

Enter the Cube

*by Nicholas and Daniel Dobkin
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Chapter 12: I'd Rather Jump Over the Moon

Nicholas had stopped by the kitchen to say goodbye to Bonapa T. He found the Toad already in his tall chef's hat and sparkling white apron. Sitting next to him was a mysterious youth in a gray weatherbeaten robe and hood. The windows above the kitchen sink were wide open, letting in a chill morning draft. The Toad held a small bird about the size of a chicken in his left hand on top of a cutting board; in his right was a cleaver. To his right was a large empty tray labeled "breasts" and another labeled "thighs", a third for "wings"; on the left was a tall garbage bin labeled "guts". The bird squawked and screamed. Nicholas couldn't blame it.

"Hey, Bonapa T., I heard you were busy this morning, and we've gotta take off before breakfast," said Nicholas, "so I just wanted to stop by to thank you for all the good eats."

"Zut! alors, you are leaving? C'est dommage. I am preparing ze glorious feast for tonite, it is a big state dinner, we will have thirty, forty guests. Neville is forbidden to enter ze dining room during dinner. Everything will be perfect!"

"Oh, is that what the cocoo is for?" asked Nicholas.

"Précisement, mon ami," replied Bonapa T. "We are having cocoo flambée avec sauce a l'orange, it will be magnifique!"

"But you've only got one bird for all those people, will that be enough?" asked Nicholas. "And don't cocoo's go in flocks? I thought if you attacked one of them the whole flock would get after you."

"Precisement, my young friend," said Bonapa. "Zat is why my friend Anikin is here. He will help."

The Toad lifted his cleaver into the air. Nicholas looked away: the shadow of the blade against the wall rose and fell: *THUNK*.

A rushing noise arose outside, growing louder and louder, punctuated by squawks and screeches. In seconds a tornado of winged creatures burst into the room. Bonapa T. retreated to the wall as the robed youth swiftly stood and reached for his belt: a brilliant blade of light

extended, humming loudly above the rush of the birds. A hundred cocoos dove to the attack: the light saber leapt to meet them, spinning and jabbing, moving with blinding speed. Screams and wet smoochy splats filled the air; parts of birds flew left and right, while the mysterious Jedi stood motionless, only his weapon twirling and dancing. Bonapa T. said "Ça suffit, my friend, zat is enough," and pushed the window closed. The light saber retracted with a hiss. One last cocoo flew heedlessly into the window, flattening against the glass with a splat, and slipped slowly down the pane.

The trays on the table were now filled with neatly piled, mostly-plucked breasts, wings, and thighs. The garbage bin was piled with steaming, gross-looking bird innards. A few miscellaneous chunks of bird flesh were spattered on the table and the floor nearby, but for the most part a miraculously accurate butchery had obviously taken place. Anikin turned, his face flushed beneath his hood, and glanced at Nicholas. "I killed them all," he said. "Nobody poops on my speeder." He returned the light saber to his belt and walked down the hall.

"Merci, mon ami!" said Bonapa T. He was already plucking the last few feathers and rubbing spices into the carcasses in preparation for cooking.

"Yuck," said Nicholas. "I think I'll stick to heating up a carton of noodles in the microwave."

"Microwave! Oh, la la, zis is the great abomination for the true gourmet. Speak not ze name of microwave in my kitchen!"

"Sorry, Bonapa," said Nicholas. "Maybe it was better when we didn't know about how you made dinner. Anyway, I don't know what kids could do for you but if there's anything you just let us know."

"It was nothing, mon jeune ami, you must come back whenever you have ze chance. I will make such a feast! Nicholas and ze children of doom! Or perhaps just ze cosmic bowling reunion celebration. Ah, well, bonne chance, adieu, my friend!" Overwhelmed by a burst of sentiment, the Toad grabbed Nicholas by the shoulders and kissed him on each cheek. The uninvited display of affection was not rendered more palatable by the blood and guts left behind on Nicholas' shirt.

"Uh, gee thanks, but I guess I'm, uh, late for the train, gotta' go!"

