra hair gel, he was a perfect replica of Cubby. She hated to be rude to him. Even if he were a replica, he was still much more mannered than the original. So instead of shooing him, she mentally mocked his irritatingly mature vocabulary. *High horse, huh, Jamie? Your horse ain't the one who's high.*

Back in the bedroom, she confronted Tripp, who shielded himself by burying his eyes in his hands. Clois wasn't moved. "I don't believe it's really so hard for you to resist peer pressure. Were you really hard up for coins in this game? I would have gladly given you some if you asked."

Trip looked up. "You would? Really? Great! I just wasted my last thirty grand on cotton candy."

"I'm not lending you anything now, after you robbed me of six straight months of hard work!"

One of the unrelated household tykes cleared their throat. "Not to bottom in..." *Jamie. Figures.* "...but did I hear a fellow claim a coinage shortage? I don't loan freely, like the less discerning of contemporary liberals," he glanced at Clois, "but I do tip for small services."

"I'm about to stop being so polite to you," said Clois. "Don't tip Tripp. He robbed me. And also, it's virtual coins he stole, not *your* kind of cash."

"Say, Clois." The other nine-year-old prodigy entered the room. "Can I look around your house a little more? I think I might have opened up a network of portals around here."

Clois groaned. "As much as I admire your asking permission before you trespass *too* much, this portal joke expired out there in the living room."

There was a knock on the door. The closet door. A knock from the wrong side of it. But Clois stopped caring when Cubby crawled through the window.

"What are you all doing in here? This is my room!"

"How'd you get in? Do you keep your windows unlocked? "

"There's a secret latch outside my window. You're all in my room, now get out! And leave your computer, Tripp. Mine's so virus-infested it needs cough syrup just to come on."

Tripp guarded his computer like an unopened first edition comic book. The knocking from the closet continued.

"Sure, we'll go," said Clois. "But we think there might be a burglar in the closet."

"Well, he has to leave too!"

Before she could intervene, Cubby opened the door, giving everyone else reason to duck, should the home invader have a gun. But the person in the closet was just as surprised to be there as everyone else was to see it was *not* a burglar. At least, she wasn't a known burglar. If she'd ever stolen into somebody's house and stolen things out of their house, they weren't sure, but the thing that they were sure of was that she was Clois's college roommate, Cleopatra Pearl.

Here's the first sentence she said when she and Clois met.

"Wow! Your name is Clois? That's long for *Cloey!* My name is Cleopatra, and that's long for Cleo. Isn't that amazing? We'll be known as 'The Clow-Cley Sisters of The Klugh Clan' campus-wide!"

Here's the second sentence.

"When I get old and shrivelled, I'm going to tie my wrists and ankles to the legs of four eagles. Then they'll fly me westward around the world 210,000 times. That way, I will age backwards and relive my twenties. I'm sure to be married by then, so won't my husband be so impressed!"

And here's the last thing she said before Clois collapsed into an *if-that's-my-roommate-I-should-have-been-more-careful* type coma.

"My favorite thing is black magic. I could use it to cheat on tests, but the courts of the supernatural realm might revoke my license. Besides, why would a know-it-all go to college anyway? There might be any number of know-it-alls. I might need to find them and correct their term papers to make them sound dumber, so if you ever meet a know-it-all, let me know."

That was eight months ago. Since then, Clois had met Tripp and joined the social gaming community, and now here was Cleopatra the magical fairy lady and her petrifyingly lunatic sentences.

"Of all places! I was walking through the kitchen for some Golden Grahams when I accidentally stepped into an alternate dimension."

"See?" said Ivy Lee. "What did I tell you? It's a Charlie Brown ghost network of portals. Anyone could enter this house, if they just knew the right whereabouts."

Cleopatra sized up Ivy Lee with an eager twinkle in her eye. "Are you one of those miniature know-it-alls? Because if you are, I'll have to follow you around and evaluate all you know."

"Hey, do all of you mind?" said Tripp, gently tucking his laptop under some comic books on Cubby's desk. "We're having an argument over online games."

"I totally mind," said Cubby. "Out. Now. All five of you."

He threw such a drastic fit that even Clois didn't have the nerve to challenge it, but that was mostly because all of her quarrel power was reserved for Tripp. Out in the hall awaited her mother, Judy Schulz, a rather large woman who took up most of the hallway. She had a laundry hamper under her arm, so she definitely meant business today.

"Oh, you and Cubby. Never introducing a poor, out-of-fashion single woman to your friends. You are friends, aren't you?"

"Oh, this is Tripp and Cleo. We all met at college. This is Ivy Lee and Jamie, who I suppose are here to study with Cubby."

"Ah, a groom and bridesmaid already, and it's only your second semester of college." Judy laughed so loud that the pictures on the wall shook. The one of her ex-husband, Reuben Damon, fell from its hook and shattered against the opposite wall. "Oh... well, serves him right. Excuse me, dears. Cubbins's room wants picking up. Or at least the clothes on the floor of it do."

As the five of them parted to let Judy by, Ivy Lee scratched her head. "Hmm... Cubby never said anything to me about studying... but I'd better check this house first."

"I'll go with you," said Cleo. "With a name so close to Ivy League, you know... *it all*, don't you?" She shrugged. "Well, I guess I'll find out in a sec."

While those two scoured the house for Ivy's highly unethical quantum-leaping experiment, Jamie went to the kitchen to make himself a "grown-up's beverage." Clois and Tripp continued their argument in the living room. She frisked him for any smigeon of guilt or remorse.

"So it took you less than five minutes to spend every last coin you stole from me, huh?"

"Come on, it's not like *you* never stole from other players."

Clois smacked her head. "Completely different situation. They were well aware of what I was doing, while I was doing it. We were on a break, you and me."

"Hey, I wasn't the only one who plundered you. I mean, don't Levi and Aaron deserved as much of a scolding as I'm getting?"

"Yes, you just happen to be in the room right now, making excuses about peer pressure."

Judy came into the room, the clothes hamper full to the brim and her face dark and grim. "Clois, you need to start thinking about the example you're setting for Cubby. He said he's now fighting a gaming addiction."

"Huh?" Clois looked at Tripp, the very picture of a gaming addict, and then back at her mother. "Cubby doesn't play online games. Besides, his computer is broken."

"Oh, please." Judy waved away her daughter's refutation. "He's just now deleting his online profile. Now, I want you scamps to stay out of the hallway. I need to vacuum and take out the trash."

She went back down the hallway, where two other scamps were already running around willy-nilly. Clois came to a realization.

"Tripp, you left your laptop in Cubby's room." She shook her head and tsk'd, while Tripp darted down the hall. Clois hoped with supreme schadenfreude that whatever Cubby was doing would be as much a setback for Tripp as his treachery was for her. The mixed bawling and screeching was reassuring if barely audible over the vacuum cleaner. As she sat back in a La-Z Boy, she soaked up Tripp's tearful declaration that he had to rebuild his character all the way back from the womb, while Cubby preached the importance of daily sunshine and natural air.

"This coffee is going spare." Jamie entered bearing a teacup on a porcelain saucer. Coffee in a teacup? It looked like he forgot which drink he was making. "Do you want it? I heard your quarreling with that Tripp fellow, and I thought you might want a weaponry advantage. You know, something to cast into his eyes should he demonstrate aggression."

Cleopatra glided into the room on a skateboard. Because the floor was carpet, that was the most impressive thing she'd ever done in front of Clois. She grabbed the teacup for herself as she passed by. She managed to crash into the kitchen without spilling it, then indulged in her knack for idiotic sentences.

"You poor thing, you poured the wrong kind of drink into the wrong kind of cup." She waltzed back into the den with a coffee mug. "I'll bet this is the work of those sneaky portals." She then stuck her face into the mug. "Helloooooo! Any portals down there?"

Jamie raised an eyebrow. "I don't know a dollop about this portal gab, but I selected a teacup because the coffee mugs were a trifle too high. I'm relatively bumfuzzled that even *you* could reach it. If you're not going to drink it—"

"And your birth was an accident that even your blobbiferous mother... oh spoot," Judy had turned off the vacuum, revealing Tripp's tirade. "I expected to be unexpectedly evicted in just a second, but first, I'm going to evict *you*, Cubby Schulz!"

He tore out of the room with such zeal that he bumped Judy with the kid he had by the collar. Judy stumbled back into the part of the wall where her husband had hung. Next thing they knew, she had visible lightening bolts slithering around her body like an asteroid belt of snakes. These electrical snakes hissed, cracked, and popped as they devoured her. Clois sprung into the hallway, past Tripp and her brother, only to grab onto nothingness as her mother vanished without so much as a cry of help.

"Stop! Everyone! Nobody move."

Clois looked up, and there was Ivy Lee, as still as an ailing poplar.

"She's fallen into a portal. I am positively convinced that scattered around this hallway is an unstable network of portals. I promise, your mom is fine, the same thing happened to me before I ended up on your living room couch. I'm sure it happened to Jamie as well, and Cleo before she came out of the closet. Isn't that right?"

Clois looked around. The others stood startled by her mom's disappearance, but Cleopatra was more suspicious of Ivy Lee's overly competent knowledge of what happened.