"Be careful, my friend, make sure to eat things before zey eat you!" The Toad turned back to his plucking as Nicholas headed down the stairs.

The foyer was in chaos. Between the ghosts come to pay their respects, Luigi simultaneously trying to talk them out of leaving and offering various sorts of irrelevant assistance, and the kids constantly heading back to their rooms for forgotten items, it was a big challenge to get everyone collected and ready to leave.

Neville was handing several lists to Nicholas: "This one contains all the items you might

need at Freedom. This second list catalogs necessary garments and accoutrements, undergarments, and perishables that you should carry on the spacecraft, and then the third list includes diversions and entertainments useful in the case that you should be captured and relegated to a prison cell for an extended period of time."

"Thanks, Neville, thanks, that's great," said Nicholas, picking up the lists and dropping them again as he tried to attract the attention of Jack and Ellie, who were talking to Clara. "Hey, Mr. -- um, Jack, wait a minute!" Clara glared at him, but Ellie took her shoulder and led her away for some private advice. Nicholas reached into his backpack and drew out the Golden Hammer. "Mr. Luigi said this was okay, I hope you like it."

"Good Lord, son, I'd quite forgotten about that. That's a right kindly thing you're doin'; hardly proper fur me to turn it down agin'. Thank you very much." He leaned down next to Nicholas' ear. "You get to Ark, you just look up Mary Ellen, all right? You can rely on us, we'll get them the word."

Nicholas tried to acknowledge but he was swept aside as Lydia drew him into an embrace, shoving him face-first into her ample and scantily-covered cleavage. "Oh, we're going to miss you children so much!" the ghost gushed. "I can't believe you're leaving so soon, with a feast tonight and all. And you're so cute, too! I could just eat you right up." She kissed him on the cheek, a chilling as well as embarrassing experience. Nicholas started to blush red, and it was only made worse when Ellie leaned over to buss his other cheek with Clara on her arm staring right at them.

"You take care now, young man, and watch after the others," said Ellie. "Clara will help."

"I'll watch them all the way to El Dorado if I can just avoid any more kissing!" mumbled Nicholas. Clara snickered but didn't dare do more under Ellie's watchful eye.

In the corner near the mirror, Slim Bankshot was talking with Brian. "Always keep your cool, kid," said Slim. "Same face when you're ahead by 10 and losing by 10. Same eyes when the bet is a dollar or your life."

Brian looked dubious. "That's sounds pretty tough, Mr. Bankshot."

"Call me Slim. You're a tough kid. Keep cool, you'll be okay. I pity the ghost that tangles with you."

Tennyson was chatting with Melody under the chandelier. Tennyson had borrowed Clara's ocarina and Melody was demonstrating some useful songs. "This one can call up a storm if you're outdoors, though I can never get it to work inside." A lilting melody, lovely even through the thin tones of the simple instrument, rose momentarily above the noise of conversation. Tennyson sang the song back to her; Melody joined him and Tennyson shifted up a third to harmonize, the pair improvising an extemporaneous suspension resolving to the major to finish. Melody laughed with the pleasure of the music and hugged Tennyson insofar as a ghost could manage the feat. "Do you really have to leave?" she asked. "We could do duets at the piano, we could sing -- it would be wonderful to have another musician in the mansion!" Tennyson turned to see Clara behind him, hands on her hips, looking upset and somewhat envious.

"Thanks, thanks, we've got to go. You'd better give Clara back the Ocarina."

"Have you seen Mr. Saturn?" Erin interrupted. "I was sure he was going to go with us, but he's not in the study or the projection room."

"He can look after himself," said Clara. "Who needs him anyway?"

"That's a heck of a way to treat him, he was really nice to you when we got here!" said Erin.

"Yeah, when he's not trying to look up my skirt," said Clara.

"Well you're wearing pants today!" said Erin.

"Come on, come on," said Tennyson, separating the two. "Erin, I'm all finished packing, so I'll go check in the gallery to see if Mr. Saturn is there--"

"Here he is!" said Brian. Mr. Saturn waddled in from one of the rear doors under the twin stairways. He was carrying a cloth bag on his head, balanced presumably by psychic forces as it had no decent physical reason for remaining poised in that precarious position.

"Not to fear, Erin my boy," Mr. Saturn averred. "Just doing a little last-minute rummaging."

"Oh, yeah, okay!" said Erin, relieved. "What's in the bag?" Mr. Saturn glanced towards Luigi. Erin nodded. "Ah, dirty laundry."

"Yep, never know when you'll find a cheap laundromat on your travels," said Mr. Saturn.

"It'sa gonna be so sad in the Mansion witha nobody, who's gonna pulla me up when I'ma bungee jumping?" Luigi was trying to talk the kids into staying. "I gotta lottsa coins, we can go to the movies and have all the popcorn you can eata, come on, you gonna stay, Clara sweetie?"

Erin put his hands out to his sides, palms up. "Let's see. On the one hand, permanent exile, loss of friends and family, destruction of our homes by game characters gone wild, probable elimination as agents of the enemy no matter who wins. On the other hand, free popcorn -- and, admittedly, no income taxes when we grow up since *we'll never live to grow up!* Yep, we'll let Cane stay behind."

"Look, we really appreciate everything you've done for us, but we can't afford to waste time if we're going to get home," Nicholas interrupted. "We've only got twenty --"

"Days or so of funds, I believe you were going to say, right, Nicholas?" interrupted Mr. Saturn. "Luigi probably doesn't worry much about money," he continued, staring pointedly at Nicholas. "If he did, maybe he would be on our side of this dispute. Or maybe not."

"Oh, yeah, well anyway we've really got to make the train!" said Nicholas. "Take it easy,

Neville!"

"Thanks to everybody!" said Tennyson.

"Except Jarvis!" said Erin as the reclusive fugitive poked his head briefly through the wall, snagged a jar of peanut butter from Brian's open backpack, and disappeared again after a moment's struggle to get the glass through the wall, leaving a dripping sticky mound of peanut glop behind.

Brian shook Luigi's hand. Clara visibly hesitated and then quickly hugged the older man before running back to join Tennyson at the entry. Nicholas screwed up his determination and pushed the door open. He was nagged by the worry that he was leading them all to disaster, but determined not to let it show. He charged outside and headed down the path towards the gate. The rest of the group followed in a ragged line, turning to wave to ghosts sticking their heads out the windows; Erin was carrying the cloth bag for Mr. Saturn, who waddled along at his side. As they passed the shack, Nicholas stuck his head in the door and yelled goodbye to Tails, but with little hope of being heard: the echoes of Tails' tunes were painfully loud even at the top of the escalator.

The gate to the estate swung open automatically as they walked up. The brisk morning air and the prospect of a train ride -- one of Nicholas' favorite recreations since he was little -- had brightened his mood; he was eager to get on with the trip and find out what the next challenge would be. At the moment his foot passed through the gate, a loud shout rang out from the house, and the door slammed with a boom. The kids turned to see Cane running down the stairs, holding his backpack in one hand while he stuffed clothes back into it with the other. His shoes were untied and his shirt was on backwards. He waved frantically to the kids to keep going as he ran full tilt towards the gate.

"I thought you were staying!" yelled Tennyson.

"Are you kidding!" panted Cane as he ran between Clara and Brian without slowing down. "Come on! We gotta' get outta here before they find me!"

A window swung outwards from a second-floor gable. A long-haired ghost stuck her head out: "Cane, darling? Where are you? We still have to work on the tango!"

"Hide me, hide me!" Cane hissed, concealing himself behind the trunk of a fir tree at the gateway. Nicholas gestured for the rest of the group to continue their orderly walk down the path; he nodded as they passed and Cane slunk out to one side of Clara and Tennyson, concealed from view of the Mansion.

Another window on the third floor went up. A male voice called: "Young man! Young man, where are you? We must think about our schedule of exhibitions, you know. Perdita, do you see him anywhere?"

"What's the deal?" asked Clara quietly without looking at Cane.

"They thought I was their agent! I was supposed to get them all these dance exhibitions and stuff. And do all the counting stuff!"

"Accounting," corrected Brian.