"So you *are* one of those pint-sized know-it-alls." She shrugged. "Oh well. At least you're not going to college. You'd probably know it all over your own classroom."

"I'm going in after my mom," Clois wound up and slammed into the wall. No luck. It didn't even collapse..

"You can't do that," said Ivy Lee. "Once you pass through a portal, it closes in that place and opens somewhere else."

"Well, so long as Mrs. Schulz is okay," Tripp grabbed Cubby again, "this runt is going *out*."

"Stop!" Ivy Lee waved her hands around in protest. "I don't know where all of the portals lead, but if you throw him through a window, you could be quantum teleporting him to an active volcano."

Tripp grinned and slobbered. "Good!"

"And you might go with him," said Clois. She turned on Ivy Lee. "These things are invisible, dangerous, and you say my mom is okay? I don't believe you."

"Ah," said Cleopatra. "So you *don't* know it all, after all."

"Come to think of it," said Jamie, "the path I tread from my own abode to yours was criminally brief. I do wonder that the road, asking of a ten minute walk at least, took a mere three steps today."

"It's because you walked through a portal," explained Ivy Lee. "And no, not all portals are dangerous. They're not all invisible, either. Now everyone step exactly where I tell you to, exactly how I tell you to. I'll lead you to the mother of all portals."

"That had better lead to the mother of all... the... me and Cubby."

Clois wasn't a fan of taking orders from a nine-year-old, even if said nine-year-old wasn't her little brother. Crab-walking to the game closet felt juvenile and degrading, but at least she didn't have to do the chicken dance, like Tripp. Cleopatra was proud to take Ivy Lee's orders, as her path required the highland fling. Cubby had to do the turbo mooner. Served him right. As for Jamie, he had to do the tazmanian devil, complete with the "Hblabluh Plllt!" language so as not to jeopardize the presence of his lips and tongue. Ivy Lee did the exorcist, which, from Cleopatra's perspective, gave her an unfair view of everyone around her. As infuriating as this dance-business was, Clois needed assurance her mom was safe. She hated this portal business. If dancing like a moron was the only way to make it stop, then so be it.

"You know," said Cubby, "we probably wouldn't have lost our mom to that portal if we played outside more often."

Ivy Lee turned to face him before she kept on turning. She frowned. "Cubby, you dummy. Do you even know what a portal is? I'm doing this for the science fair. My parents have a lot of money saved up for college. I can't let my brains go to waste."

"Aw, don't go all Alberta Einstein on me. Tripp and Clois are the ones with scrambled brains from all those online games."

"Oh yeah?" snarled Tripp. "I'm gonna peck your butt cheek when it comes out again if you don't shut up about the great outdoors."

"Oh, you mortals are always so grumpy!" Cleopatra kicked a landscape painting off the wall. "That's why you're so mortal. I have to say, the highlands are marvelous things to fling."

Clois, against Ivy Lee's instructions, edged close to the one she blamed the most and whispered in her ear. "How can you tell me my mom's safe but tell Tripp that some of these portals lead to active volcanoes? If my mom's boiling in lava, then the only career in your future will be a penitentiary career."

"Grouch," snapped Ivy Lee. Then she whispered, "I'm helping you find your mother whether she's molten ash or just in your neighbor's yard. Sheesh. It's no wonder you college girls are so jealous of me."

"I happen to know some of our neighbors raise vicious dogs. That is not very reassuring."

"Oh, shut up! Do you want me to help you find your mom or barf all over your sweater? I can do it, you know. I'm good at doing the exorcist."

She wouldn't have the opportunity. They made it to the game closet without stepping through any portals. Ivy Lee opened the doors. Over the stack of classic board games was a warp in the electromagnetic field. Although the depth was three dimensional, it looked like an evil spirit was sucking on the view through a funnel. It royally freaked Clois out. Even Ivy Lee allowed herself to sweat. The boys struggled to use one another as a shield with Jamie and Cubby teaming up to push Tripp to the front. Cleopatra, on the other hand, looked angry.

"It feeds on distrust and animosity," she said. "I heard you and Tripp arguing over paltry online games. Sometimes, when friends bicker over the wrong things, the transdimensional balance of right and wrong tips to the wrong end."

"Uh, Cleo? Speaking of the wrong things, the sudden upbringing of this topic is one of them."

"Besides," said Ivy Lee, "didn't you spend the whole afternoon complaining that I knew too much?"

"And that *you* know how to tear wormholes in the fabric of time and space is proof of that."

"Oh, so now you're going to blame us for this?" growled Clois. "If anybody deserves blame, it's Tripp over there. *He's* the one who shoved my mom into who-knows-where."

"Hey, I heard that!" Tripp overpowered Cubby and Jamie by sitting on their faces, forgetting his goal to be less exposed to the closet than they. "If you're mom's just a neighbor's yard, then just start there. "

"That'd be a wild goose chase, stupid! " snarled Ivy Lee. "Portals follow a pattern, I just... don't know what it is yet. "

"I'm not finished. Cubby's the one who shoved her, not me. I wouldn't have gotten so violent with *him* if I didn't have to start my Clobbering Club player all the way back from a zygote."

Cleopatra's brow darkened. "You may have to go back even further if you don't stop now."

Tripp stood up, presumably to argue more fearsomely. Clois pinched his lips shut so she could have her say. "I was happy. I had my revenge." She looked at Cleo. "And here *you* are, bringing stuff up."

Cubby gasped for breathe. "See? This is what happens when you lie around inside on the computer. The great cosmic hoo-hah falls apart."

"Hey, stop!" said Ivy Lee. "It's getting worse!"

Jamie brushed himself off. "Ooh... hey, the suction does look like it's gathering strength."

"You're one to talk!" Tripp poked Cubby on the forehead with his long, skinny finger. "You just wanted us out so you could screw with our accounts! And you said you wanted to study history."

Ivy Lee slapped her hands over her mouth. The life in her eyes wilted. "You promised you'd never study without me! Cubby, how could you?" She slapped him upside the forehead with the butt of her hand. "That promised got stuck in front of your skull! You couldn't so much as answer a study question without me."

"Here's a question I'd like you to answer," said Cleopatra Pearl. "Now that we've awakened the portals, shall we monopolize them? Or would that get us thrown in the dungeon? I'd like to operate on them myself, but the public might go to battle over them."

She had a blank, hollow look in her eyes, and in that moment, Clois realized that she'd gone into a trance. Who could tell what she saw when she got like that? Maybe she caught a glimpse of Clois's mother through the system of portals.

"Cleo!" Clois grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a minor shake. "Tell us what you see!"

"Huh? Oh, I must have gone into a trance. You should try it sometime, it's very refreshing. Now, where was I?"

Ivy Lee said, "You were just accusing me of knowing it all?"

"Oh yeah, that's where I was. Like I was saying, I'd like to bewitch this portal so that *we* could walk through it, if you'll let me."

"Uh, " Ivy Lee gazed down that gaping whirlwind of a master portal. "...no. I think it's better if Mrs. Schulz finds us first. I can't let you do that."

"Aw, heck, I'll do it anyway."

Like a hypnotized E.T, Cleopatra dipped her glowing fingertip into the sucking warp. Her finger to the length of a saber, then the warp spread down her arm and encapsulated the rest of her. Once Cleo was sucked in, Clois realized that the mother portal had had its first taste of human flesh, so naturally it wanted more of that succulent goodness, devouring Tripp, Ivy Lee, Jamie, Cubby and Clois. Clois wasn't around to see any further carnage, but she did wonder how much stronger each meal made it. It probably sucked in the whole house in search of more prey. Now she had Cleo to be angry at. The only one she wasn't mad at for the moment was Jamie. Still, that kid was fruity.

Wherever they were was a far cry from Conifer Avenue. It looked more like Millionaire Acres, the likes of Jamie's residence. Before them all lay a long stretch of sidewalk, turning and curving over hills and valleys. Estates of vulgar wealth sat on either side with no discernable road, although the other direction, hamlets of paltry presentability (cottages and huts, mostly) awaited.

"You know," said Tripp. "We'd probably end up in this place anyway, whether or not you cast a spell, Cleo."

"No you wouldn't! You heard Ivy Lee, we'd end up in some doggy-bone part of the neighborhood. You know what that sounds like to me? Suh-*necceewwzer!*"

"Who cares?" said Cubby. "Let's just go find Mom."

Jamie looked longingly in the expensive direction. It was closed off by a gate and had a noticeable bulge in the vision.

"Hey, Ivy Lee... you see that bulge?" Clois attempted to poke it, but it repelled her finger. Ivy Lee attempted the same thing, and the result was the same as forcing two identical magnets together.

"Why don't we ask that guy?" Cleo pointed to a fancy old man with a moustache behind a kiosk.

Ivy Lee scampered over to introduce herself and explain their intentions.

"A fine lass!" exclaimed the man. "Well-mannered lass. The foot road before you leads in one direction. It's the road to wealth and prosperity. Gather ye 'round aspiring comrades. This path leads to the other side of the golden gate, but you must buy your way up first."

"Oh, so that's the spell you used," said Clois. "You delayed our search and rescue mission by turning us all into game pieces."

"Stiff upper lip, now, Clois," said Jamie. "These vile wormholes are liable to tug our bunnies unless we tug at theirs first."