"Yeah, that's what I said. Boring boring boring! And the lady was always grabbing me and trying to do this durango thing--" ("Tango", added Brian) "--yeah, that's what I said, and it was terrible, her you-know-whats were stuck in my face and she's pushing me around and this guy is always lecturing me about how I'm supposed to read--" ("Lead", Brian started to say before being halted by a glare from Cane) "-- and then they wanted me to wear an albedo -- shut up, Brian! -- and I just grabbed everything I could find and ran! How could you guys desert me like that? I thought you were my friends."

"Seems to me you were lecturing us yesterday on how stupid it was to leave the mansion," said Clara.

"What? I never said that," said Cane. "Besides, so were you."

"Well, I changed my mind," replied Clara, grasping Tennyson's arm tighter. "You should make up yours before you go accusing people."

During this exchange the kids continued down the road, which turned left and descended steeply through a tree-lined gully. Erin was supposed to be watching for race cars barreling down the road, but he was busy describing his adventures at the mini-games park to Mr. Saturn. Nicholas was trying to remember Tails' instructions, simple though they were: he was a bit bothered that there was no train station in sight after what seemed like a good distance, though they had actually walked for only a few minutes. "Hey, Tennyson, what time is it?"

"About ten after nine," Tennyson replied. "Relax, we should have lots of time. Look, there's the field Tails told us about. We're fine." The road came out of the gully and passed by a lovely meadow, decorated with purple and yellow wildflowers still sparkling from the morning dew. A fox sat on its haunches on a tree stump just off the road, watching alertly for signs of prey. It glanced nonchalantly at the crew as they walked by. A small flock of pigeons burst out of the bushes to the left, frightened by the kids' loud argument. The fox watched them wistfully and then returned his attention to the grass.

The road straightened and led them between the walls of more very fancy-looking estates. On the left a vine-covered brick wall surrounded a red-roofed wood-framed building with huge picture windows everywhere. A wrought-iron gate flanked by security cameras carried a nameplate proclaiming in block letters: THE TORTIMERS, and below in smaller script, *slow and steady wins the race*. A smaller sign next to the gate proclaimed, *NO ADMITTANCE. BY APPOINTMENT ONLY. NO SOLICITING. GO AWAY.*

The road turned to the right again, past a fortress-like building surrounded by a huge wall and sporting scary-looking guns at all the corners with no obvious windows. A tiny door set in the glistening steel wall said: ARAN and nothing else. There was no doorknob, bell or knocker, just a tiny slot set taller than the kids could reach. The ground in front of the door was bare, with several prominent black patches that looked like scorch marks and a little blob of what might have once been molten metal.

As the kids passed the corner of the shining wall the train station came into view. A low brownish art-deco building was set behind a sizable parking lot, tastefully landscaped and sparsely occupied with both recognizable automobiles and stranger vehicles. Nicholas had just stepped out into the middle of the street to lead the kids towards the entrance, when a loud screeching sound followed by the roar of a car engine burst out behind him. Clara grabbed Nicholas by the shirt and jerked him backwards as a recklessly-fast car flew skidding into the lot, heedless of the kids or any other occupants of the road, and came to rest perpendicular to a minivan. The car was marked with a prominent '24' in block numbers and several sponsorship announcements; it was a stock race car. The doors flew open and two men dressed in white racing suits with EARNHARDT lettered across the back jumped out and ran full tilt towards the station.

A family of squirtles piled out of the minivan as the kids walked onto the lot, the little ones squabbling and dousing each other while the adult -- the father -- admonished them, while he squirted angrily at the two NASCAR drivers and simultaneously grabbed suitcases from the back. A whistle sounded and a sleek green-and-white-striped locomotive pulled out from behind the station, pulling four bizarre green-glass cars that appeared to be filled with water, in which floated some sort of fish-like passengers or cargo. There was a snack truck outside the station entrance, run by a raccoon who occupied himself arranging the price tags while keeping up a constant patter with a rather fat koopa troopa, apparently a security guard, who hovered, huffing and puffing, around the entrance. As the kids hadn't had time for breakfast, everyone was soon plying Brian for coins to pay for the food and drinks they were grabbing. Nicholas could see a big clock inside the station through the window: **9:21 AM**. "Come on, one item each, we've got to go!" he shouted, while making Cane put back the three packs of shroomsticks, four PandaCanes, and two Berry Tarts he had packed into his shirt. Copies of the *Toadtown Times* were stacked next to several other newspapers and magazines; Nicholas slapped his forehead: "Geeze, we were supposed to call Hedley!"

The glass doors of the station slid silently apart as the munching group of fourth-graders entered, Nicholas at the front encouraging them to move faster. Inside the station people and stranger creatures walked hurriedly back and forth past the various platforms, some already occupied with locomotives of every shape, color, size, and technology. There were sleek electrics, antique steam locomotives, and even a hover train. A glowing display hanging from the roof listed the trains:

PLATFORM	TRAIN	DESTINATION	DEPARTURE
1	32b	Hyrule Central	10:22
2	Ornt Exp	SPECTRE Hq.	9:47
3	1+8i	Pikmin University	10:05
4	K64 02	Mt. Rugged	10:24
5	HV44	Mos Espa	9:52

... and so on. Nicholas scanned the list with some anxiety until at the very bottom he found:

18	Jack O' L1	Corneria	9:31
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"Let's go, let's go, we've only got six minutes!" said Nicholas, trying to gather the group up as Tennyson gawked at the huge hover train floating above its track, and Cane tried to snag another bag of popcorn from a pushcart. They hurried across the polished marble floor towards the last platform. As they reached halfway Nicholas noticed a large black-on-white sign suspended above one of the dividers: "TO PLATFORM 9 3/4". A long line of kids with luggage carts protruded out into the waiting area; as Nicholas watched, the kid at the front of the line ran full tilt at the steel wall under the sign and crashed into the barrier, spewing books and parcels onto an already-extensive pile. The stunned child barely had time to crawl out of the way before a young girl flashed by lemming-like on her way to her own collision.

Finally they reached platform 18. An imposing steam locomotive stood hissing like an angry cat; the front of the boiler was painted like a jack-o-lantern with glowing eyes and mouth looking into the firebox, and the remainder of the boiler was decorated with spiral red stripes. The driving rods were brilliant yellow. At the entrance to the platform hung a large black placard about chest-high to the kids, lettered in brilliant yellow: YOU MUST BE TALLER THAN THIS SIGN TO RIDE. Next to it was a ghostly chimpanzee in a blue uniform smoking a cigar (the smoke tended to leak out the back of his head). The kids started to walk onto the platform when the chimp blew his whistle and pointed at Mr. Saturn. "This one cannot ride, it is not allowed, you must see this, yes?" said the chimp.

"What!" exclaimed Erin. "That's ridiculous! Why not? Come on, Mr. Saturn."

The chimp reached down to his belt and pulled out a communicator. "You must not advance. I will call Officer Jenny if you go any farther. This creature must not ride. It is against de rules."

"Officer Jenny -- oh, no," said Erin, sitting down onto the ground. "Not her again. What are we going to do?"

Mr. Saturn waddled up to his side. "Don't worry, Erin, I'm fine. I'll just take the other train -- just an extra couple of stops. If you'd be so kind as to take the bag everything will be fine."

"Other train?" asked Erin. "What other train?"

"Platform 17, of course," said Mr. Saturn as he waddled away. Erin looked up. Under the big red "17" was a white placard with elegant cursive lettering:

Paper Pacific Toy Trains Special: The Ambivalent Express

-- luxury for toys so wealthy they ought to feel bad about it --

Featuring:

- unlimited hot and cold beverages

- meals prepared in your compartment by our 5-star chefs

- all legal game consoles; choose from over 1000 cartridges and disks
- 133 channels of broadcast entertainment
- private video selection, over 500 titles
- social events for all species
- private Jacuzzi tub in every compartment
- 2000-volume library in every car

Stopping at:

Brinstar

Coruscant

Conker's Corners

Corneria

Larry's Leisure Lounge

and points beyond

Only 25,000 coins (but if you had to ask you shouldn't ride)

"Wow!" said Erin. "Hey, Mr. Saturn, I want to ride with you!"