"But we can't buy anything. We don't have any money."

"Ah, but that is the reason I am here!"

The old man dug into his pockets and pulled out several wads of dollar bills.

"Go forth, ye ambitious moguls! Monopolize these myriad acres."

He handed equal amounts to the girls, and then to Tripp and Cubby, but stopped when he got to Jamie.

"Ah, a prep. You shan't wring any finance out of me; you dress so pretentiously."

Jamie glowered. "Look who's talking."

"Forget it, Jamie," said Clois. "Just take two fifty from the rest of us."

"Wait," said Tripp, "That's not how you play monopoly."

Clois rolled her eyes. "And here I thought you caved when it came to peer pressure. No, it's not how monopoly is played. But..." she stared down the bigotted top-hat man... "Neither is bankrupting the richest player at the outset." He wasn't moved, but Clois would rather not waste her time. "Just give him the money, Tripp. Or I'll sock you in the eye."

A screeching whistle interrupted their charity. "Stop in the name of the rules!"

A policeman, short but armed, ran their way. He stared up at Clois with beady, bloodshot eyes. "Don't even think of playing this game the communist way. Redistribute one cent of that wealth, and I'll throw every last one of you in the slammer."

Cubby checked his cash for coins. "But we don't have any cents."

The officer poked him with the pistol. "You don't look like you got any sense, sonny."

Jamie shook with fright. He tugged on Clois's jacket and whispered, "That gun looks a mean brute. Could we perish in this presumably virtual land?"

"I... I personally would rather not risk it." She said to the officer, "Well, okay then. We'll be on our way."

"I'll be watching you little punks."

Tripp looked unforgivably relieved to be keeping his cash. Cleopatra gave Jamie a pat on the back. "Tell you what, kiddo. Any ritzy joint we stop at, we'll stop at together. I'll cover the expenses for the both of us."

"That's awfully kind of you." He wiped away a tear. "I suppose this comes down to penance. In my youth, I was a terrible spendaholic..."

"Snap out of it." Clois caught up to the two of them. "It's not like this has any impact on your actual real life money. Hey, Cleo, so, what's the deal here? Why turn all the board games into giant explorable worlds?"

Cleo pondered this for a moment. Then said, "Let me put it this way. You know how we all wound up in your house and couldn't get back?"

"But there were portals in my house. One of them might have led to... wherever you were staying."

"No ma'am. I was in Hong Kong visiting family. All of your portals lead to who-knows-where. That's why I made it so they lead to certain board game dice-rolling action."

"And my mom? Did you teleport her to this dimension?"

"No, but if she steps through another portal, it will lead to one of your board games."

They strolled along the sidewalk. Each house they passed had a kiosk in front of it with the same fancy old man in front of it. Each time they walked by, he would try to talk them into purchasing that property.

"Baltic Avenue! The price drops no lower. You shan't find a more affordable establishment."

"Encourage literacy! Buy Reading Railroad! Hurry, before someone else gets to it!"

"Stake your claim on the electric company! Everyone looks up to you, weilder of modern lightening power."

The only one buying anything was Cubby. And he bought everything they walked by. He tried purchasing the jail. "Why do you think? I want to put you guys in there someday. Or at least you, Tripp. You sat on my face."

"You wouldn't have the guts!"

Tripp was the one without guts. He ran like crazy towards the end of the block. Not that he had anything to worry about; the jail was not for sale. Cubby was crushed.

"Come on, we can't waste time! Mom's still lost, and all you're doing is holding us up."

The five of them had to jog to catch up to Tripp, doing their best to ignore the kiosks of men with their charlaton ways. Harder to ignore were an increasing number of oddly placed bungalos in front of the avenue yards. From the windows of these places, homeowners watched them through binoculars.

"They've got their checkbooks out at the ready," noticed Ivy Lee. "They're all just waiting to press charges for trespassing."

"Bologne!" said Cubby. "We're on the sidewalk; they can't charge us just for passing by."

They darted past Virginia avenue, dodged the Pennsylvania coal train, ran under a water tower, and jumped a very tempting treasure chest. The owners of the house on Tennessee avenue even left his house with a cashbox in tow.

They found Tripp exploiting an ATM placed randomly in the middle of the parking lot. "I hit the Jackpot, guys! Thirty tax-free grand and finders keepers!"

Clois, out of breathe and dizzy from the chase, read the sticker on the side. "Whosoever reaches this cash dispensing machine shall collect all tax-paid dollars since the last lot arrived."

The injustice of it all nearly made Clois's brain do the exorcist. Why fate had cruelly selected the group cheapskate to win the parking lot lottery, she didn't have time to fathom.

She did, however get the last word.

"Great. It's not like you'll get the chance to spend it, however."

"What are you talking about? I won it fair and square."

"You won *monopoly* money, moron. You won't get to buy anything because these cash-crazed coots already got here and bought the most expensive property already."

Tripp looked down at his cash, then ahead at the many houses crowded around Kentucky Avenue. There, the pruney, wrinkled neighbors stood behind marble desks, awaiting the dimension-hopping sixsome's approach with a ferocious cash register.

"Where did all these people come from, anyway?" said Clois.

Ivy Lee, the last to arrive, panted and wheezed as she exhaled her answer. "If I had to guess... I'd say they're... all here by accident... as if they stepped through a portal... and ended up here."

"See? What did I tell you?" Cleo puffed up and stuck her thumb at her chest. "Cleo does the trick. We'll find your mom in no time."

Clois raised an eyebrow to this supposition. "Sure we will... I just hope we don't have to sift through the entirety of the rest of the world first..."

A woman of sketchy composure attempted to scoot her 500 pound marble kiosk closer to the sidewalk. "Don't even think about walking by my house without paying me my dues."

She sounded to Clois like she was due for a punch in the face. Clois saw to it that she delivered one, only to notice the squat officer running towards her, brandishing a baton.

Delays. Such damnable delays.

"Cubby, I'm going to jail now." Burning tears trailed down her cheeks. "I won't be with you to help find Mom, but promise me you'll listen to Cleo and Ivy Lee. They'll know where to take you."

Cubby sniffed and rubbed his eye. "Goodbye, Clo. But no, I'm not promising you anything, Princess Bossy Bra. I'll promise... um, Jamie. I'll promise to find Mom for him."

The policeman, huffing and puffing like an artificial lung, produced a pair of handcuffs. And tried to cuff Tripp.

"Hey, what are you doing? She's the one guilty of assault, not me!"

"Not against... puff... the rules, sonny. And you... huff... were the one speeding."

"Wait," said Clois, "So I could punch anyone in the face, and that's not against the law?"

"Don't bother me, ya dumb broad. I'm trying to arrest this chucklehead."

Clois's face-punching mood had kicked into high gear. Since she wasn't keen on leaving a close personal friend, however miserly he was, marooned in another dimension, she went all kami-hami-ha on the policeman's face. Then they ran down Illinois Avenue like the Choco-whoopi man was escaping their clutches in his ice cream truck.

Cleo, apparently aroused by Clois's uninhibited aggression, picked up Ivy Lee and slung her over her shoulder. She snatched a wheelbarrow from Marvin Gardens and scooped Cubby up into it.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Protested Cubby as he tumbled around alongside Ivy Lee.

"Like I said, we're in this together! You got no cash? You got no problem! Big mama Cleo gonna pay ya rent!"

She turned around, back to the water tower and pulled out a wand. She punctured a hole in it so as to cause a cascade, through which she burst, wheelbarrow headlong, before doubling her speed and catching the attention of another officer Portlyworth.

"No speeding! Hey, get your felonious keysters back here!"

As Clois outdistanced the boys, she realized that Cleopatra had mistaken Cubby for Jamie. She didn't blame her, though. Not only were the boys similar on the level of identical twins, but Jamie's lack of monopoly cash matched Cubby's lack of formal attire. Plus all that black magic school probably pushed out the importance of social distinction.

It was worth noting that houses of multiple stories began to appear on the more expensive avenues. These people had placed them ruthlessly close to the sidewalk. By the time they got to Pennsylvania Avenue, proprietors hungry for sight-seeing fees had left their perch to join in the chase. Jamie was losing his breath.

"Dash this aerobic necessity!" he cried. "I do believe I am adopting that Lee girls' respiratory ailments!"

"It all comes from sitting behind a desk, brockering stocks all day," scolded Tripp.

They were almost there. A four-star hotel with a golden star in front of it blocked their way, as did a security gaurd built like the thing he gaurded. He stood in defensive tackle stance, drooling over the incoming barrel-pushing Cleo and her soaking wet passengers. Clois expected the three to pancake against the impact of his impressive torso, but before a battle cry of "Filthy Gold Riches," the gaurd whimpered and hopped aside, allowing Cleo to crash through the wall.

Certain he'd take a bribe in that condition. Clois wadded up her own monopoly dollars and threw it at him. "Enjoy it while you can; you're about to get trampled."

The hotel guests were so upset and confounded by Cleo's taunting (who wants a ride? Not you, buster, you're too heavy!) that Clois's run though the breakfast parlor was paltry mischief. Cleo put a hole through the other wall, too, which made Clois wonder if there was some hidden rhino blood in her family history.