Mr. Saturn shook his head and directed Erin's glance towards the placard he was waddling under: YOU MUST BE SHORTER THAN THIS SIGN TO RIDE. Beyond it was a brightly colored train even smaller than the fake steam trains that Erin remembered riding as a kid at the zoo: way too small for even Mr. Saturn to fit inside the cars. Erin could see a tiny lounge car, dining car, and seven obviously luxurious passenger carriages behind the yellow, red, and gold windup locomotive.

"Hey, Mr. Saturn," called Brian. "How are you going to pay for that? I didn't give you any coins. Besides, we don't have that many!"

Mr. Saturn wiggled his nose; the cloth bag in Erin's hands popped open and a little embossed square of plastic floated out. "We'll just let Princess Zelda's credit card worry about that," he said, as the card slid through a reader at the side of a little gate. Mr. Saturn walked in,

glowed purple for a moment, and walked out the size of a large rat -- enabling him to comfortably fit through the festooned entrance to the first passenger car and disappear.

Now that the chimpanzee's objections were removed, Nicholas led the crew towards the ghost train. As the kids hurried down the platform, the locomotive let loose with a loud blast of its whistle, and an ethereal whisper like a remembered friend echoed down the platform: *all aboard...* Ghostly figures hurried up the stairs of the cars or simply floated in through the walls. Nicholas ran up to the first door, where a blue ghost in a black uniform and cylindrical hat waited. The ghost glared at them and pointed up at the sign next to him: *DEAD ONLY*. "Your kind's not wanted here," he growled. "Dontcha know anything? You haveta go to the back of the train."

"Okay, thanks," said Nicholas, not wanting trouble. The whistle blew again. Past the dining car another blue ghost was reaching out to pick up the entry stairs. Nicholas screamed "Wait!" and started running full speed, passing right through two ghostly old ladies ("The nerve of that brat!" "I never would have behaved that way when I was alive!"), grabbing onto the stairway just as it started to go up.

Fortunately the conductor in this car, though he looked just like the first, was more kindly disposed. "Come on, children, hustle now, we're starting to move," he grumbled, as a clank propagated down the length of the train and the wheels slowly began to turn. Nicholas, Erin, and Brian jumped on, followed by Clara, who turned to help Tennyson. Cane barged right past him and jumped on. Left with no choice, Tennyson leapt onto the now-jostling platform, tripped, and did a face plant into Cane's stomach.

"Get off me!" said Cane, as the ghost pulled the stairs closed, tumbling the kids into the corridor.

Nicholas stood up and helped the others to their feet. He turned to thank the conductor, but the helpful ghost was already floating down the lower aisle collecting tickets. The car was dimly lit by oil lamps suspended by no visible means at intervals above the corridor. Large picture windows lined both walls, but the images of the outside world were somehow subdued and cast little cheer into the somber interior. The seats were arranged in facing pairs, so that four could sit together in a cozy group if they were kids whose knees didn't bang. On the wall below the window next to each set of seats was a little console with buttons: probably a mobile phone. There were about 15 rows of seats on each side of the corridor; most were vacant, with eight or ten occupied by ghosts of various descriptions, and a pair of koala-like furry creatures slept contentedly in the row just in front of the kids.

"Come on," said Nicholas, and led them to a pair of empty groups of seats. Nicholas, Brian, Erin and Cane took the front four, while Clara and Tennyson took the next set. The two vacant seats became the dumping ground for their backpacks and miscellaneous items; Erin threw Mr. Saturn's bag onto the luggage rack above them.

By this time the train had backed out onto a siding and stopped momentarily. They started up again with a lurch, allowing Tennyson to wrap his arms around Clara's waist under the pretense of steadying her as she stowed her Superscope on the luggage rack. The other kids settled into the ride as the steady click-clack of the wheels accelerated again. Nicholas looked out the window:

they were riding gently uphill through a narrow gully lined with pine trees. The train gained speed as it pulled out onto a granite plateau; the tracks curved to the left towards what appeared to be a deep canyon crossing their path. As they neared the edge of the canyon it became apparent that the tracks didn't turn back, but simply ran right to the edge of the rock and -- ended. Nicholas didn't know quite what to make of this: his stomach felt quivery but no one else on the car seemed to have the slightest apprehension.