In any case, the next portal awaited them. "Hey, wait up, Cleo, we need to all go through it together."

"She's right," said Ivy Lee. "It could close after we pass through it. We should wait on Tripp and Jamie."

"Nooooo!"

Tripp slammed into the rest, forcing them all through the portal. In the next dimension, the lights were out, the floor was damp, and Tripp lay atop the dog pile.

"What's the deal?" Clois shoved him off. "Now Jamie's gone because of you. He might be stuck there forever."

"Trust me, Clois, we couldn't help him. Last I saw, that guard was tucking him into his beefy sweaty armpit. He didn't offer a bribe."

"You had thirty thousand dollars. That should have been enough for all of our bribes. And don't bring up the rules, we were already on the run from the law."

"Silence!" Boomed a thunderous voice in the dark. The gang stood up and squinted. Whatever had ordered them silent towered above them against the dim moonlight rays. Barred windows permitted only the slightest of nocturnal light. It was then that Clois realized she was in a dungeon, which could only mean that the beast above was a dragon.

"You trecherous fiends were on the run from the law. Now, you shall run no longer."

A ring of lamps suspended from a chain lit up, courtesy of the dragon's breath. His face was red, rugged, and bovine, with an iron ring through his nostrils. He positioned his head over them and looked down.

"You are held here for crimes in other dimensions. You, Tripp McCommas, you are guilty of theft and conspiracy."

Embers rained from his jowells as he spoke. Clois sidestepped them and took up the invictiveness.

"See, Tripp? Screw your peer pressure excuses."

"And you, Clois Schulz, you are guilty of assault. The evidence against you is legion."

Clois groaned. She punched a board game man in the face, for crying out loud. It wasn't like he corresponded to any real life cop, was it?

"Some of that evidence is her wrestling me unfairly, right?" said Cubby. The dragon's stern look grew darker still. "You, Cubbins Schulz-Damon, are guilty of unregulated womannap. Is it not already unlawful to take an unwilling captive from her home? But you, without consort or care, sent the woman Judith Schulz through the door to a parallel dimension, unaware of her destination and without so much as an escort goon."

"But that was an accident! Besides, that was kind of Ivy Lee's fault, too."

"Cubby, I'm one of the only two people who can find your mom, remeber?"

The dragon, however, was focused on the first of his excuses.

"An accident? A shameful excuse! Flukes of will and intention are the most detestable of crimes. There are no stronger indications of unattended development and motivation. As for you, Ivy Lee Nicolson, you are guilty of savaging the space and time continuum. It would have been easy to skirt the claws of the law in your East California home. I'm certain nobody has ever noticed the portals, invisible as they are in that world."

The dragon removed his head from his condesceing pose, then leaned back to inhale. The rest of his body came to light, and it was a vast, copious one. His lunar white chest broadened and stretched over a global belly, and Clois covered her head to await the rier of magma she thought would erupt, but all that came out was a cloud of smoke, the emblem of the great creature's sigh.

"It's almost a shame," he said, "That you would meet your consequences elsewhere. Such less heartache would ensue, would only judgment knock upon the instant of treason."

There was a hint of age in the dragon's eye, an almost grandfatherly warmth. Cleo had to remind herself that she was in a dungeon, that she was a prisoner to him, to deflect thoughts of embracing him around the leg.

"Aw, it can't be all bad," said Cleo. "You big party pooper. That was one snore of a family reunion back in Hong Kong. I'm glad to be here."

One jerk of his head, and all sorrow in his eye vanished. "You. Cleopatra Pearl, possessor of precious supernatural gifts. Your crime is the deliberate unlicensed use of black magic to exacerbate the transdimensional network."

Cleo played coy, cutting her gaze and shuffling her feet. "Deliberate unlicensed, maybe, but not deliberately unlicensed."

"Huh?" said Tripp. "Nothing makes sense any more. I feel like I'm in a *dub...*ngeon."

A wave of howling erupted around, like some combination of tropical birds, prehistoric apes, and a woodwind concerto gone feral. The dragon, still glowering from Cleo's perky sassings, turned around to silence the other prisoners.

"Cleo," said Clois, "You didn't tell us you need a license to cast spells. This is illegal on a cosmic level."

Cleo folded her arms. "That's what my pastor said. Want to know what made him change his mind? His wife couldn't cook. She couldn't even pour a decent glass of milk. So I stuck my finger in his refrigerator—"

"Woah there," said Tripp, "Once you start taking over the wifely duties of the epistles, you're really ploughing through biblical rules."

"You're not talking about religion now, are you?"

The college kids turned. Ivy Lee sat curled up in a corner of the cell. Her eyelids were red and puffy, her hair still matted from the water tower run.

Cleo knelt beside her. "Why are you crying? You should be proud of discovering this place."

"I didn't want to discover this. I only wanted to develop a safe, inexpensive way of travel that doesn't fog up the sky with exhaust fumes."

"Shush, not too loud now," said Clois. "That might be what the big red lizard's in for."

As a matter of fact, he had started listening in. Clois, while keeping her ears open to the conversation, kept her eyes on the reptilian warden.

"Don't be so down on yourself," said Cleo. "Flunking your own scientific tinkering is all part of the learning ladder. Take it from somebody who spent years trying to nail witchcraft and sorcery. Why, it's a wonder I wasn't thrown in the dungeon sooner. I spend so much time turning the aristocracy into random kinds of amphibians that I've gone completely loony."

"Frogs, huh?" said Cubby. "Sounds like what we did to Jamie. He was my twin. We're never going to find another guy like him again. How could you older kins do a thing like that?"

The dragon started.

"You abandoned a child?" This was asked of Cleo, even though the bulk of abandoning belonged to Tripp. Clois saw to it that that fact was laid bare.

"Actually we tried to wait. Ebenezer Scrooge here pushed us through the portal."

"Tsk. And who made that portal possible?"

"Hey," objected Tripp, "We left him with a really rich couple."

"Yeah," snorted Cubby. "Rich couple of mobs."

"But you still left him." The dragon hung his head, while Ivy Lee raised hers. She excused herself from the consolation of the adults.

Maybe she saw something that no one older could. Along with lost innocence went a sort of natural insight. Clois, since completing high school, had already forgotten the value of face-to-face interaction, likely because of her tendency towards confrontations and crass remarks. To protect her dignity – not to mention the faces of those who angered her. Ivy Lee hadn't even shown the slightest discomfort when she appeared on the couch back at the house. Cleopatra was wrong; Ivy Lee wasn't a know-it-all. She hadn't learned to withhold trust.

"You're lonely, aren't you?" She held her hand out between the bars. She couldn't reach him. "You were abandoned as a hatchling, and that's why you won't let us go, isn't it?"

"No, you remain here for the aforementioned indictments." He saw her hand and nudged it. The contact hissed and Ivy Lee jerked back, but the dragon kept his muzzle at her level. "You are correct, though, in your assessment of my origins."

Ivy Lee made another attempt to stroke his muzzle. Even in the dark, there was no mistaking the ribbon of steam arising from her finger.

"The local chivalry saw to my orphanage while the law saw to my exploitation. Not wanting to waste so formidable a stature, they appointed me dungeon warden." He stood, looking out towards the light. "Since I never met my mother, I can never ascertain whether or not she would have approved."

He sighed and curled into his own personal brood. Ivy Lee gave up. She might have intended to talk the great beast into setting them all free, but that wasn't her skill. She didn't have the know-how. "My parents don't approve of my experiments." She returned to her own corner. "I don't blame them. I don't blame you guys, either, if you think I belong here."

"No," said Cleo. "This is where I belong. *Sim-Sim Salla-Vim!*"

"You're not about to cast a spell, are you?" said Tripp. "Isn't that the reason you're here in the first place?"

"Bet your gaming socks it is. But that doesn't mean it can't be the reason you guys all go free."

She squatted and jumped. Or, her head jumped, and the length of her neck along with it. She hit the roof, possibly loosening some ceiling cobbles.

"*Yowee...* Well, onto step two. Step back, you guys, time to loosen mama's belt."

The warning was useless. Too surprised by Cleo's unsightly giraffe impersonation, they were none more prepared for the accompanying hippo disguise. She started glowing, and Clois, struck by her roommate's hip, saw an over-manicured claw coming to peel her off and lift her up.

The dragoness that Cleo had become had a maniteeish face. Sitting before that imposing puss, Clois could only hope she wouldn't ask, "Well, how do I look?" She was aiming for dragon standards of beauty, not human.

"Take this good luck kiss, you worry warts, and pass it on to Mama Schulz for me." Cleo's lips couldn't form the required pucker, so she slobbered soap suds all over them instead

"Eewww! Kissed by my sister's roommate?" Cubby tried his darnedest to wipe it off.

She set them down, then turned to the big scaly warden. "Be ashamed of your orphanhood no longer."

He'd apparently been watchng since she hit the roof. Clois couldn't read anything beyond surprise in his expression; Alarm? Rejection? Submission? They certainly weren't getting any closer to her mom with substitue dragon mom. But Cleo leaned in for a side whisper." Don't worry, my family's been doing dragons for generations. Just give me a sec to find the portal."

She hopped into the air and didn't come down. Her head vanished into the roof.

"Whoops, found it."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Cried Clois. "Come on!"

She led the four to scamper up Cleo's body, wedging themselves under the hula hoop of the enclosing portal.

"Gak! It's strangling me!" gagged Dragoness Cleo. "Big boy down there won't want a headless mama!"

"Okay then," said Clois, "On the count of three, everybody push your edge of the portal!" There was one at each hypothetical corner, snuggling against Cleo's neck. "One.... two.... threrrrruuun!"

They'd made enough space for Cleo to drop out and the rest to fall into the next dimension.

"Goodbye, Cleo," Ivy Lee waved a farewell to where Cleo's chunky head had been. "I hope he accepts you as his mother."

"Yeah," said Cubby, "Even though he saw every second of your mighty morphin' power."

"Uh, guys?" said Tripp, "She can't hear you."

"Shut up, Tripp. Let them give her her departing eulogy. For all we know, you could be the next one we leave behind."

Tripp put on his shrinking hermit schtick. In Clois's view, he wasn't good at looking victimized.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you, Clo? Where are we, anyway?"

They were in some kind of bleached waiting room. Doctors and nurses walked by with rolling gurneys.

"Good gravy," Cubby turned pale, "I sure hope this isn't where Mom's landed."

"Nah, none of those gurneyed patients were blobby enough," said Tripp. "Come to think of it, would your mom even fit on a gurney without crushing it?"

"You take that back, poodle-face!"

"Shut up, both of you!" said Clois. "Now, I can't see Cleo getting lost in a parallel dimension, but Jamie got kidnapped. I think that we might have to rescue two people now."

"So... just two people?"

Ivy Lee took a seat on the waiting room sofa. A twitchy receptionist tapped her pen on the sign-in sheet, and that got Ivy Lee's attention. She beckoned the other three over. "You see that lady at the desk?" she whispered. "Do you think she's always worked here?"

"What do you mean?" said Clois. "Why should that matter?"

"Well... it's just that... you know how in Aladdin, the Genie creates an entire new country for him to rule over?"

"Those were just ghosts," said Cubby.

"That may be true, but... could that receptionist, those doctors and nurses, the monopoly landpeople and the dragon all be ghosts too? I have a theory. I don't have much to back it up, but I have a theory that when I opened up the portal network, I didn't just open up portals in different places. I opened them up in different times, like, one in the sixties, another in the twenties. I think some people may have stepped through these portals and ended up here."

"What's that got to do with anything?" said Cubby.

"I think... some of these people used to live in the real world. Our world. I just can't believe that, however good she is with magic, Cleo could enchant sapience into board game pieces. I think some people from across history may have stepped into one of my time portals and ended up here. Since they didn't know where to look to get out, they resolved to make a surviving here, in the board game universe. They may have even lost their memories too."

"That dragon should have known where to look," argued Clois. "It was awfully cramped in that dungeon. All he had to do was raise his head."

"But remember when I said that when one portal closes, another opens up? That one probably just appeared when we left monopoly. And now that we left Dungeons and Dragons, another one must be open here in... uh, where are we, anyway?"

"Oh no," Clois buried her head in her palms. "Tell me we don't have to do surgery."

"Eh!k!" said Tripp. "I'm copping out on that one!"

"Fine," said Cubby. "Who needs you anyway? But what makes you think we get to do surgery, Clois? We're not the doctors, *they* are."

He pointed to some snooty medical couple. They turned their noses up as though walking down the street with a pedigree dog rather than pushing along a seriously ill senior citizen.

"Guys," said Clois, "we're in the game 'operation.' Any moment now, the intercom's going to come on and—"

"Dr. Schulz, Dr. McCommas, Dr. Schulz-Damon."

"Hey," said Ivy Lee, "How come I'm not a doctor?"

"Because you don't know it all," said the receptionist. "And besides, you're the patient!"

Ivy Lee blushed. She stormed over to the desk, pulled over a chair to stand on, and banged her fists on the surface.

"Excuse me, I am no patient."

"Well," purred the woman, "You are certainly *not patient*. That is as clear as the scars all over your skin."

"What scars? Listen to me, you smug checkout lady, I am as qualified to play the one board game based on metaphor surgery as the doctors that live here. I'm the one who put you here, you know."

"Oh don't you just wish." The receptionist curled her lips in a smirk imitation of a horse's sneer. "Wouldn't you just love to hog every last drop of credit for that portal invention. But no, I heard your little chat over there with your friends. And I'm certain I never stepped through one of your portals."

"What makes you so sure?"

"My ex-husband came up with the very same thing. He opened up a trandimensional window and pushed me through it, and here I am, cursed to forever call on doctors and their patients. A ratty fate, but not nearly as damnable as the one you're getting."

Clois intervened while Tripp and Cubby cowered on the couch.

"Wait, so *multiple* people are building these trans-thingummydinkers? My friend here is underaged, but it sounds like your ex-husband belongs in prison."

Cubby stopped shivering long enough to put in his own half-cent worth of wisdom. "Scientist prison, you mean."

"No, no, no. There's only one prison, Cubby. But if you think we're going to pull out her sweet tooth or... knee cap or whatever, you've got another thing coming, lady!"

"Oh, how distraught you must wish this makes me! But you see," She went to go dig around in some closet. "I am one of those people who belongs in science ethics breaker prison."

She yanked out what looked like the shrink ray from *Honey, I Shrank the Kids* and pointed it at Ivy Lee. Clois shielded her.

"Over my dead body!"

The beam whirled around Clois and enveloped Ivy Lee. "Huh? Clois turned, but the younger girl was as gone as her mother had been. "That shouldn't even be possible!"

Reception witch smirked most argumentatively. "You'd be surprised to know what you can train light particles to do when your bored."

"What did you do with Ivy Lee?"

"I put her in her proper place: The operating room. Now, as I asked of you three before, *Dr. Schulz, Dr. McCommas, Dr. Schulz-Damon.*"

Tripp gulped. "But I don't want to pull horseshoes out of Ivy's thigh."

Clois wanted to be brave. She wanted to strangle this wretched woman, but seeing how unpredictable her ammo was, she took the coward's way out. She donned her coat and surgical mask, then dragged the two screaming, wailing males with her.

"Let's just get through this. It's the only way we'll make it to Mom..."

Ivy Lee lay on the table in room 265, wide awake, with a cork in her ear, an eye patch, and a seat belt around her waste.

"What have they done to you?" said Cubby.

"I swallowed the portal. I won't be able to come with you into the next world. And before anyone asks, yes, it is possible to swallow a portal if someone shoots it down your throat."

Clois removed the strap. "Well, naturally, then, it should be in your stomach."

"No, my anatomy is different now."

Beneath the strap, around where Ivy's heart should be, was a hole surrounded by masking tape. The edges of this hole were metal, and inside this hole was a wire cage. Clois knew how to play operation, through she wasn't quite sure of the stakes. More importantly, she didn't have anything to remove the cage with.

"Hey, just to be clear, what will happen if I touch the edges?"

"The portal will close. I don't know if the portal is under my rib cage, my ear drum, or my eye lash, but there are some ice tongs over there. Work as a team."

"Like hell," Clois grabbed the tongs out of the sink. "I'm the only one with a steady hand."

"Yeah," said Tripp. "This is way to freaky and gross for me."

"Did you just say we have to boink your eye out?" Cubby shuddered.

"If you don't work as a team, then only one of you can pass through the portal."

"Yeah, right. Not seeing the logic behind that rule." Clois yanked out the rib cage with little trembling. "Well, not behind there. Here, Tripp, hold this. That can be *your* team contribution."

"Hey," said Tripp. "There's a rack of honey barbecued ribs in there!"

"Yes! And those who don't contribute don't get to dive through portals!"

The voice came, not from Ivy Lee, Cubby, or Clois, but the thing inside the cage. Tripp dropped it and shrieked.

Cubby picked it up. "Listen here, baby back ribs, after what you did to my straight-A friend, I'd eat you, talking or no."

Clois yanked it away. "No, Cubby, then a portal will open up in *you*!"

"Correct! I am a member of the portal police, and I deem your team to be unfriendly and ununified. I shall close the next portal, should you not share the workload evenly."

"Yeah, well, for all we know, Officer MacSpecial," said Clois, "The portal could be in the next thing we look under."

The ribs harrumphed. "That is doubtful. Let me help you to divide the work."

Clois leaned into Ivy Lee's uncorked ear. "Psst, is this your idea of a healthy lunch? It's kinda gross... hey, what are you doing?"

The ribs puked barbecue sauce all over her hands. She tried to drop the cage and discovered that she couldn't, as her hands were encased in the sauce. It had the viscosity of tar. The ribs, proud of his accomplishment, answered, "You are hereby incapacitated, Clois Schulz. You have no choice now but to divide the work."

"Dibs on the ear." said Cubby. He grabbed the ice tongs and yanked out the cork. Inside Ivy Lee's now tire-wide earhole ("Ick, let's hope that goes back to normal," said Cubby) was a snare drum. He pulled it out.

"Cubby, no! You didn't touch the sides, did you?" She got in the ribs face. "This is exactly why I don't do teamwork! At least, not with these bozos."

"It's okay," said Ivy Lee, "The portal is still open. I can feel it feeding on my soul. You need to work quickly."

"That means you get the eye, Tripp," said tar sauce hands.

"No arguments there," said the little drummer boy, who showcased a marvelous rendition of Beethoven's pastoral symphony on that single snare. Clois made a memo to respect her little brother more when she got home.

Tripp cried. He sobbed. He dropped to his hands and knees and kissed Clois's sneakers. She shoved him away with her foot. "Stop groveling and be the peer pressure victim you are! C'mon, Cubby, let's kick it with a little more attitude."

Cubby mousetrapped the sniveling foot fumble right next to Ivy Lee's head with the power of some thunderous Olympian beats...

"All right," balwed Tripp, "Just stop with the tone-deaf drumming or you'll make me drop the tweezers."

"I can't," Cubby pounded away. "These freakazoid sticks—I can't even let go. They've got a hold of me!"

"Oh boy." The chunk of respect Clois had grown for Cubby crumbled into a few piffing pebbles. So it was the ear drum playing Cubby? Of course. The rib cage had encased Clois. What, come to think of it, might the eye lash do to Tripp?

"Wait, Tripp, brace yourself for a—"

He lifted the eyepatch, and a camelhide wip lept out and throttled him.

"That's it!" cried Clois. "That's the portal to the next world!" She got in the rib rack's face. "You knew we'd only check the eye lash as a last resort, didn't you?"

It puked barbecue sauce in her face. She was afraid she'd suffocate, but the cord grabbed her by the leg and dragged her into some child's bedroom. The barbecue did not accompany her, and she was grateful for that. "Thank you, rib cage, even though that teamwork business seemed entirely arbitrary. And goodbye, Ivy Lee, I hope to see you at the end—"

"Shh! Cork it, sister! Are you trying to wake Daddy?"

Clois looked down to assess the appropriate way of smacking this back talker. She found that it was a plush version of Cleo. She could easily kick this thing clear across the room, but it might know black magic and spirit her out the window.

"Don't tell me you're the reincarnated soul of Cleo?"

"No, but I am the one who's going to stuff socks into your mouth if noise keeps coming out of it."

"I'd like to see you try. No actually, I wouldn't, because I don't have time for this."

The only light was from the moon outside. Clois wasn't keen on fumbling through the dark, though she believed the tyrannical plaything now chewing on her ankle.

"Is that the best you can do?" she picked it up. "I do this in good faith that you do not contain the soul of my roommate." She held it by both ends and tried tearing it apart. It made constipated grunting noises and stretched like rubber.

"Crap! Fine, so I *can't* release whoever's soul is in there. Here's the next best thing."

She tied the stretched doll into a bowtie knot. Bug-eyed and balloon-cheekd, the doll could only stare at her tormenter.

"Thplllot thppllt thllt thppllt pllt!"

Its tongue lolled out, sputtering when she tried to speak. Though amateur in her knowledge of poot tongue (Ick, glad she didn't have to pull *that* out of Ivy Lee), Clois supposed that she must have said something along the lines of, "Go ahead and leave me here! You won't get through unless you know the rules!"

"I know the rules," she hissed back. "Make as little noise as possible."

She stepped out the door, stepped on one creaky stair, and something wizzed by her ear.

"Pipe down up there!"

That voice! Could it be possible? After all, the portal her mom fell through was located behind a picture of her father, and she did recognize the sort of knee-jerk rage that led to their divorce. The only piece of evidence needed was that the thing he threw was an alarm clock. Clois knelt and combed the floor. She couldn't see a thing. Maybe there was a flashlight back in the bedroom.

Some commotion stirred in some other nearby room. She didn't want to get too close, should the door fly open and crack her in the teeth, but it sounded like a drunken couple were trying to perform competitive gymnastics on the furniture. Clois supposed it was Cubby. She slipped inside.

No, it was Tripp, tripping over a highly elusive plastic Ivy Lee doll.

"Tripp, knock it off!"

"That's what I've been trying to do for the past five minutes!"

The doll hopped on the bed to pelt him with rubber bands, and Tripp swatted at it.

"For Pete's sake, we're in the Don't Wake Daddy game!"

Clois opened a window, grabbed a butterfly net, and captured the plastic Ivy Lee, dumping her out the window onto the street below. A car drove by and squashed the thing. No soul floated from the thing, so Clois could safely assumed that the real Ivy Lee had never resided within.

"Don't wake *whose* daddy?"

The door shook beneath the fist of a whiskey-powered man. A few splinters even split off the door onto the floor.

"Mine," whispered Clois. "Cubby must be in the other room. I want to get out of here as soon as possible."

Clois put her ear to the door. After verifying that her father wasn't waiting in the dark, she opened the door and stepped out. Tripp didn't follow, so she stepped back in and closed the door.

"Are you just going to stay there? That's more dangerous than skulking to the kitchen."

"Yes," said Tripp. "I won't have to stay here forever. Eventually, your dad will have to go to work."

"Our dad is jobless. Always has been. And he has two stations in this house: in bed when he's sleeping, and downstairs in front of the TV when he's awake. Don't tell me you're sneaking around while my dad's *awake*?"

"Um... maybe. I mean, if the portal's still open."

"Not after I step through it. And you should know that if my Dad catches you here, he'll think you've come to snog with me. You think you'll get his seal of approval?"

Tripp gawked at her a moment, then wrapped himself around her leg. "Meanie."

"All right, stand up. We've got to find Cubby."

"If he's here."

They left the room and tiptoed along the hallway. With only two bedrooms, they couldn't be sure where Cubby had landed, only that he'd be struggling with a toy in Jamie's likeness. There were no sounds of combat.

"Hmm, this is weird," whispered Clois. "Cubby's usually the one making a racket."

"You don't have an indoor pool, do you? I'll bet he loves swimming with his clothes on."

"He does at that, but we don't have a pool. We don't even have a bath tub. He's got to be upstairs, though, at the starting point of this game."

Of all places, he was actually in the attic, sipping tea with a tame ventriloquist dummy, predictably carved and attired like Jamie. Clois was dumbfounded.

"Why isn't that dummy trying to strangle you?"

"Go stick your foot in the toaster," snapped Cubby. "Jamie was the only twin I had. The least you can do is respect *his* twin."

Clois's impulse was to take the dummy (either one) by the foot and sling it across the table, but so long as this facsimile of Jamie sat dormant, she figured she'd better cooperate. She took a seat and Tripp did too. Cubby sipped his tea.

"I don't want to argue too loudly," said Clois. "We're in the Don't Wake Daddy universe, and it's *our* dad we run the risk of waking."

Cubby sputtered out his tea. "What? We're in Dad's house?"

"Keep it down!" said Tripp. "I said we should wait until morning. Clois bullied me into coming here!"

"This is bad.." said Cubby. "And here I wanted to have an in-depth discussion about parallel thinking."

Clois raised an eyebrow. Intellectual discourse had never been part of Cubby's complete breakfast. Maybe this dimension hopping excursion had grown him a little.

"You mean, how Ivy Lee's not the only one to build a portal machine?"

"Come to think of it," said Tripp, "If one opened up in Hong Kong, who knows where else they might have opened up?"

He snug punched Clois in the shoulder and laughed. "Darn lucky for you a stranger didn't wind up in Cubby's closet."

"Don't call me lucky." Clois rubbed all that affability off her shoulder. "For all I know, the house could be crowded with strangers. Ivy Lee messed with things she should not have."

"Don't say that," said Cubby. "Maybe those portals weren't Ivy Lee's. She didn't invent the portal opener, after all, she just brought it into the 21st century."

Tripp bowed his head. For a moment, it looked like he wanted to lead them all in prayer.

"It sure feels like way too much of a coincidence that only friends made it to your house, and not strangers. I'd say those portals were Ivy Lee's. She knew what she was doing. She just wanted to see how far from her own house she could put a portal."

"But did Ivy Lee even know Cleo?" said Clois. "I thought that she met for the first time at my house, when she looked like a know-it-all."

"Well, if she really is a know-it-all, then maybe the fact that Cleo's your roommate is one of the things she knows."

Clois shook her head. "There's going to be a lot of space-time business to fix once we find Mom."

"Maybe not," Cubby picked up a scone and plucked out the raisins. "Maybe Cleo can use some of that black magic to close them up."

"But what about all the people stuck here?" said Tripp. "Won't they be trapped in the board game dimension?"

"Don't ask me, I'm no physicist. Damn, that's a lot of raisins!" Cubby gave up on the scone. "Well, eat something. Who knows how long the road ahead of us is."

All of the food looked like plastic. The toy cups did have liquid in them, but she wasn't nearly thirsty enough to take a drink. The whole reason Cubby couldn't pluck *all* of the raisins was that he couldn't pick out *any* raisins.

"Cubby, you realize that this is the plastic tea party set I got for Christmas before you were born, right?" Clois spoke cautiously. She began to fear for Cubby's sanity. "I know it might be a little hard to see in the dark here, but you can't eat this. It's all play food."

Cubby folded his arms and stared at his sister. "Plastic, huh? What good is plastic? What's that supposed to teach us impressionable young kids besides starvation and wishful thinking?" He snapped his fingers. The Jamie dummy's jaw popped open like a cash register and Cubby pulled out a slip of paper.

"What are you doing?" said Clois.

"You'll see."

He wrote something then returned the paper and closed Jamie's mouth. The dummy stood and marched to the drop door, making it as far as the threshold before Clois tackled him.

"What are you doing?" yelled Cubby. "He's going to get us our food!"

"No, he's going to go wake up Dad! You can't trust these things!"

There was no window through which to throw it; while it couldn't talk with its mouth full of paper, it could trigger a siren all over the house.

"Run for it!" Clois threw the dummy aside, grabbed a stupified Tripp by the wrist, pushed him through the door, then called on a frightened but able-bodied Cubby.

There was no way to get to the fridge (where the next portal presumably was) without crossing paths with Dad. Even amidst the siren, they could hear the footsteps of Daddy down the hall.

"Quick, we have to hide!" In one of the bathrooms, there was a laundry chute. In her panic, Clois couldn't remember which one it was – to the right or the left. She took a gamble.

If she and Tripp couldn't fit, then at least she could protect Cubby.

"In here! Lock the door.

"There are no locks!"

"What!?! That's impossible!"

Clois grabbed at the door herself. It wouldn't lock.

"Okay. Bad, bad, bad. Cubby, down the garbage chute."

"Forget it, I'm not..." He paused, seeming to recognize himself as the bearer of blame for their current predicament. "I am garbage, aren't I?"

"What, did I say garbage? I mean laundry. Go down the laundry chute."

"But we're in the wrong bathroom! The laundry room is on the left wing of the first floor, remember?"

Clois sighed. "No, I don't."

She peered out the door, praying that Daddy would go to some other room first. Then, for the first time since the divorce, she saw her father, Reuben Damon.

Reuben "Demon" was his nickname at the bar and prison cell. He wasn't especially large, but he *was* unthinkably savage. Even his Mr. Hyde-like silhouette brought back memories of the gashes on his arms and face from where he'd been struck with broken bottles.

Yes, he charged the bedroom.

"Now!"

She grabbed Tripp and Cubby, flying down the stairs and evading their father.

They had not escaped the wrath of the plastic action figures.

The overhead lights flashed red alarms as Cleo, Ivy Lees, and Jamies crawled from the air conditioning vents. "Get, em, Daddy!" They cried.

Water dripped from an army of marionette Ivy Lee's. They must have crawled from the toilet. Clois kicked them out of the way. She had given Tripp and Cubby enough momentum to move on their own. She needed to use them for punching the giant blow-up Cleo pear that bounced from the garage.

"Pee off, you menacing blimp!" For all the air it held, the doll was impressively heavy. It bounced off Clois, who fell backward into Tripp.

"Guys, this is no time to play grab and grope," Cubby pulled his sister up. The Cleo doll rebounded and pushed Cubby to the ground.

"We need to pop it." Clois pulled her brother to his feet. "Everybody into the kitchen!"

By a snap freak expansion, Cleo denied them access. All except Cubby, who slipped by. "Find mom for us!" cried Clois. Her captor continued to inflate, nearly asphyxiating the two college kids.

Apart from the hissing of the growing clown bully, the quaking of her father's steps was the sound of doom. This was the climax of the story, maybe even Clois's life.

SMACK.

A piece of plastic rubber hit her square in the face. She removed it to see cubby, illuminated by the flashing red lights, brandishing a knife where the now burst Cleo had been.

"Wow, Cubby," Clois stood and picked up Tripp, "You'd make a great serial killer, if that were allowed in some universe."

"Thank me later. Dad's in clear sight!"

"Hey, what is that tramp doing in here?"

Tripp was Reuben's prime target. Clois snatched him and threw him toward the kitchen, pursuing him with utmost urgency.

"Quick," she said. "Open the fridge."

"You bum, stay out of my booze!"

The oven door fell open and belched out a troop of gingerbread men, all carved in Jamie's likeness. They hurled themselves in front of the fridge. As they were smoldering, neither Clois's nor Cubby's violent disposition was going to help anybody now.

"Okay, I'm doing this," said Tripp. "Clois, I'm sorry to sacrifice your dad's blessing on our unadmitted love, but—"

Reuben was there at the threshold. Tripp whipped out a spatula and flung those flaming Jamies his way.

"You can just bomb, Mr. Daddy!" he shouted, and the brutish ex-husband caught fire. "The evil is laid to rest."

"Wha... that's our Dad you just immolated." Cubby stared at the staggering bonfire. Reuben swatted himself. The man was so drunk that he mistook the flames for bees.

Clois opened the fridge. "Come on, we need to rescue Mom."

"No, I need to take care of Dad."

"Cubby, that is not Dad. That is some transdimensional image of Dad."

"Are you trying to tell me he's a ghost or a robot?" Cubby found the emergency fire extinguisher and restored his father to an unblazing state. The man now had new injuries to brag about to his cellmates: 3rd degree burns. "Look, guys, I'm fairly sure that, if my dad stepped through a portal, he wouldn't notice, unless he stepped into a place with no alcohol. Now, I don't know where these toy and cookie replicas of our friends came from..."

"*They* can look after him," said Tripp.

"But they don't know first aid. You guys go on ahead. I need to call an ambulance."

Cubby picked up the phone. Clois, for the first time in her life, couldn't bring herself to drag him along. He simply wasn't being defiant enough. It would have been much easier to grab him by the scruff of the neck and force him through the refrigerator if he would only stomp his foot and sass her. She looked to Tripp for support, but all he did was sneer.

"If that's the way you want it, Cubby, then fine. Stay here. I'm ready to go home."

"Wait," said Clois, "What about my mom? Don't forget you're also partially responsible for her disappearance."

Tripp's jaw dropped. "Is that the thanks I get for saving you from your drunken father? Well, you can stay here too, for all I care. Nice knowing you, Clo."

He stepped through the portal; Clois's reflexes kicked in just when his foot was about to disappear, and she leapt after him, half afraid she'd upset the homemade jam shelf.

She then found herself tumbling along a metal floor, collecting scrapes and bruises.

For a moment, she felt like she were in an episode of Muppet Babies, for her clothes were formal and full of buttons, something akin to an English bureaucrat.

She was outdoors, judging by the amount of fog she was sailing through. The floor was unsteady; a creaking and groaning nearby alerted her that she was on a ship. "Tripp? Where are you?" She stepped into the fog, inching her way forward so as to not fall overboard. She could hear a radio buzzing; using that as her beacon, she began walking. She found the cabin, and in descending the steps, she was relieved of the fog. She tampered with the radio, diminishing what static she could until Tripp's voice came through.

"I know where the next portal is" he said. "And I know where it leads to."

"Yeah? Well, thanks for ditching me. I suppose you're going to sail through this one, too."

"Ooooooh hoo hoo! I'd love too, but you're in the way. And don't even think of whirling around and sailing through it yourself; It leads right back to your house."

She looked at her sonar. In true battleship fashion, she could see the positions of all her ships while Tripp's lay offscreen."

"You'd better not be able to see my ships to know that I'm in the way," she said. "That's against the rules."

"You're foolish," said Tripp. "I don't think you've really payed any attention to the portal pattern."

"There's... always an obstacle in the way. But how would you know where the next portal leads?"

"You'd be surprised how advanced my sonar is. It took the bulk of both Cleo's black magic and Ivy Lee's transdimensional tinkering. I'll tell you where the portal *I'm* guarding leads if you let me sink you."

"Tripp, I'm not guarding any portal. Go ahead and sail by me if you like, but I need to find mom."

"I'd love to. I wish I could tell my colleagues not to shoot you, but they convinced me otherwise. You know how easily I give in to peer pressure."

"Which ship are you on? I'll order my crew not to blast it."

"Like Hell! I know you're still mad about the money I stole from you. I won't let you steal my trust. My ship is, without a doubt, the first thing you'll blast."

"Screw you."

She tapped a signal to the rest of her fleet. She would nail Tripp, and this time, she wouldn't take a break.

On the sonar, white clouds began to appear when she had fired. This was not a turn-based situation; A few cloud puffs appeared near her own ships, too.

Kerrr-bunkklullllrrrrr....

She could hear the bombs and missiles outside, striking the water.

After her first hit, signified by an X on the radar screen, she realized that she had started something needlessly evil back in monopoly land. Did she really need to sock that pushy landowner? Sure, she was getting in the way, but couldn't she just as easily have walked on by her? The call for violence was unmistakable in Don't Wake Daddy at first, right up until Daddy caught fire; but she, Cubby and Tripp had certainly concluded more than a handful of lives. Whose lives had they lay to rest? Did the dying moments of blow-up Cleopatra include memories of a childhood long left behind? Was marionette Ivy Lee an aspiring mother, whose young now cried without answer? What preceded the infernal demise of Gingerbread Jamie? And who was she shooting down now?

"Cease fire," she signalled to her fellow ships. "Tripp, I give up. Go ahead and shoot me."

"Wow," answered Tripp, "you have an astonishingly low opinion of my combat skills, don't you?"

"It's not that," said Clois. "I just think that this battle is a waste of time. If you kill me, sink me... If I drown, I'll end up in the next dimension anyway."

"Wow. I never took you for the gambling type. That's an awfully bold assumption."

"I'm just through with all the violence. Let's take a break from it, okay?"

"NO-kay! In addition to being a wimpering coward, I'm also extremely jealous of your initiative and courage. I'll tell you what. You try to sail by me, and I'll only shoot at you. Sorry, but I'm already out on a limb here. My naval buddies want to take down all of you."

Something else struck Clois. Tripp had one fewer "Naval buddy" than he had opponents. Perhaps she could turn the tables on him and change his mind?

She tapped out another message to her own allies, ordering them to bombard Tripp with demands to switch sides.

Clois adjusted the radio so that she could listen in on the demands. Her own officers, gruff, surly men who barked their every word, shouted such unkind words as, "Weakling! You have the willpower of the dirt you are! The worms in the ground hold their heads higher than you, as they deserve!" and "Show some backbone, if you have any! But I bet you don't! If you had the slightest chink of backbone, you'd stick your gun right out the window and blast those bastard merbroads swimming alongside you!" and best of all, "I'm calling your comrades after this and telling them to secretly turn on one another. You want to try and warn them? Oops, too late, my colleagues already did that."

And so on. After twelve or more bullying, belittling messages from Clois's team, Tripp sent her a message.

"Ahem, I'm vulnerable to *peer* pressure. This is *geyser* pressure."

If he had to elaborate any further, the chance to do so was blasted away by his buddies.

"Wait," cried Clois, "stop, this wasn't supposed to happen."

"Well, we've done all we can do."

On the screen, her own allies turned about face and sailed towards the portal they gaurded, represented by a whirlpool.

"Wait, where are you going?" said Clois, "That just leads to my house."

"Not for us, it doesn't. If you won't shoot, captain, then count us out. We've got no spirit to fight alongside a triggerless leader."

They sailed on, vanishing one by one into the whirlpool on the sonar. It must have been something to watch in person. She ran to the deck to see if the fog had cleared. It hadn't. The vessels seemed to be aware of their invisibility. One of them tooted a validiction with its fog-horn. The bellowing moan faded as the ship sunk down that phenomenal road that carries one homeward.

Clois waved. She would not be going home just yet. Maybe Tripp had bluffed her. Maybe he was looking for a fight. Clois didn't even know which boat she was in. The cruiser? The destroyer? The Patrol boat? She went back to the helm.

As she heard the next portal, she faced no fire from Tripp's team. They'd never shown up on the radar, not even the one she'd struck. If there was one thing she'd missed, it would be her game mate paddling around in the water, clinging to some piece of flotsam.

She tried the radio. It wasn't likely it had survived the blast, but she had to convince herself that she'd at least made the effort to make contact.

"Tripp? Are you out there? It's me, Clois. Look, I don't know if you can hear me, but if you can, I'm about to go through the portal. I don't know if you want to go. The ships all sailed through our home portal, one at a time, so apparently these ones don't close. I can only suppose it's the wtaer keeping them open. So if you want to swim all that way... I don't see any of your own crew around here. I'll check and see if there are any life boats. If there are... I'll send you one."

In fact, there were no lifeboats. Just as there was no Tripp. There was no sign of life anywhere on the ocean, just fog and wtaer.

Night fell. The stars could not penetrate the opaque moisture, so Clois retired to the cabin and closed her eyes. She thought about what she might say to her mother.

"Come home immediately. This place is ludicrous."

She fell asleep as she sailed into the portal. She awoke to the beat of some techno racket, the sound of mingling and glasses chinking together. Had she been boarded? Then she remembered that the search for her mother was her main goal, not the preservation of her control of the ship, unless one negated the other.

It didn't matter anyway. The deck of the ship had become some sort of ballroom for acid sniffers. She feared for a moment that, due to the kaleidoscoping neon dance floor tiles, she had walked into a mist cloud of a hallucinogenic substance. How else could she fathom her mother mastering the 'it's-not-over-until-I-sing?'

Also taking on some of the most flamboyant dancing she'd ever seen was the monopoly policeman doing the 'cash register.' There was also the hospital receptionist, dancing the 'emergency room freakout' with the rib cage and the ear drum, while the eye lash did the 'blink-and-you'll-miss-it.' The Don't Wake Daddy dolls were there, too, dazzling one another with the 'midnight hangover.' Some massive ships with long flippered legs did the 'heart will go on,' though their massivity was quickly overshadowed by two waltzing dragons who dropped from the roof to do the 'jailbreak.'

"Come on!" Dragoness Cleo leaned over the crowd to encourage Clois. "Join the party!"

"But where's everybody else? Is this really happening?"

"Of course it is!" She put her head through a barred window. "It took me and Sulphur-geson here a while to earn each others' trust. Long story—eastern dragon culture and western dragon culture aren't exactly twins, culturally speaking, but once we rigged Receptionist Nurse Rebecca's transdimensional beam to send everyone she shot to the DDR dimension, she went trigger happy."

Said western dragon, Sulphurgeson, nicked the monopoly cop's whistle and gave it a mighty blow, halting everything from the music to the dancers.

"Fortunately," he explained, "The 'Harlam shake' is a remarkable tool for building peace. Now, where are your cohorts?"

Jamie had been trying to impress some of the monopoly accountants by doing the 'Don-ald Trump.' He was pretty good at it, for a guy without a toupee, "Time to depart already?" He hung his head. "And I, only shillings away from striking a professional partnership."

Ivy Lee had been in charge of the music. That was understandable. 'The exorcist' had likely put a crick in her neck, and the cartoony surgery couldn't have helped, either.

"I can leave the portal here in Rebecca's hands. Don't worry, everybody here knows where they come from. And thanks to Cleopatra," she winked at the portly pink dragon, who hid behind a fan and blushed. "They'll all be getting back to their respective time periods, in their human forms."

Tripp, who'd seemed to be doing the 'post roller coaster twist and hurl,' staggered over and fell to his knees. "Not dancing just sea sick."

Clois stepped back, wondering if he was going to hurl. The color returned to his face, and he stood.

"All right, all cards on the table. I suck at games. If I didn't cheat, if I didn't beg my peers to team up against the *champion* players, then no way would I stand a ghost of a chance. But you don't need me to tell you that."

"Sounds like proposal to me!" Judy Schulz marched over and tried to force their lips together.

"Mom, no, I'm not..." Clois ducked under her mother's firm hand. "We came all this way to rescue you. Me and my friends... where's Cubby?"

"Now, never you mind. I'm getting myself a son in law. What was your name, son?" She grabbed Tripps's ear lobe. "Huey, wasn't it? Propose to Clois again, Huey."

"Somebody stealin' my daughter away?"

Like father, like son in law, Reuben came staggering over with Cubby as his crutch.

"Take it easy, Papa," said the tyke. "You don't want to pass your alcoholism genes down to either one of us, do you?"

"No son of mine is going to grow up to be a tea-cake teetotalluuurrpp!"

Reuben stumbled backwards, disrupted a 'voodoo spring' between a Cleo doll and a Jamie cookie. Cubby attempted to help him to his feet before being bounced away by the blow-up Cleo. A dozen Ivy Lee marionettes then did the 'Gulliver's travels' all over Reuben's inebriated butt.

"Oh, leave him that way," ordered Judy. "We need to get home in time for dinner."

Clois helped Cubby to his feet, casting one final look at their dad before he was swallowed up in the playthings of his home dimension.

His son and daughter, on the other hand, found themselves swallowed up in the tail of Cleopatra Pearl. "Places, everyone, places!" The seven real worlders stood around in a circle. "All right, on the count of three, everyone do the 'be it ever so humble' And repeat the phrase, 'there's no home like Judy's or Clois's or Cubby's.'"

The humbling commenced, and the ballroom around them evaporated, as did Cleopatra's draconion guise.

"Whew," Clois wiped the sweat from her forehead. "Everything's normal now."

"Yeah," said Ivy Lee. "I'd better go turn off the transdimension machine."

"Oh, not yet!" Cleo slipped into Cubby's bedroom. "Give me a sec to find my way back to Hong Kong. I still have the munchies for those Golden Grahams."

"I could just walk home," said Jamie. "Millionaire Acres is a pebble's toss from here."

Ivy Lee shrugged. "It's a ten minute walk from here to my house, but Cleo's spell still stands. If you step into a portal, just shuffle and say it. You'll end up right back where you were."

She left with Jamie, though not hand-in-hand.

The evening sun had come, giving the horizon an intense citrus glow. The four set up lawn chairs to watch the clouds drift by.

"Cubby," said Tripp, "What did you do after your dad woke up?"

"I tried to talk him into coming back home. His speech was still all slurred, but I think he said something about being father to all those toys and cookies. Weird."

Then something even weirder and unwelcome happened. Jamie and Ivy Lee came dashing through the hedges, waving their arms and giving themselves atesma from the panic.

"Heh, you kids are always in a hurry," said Judy.

"Clois, we need your help!" said Ivy Lee. "Those... that last dimension you left before you came to DDR... what was it?"

"Battleship. Why?"

Jamie slapped his hand over his face. "That explains it fine and clear."

Suddenly, all of Clois's internal organs felt as though they were spinning around like a washing machine. The ground tremmored, and she saw four ships dancing down the road, carried by two black-lagoon legs a piece.

"We need Cleo," she said. "Only she can spirit them away."

Cubby gulped. "Anybody have the number for Hong Kong?"