At that moment the door at the far end of the car hissed open and the ghostly conductor lazily drifted into the corridor. The train was moving fast now, rolling and jerking to the nervous clacking of the wheels over the joints in the track. Just as Nicholas stood up to go ask the conductor what was going on, Cane (having finished his snacks) looked out the window. "HOLY COW WE'RE GONNA' DIE!" he shouted, grabbing Nicholas and forcibly directing his gaze back outside. The engine had already flown right off the edge of the cliff, charging straight over the abyss, and as the kids watched the bottom dropped right out from under them, their stomachs following along, as the canyon wall plummeted to the river valley far below. The train passed into the air, unconcerned by their panicky exclamations: the only effect of the loss of the track was a sudden quiet as the ride smoothed and the noises of the wheels died away. The whistle blasted lonely through the unending sky. The conductor bustled up and asked for their tickets.

Brian was pale but calm as he counted out coins for the fare. "Beg pardon, Mr. Conductor sir, but are there any restrooms?" he asked.

"Course, son, live folks allowed on this car. In the back by the trash cans; train schedules too if you need some readin' material. Car behind this is the lounge car, tee vee and picture windows, card tables, an' such. Then another live car, and the dinin' car; baggage car and caboose - - that's ghosts only, don't be goin' in there. Snacks in the lounge car too. Thanks for ridin' Jack O' Lantern 1, we appreciate yer business even though you're still alive."

While Brian headed off to the restroom Nicholas stared fascinated out the window. As they executed a wide left turn he discovered that you could still see a sort of track, barely visible as a silver streak across the blue sky, when the sun was at just the right angle. They were still climbing; Nicholas felt like they were getting as high as an airplane although he couldn't quite judge how high that was. Below him the canyon wound off to the right, and a range of low hills extended to the left. Before them was a hint of glimmer that slowly resolved itself into a stripe of blue: the sea.

Nicholas heard the *click* of someone turning on a microphone and then from a speaker on the ceiling came a voice that seemed somehow very distant even though it was loud and distinct: "Welcome to Jack O' Lantern Line. This is Spirit Express 1, passing over Pokemon Sea, Johto, and Pallet Town, on our way to our first stop at Corneria, arriving at precisely 11:27 AM. We will stop for 40 minutes; passengers who wish to leave the train should be sure to retain their tickets to reboard. Our staff of conductors, serving ghosts, and assistants will do everything in our power to make sure that your trip is eternally memorable, even for those of you who are still alive. The dining car, located behind the lounge car, will be serving brunch shortly; for reservations, please contact a conductor. Various recreational activities, snacks, and drinks are available in the lounge car. I'll be calling your attention to particularly striking views from time to time as our journey continues; meanwhile, please relax and float comfortably above your seats."

"Dining car!" said Cane. "Brunch! Wow! Which way did that conductor go?" Brian pointed and Cane went off in search of a reservation.

The car door slid open with a hiss. A wheeled cart creaked in, pushed by a ghost with huge wide eyes and a vicious grin -- Nicholas recognized it as a ghost from Freedom, Sonic's world. He was momentarily frightened until he saw the coin changer strapped around its waist and the cap on its head. The cart creaked slowly up the aisle. "Paper?" said the ghost in a cute squeaky voice entirely unlike its appearance.

"Sure, that would be fun," said Brian, returning from the bathroom. "I always read the newspaper on train rides at home. How much?" He reached into his backpack on the seat and pulled out some coins.

"Two coins," squeaked the ethereal vendor.

Brian opened up the Toadtown Times and sat down in his seat. The vendor ghost pushed the cart down the aisle. Nicholas glanced at the front page: *Children Missing: Foul Play Feared*. "Wait a minute! That's two days old!"

The ghost twisted its head around, distorting its mouth and eyes into ovals. "Only live folks worry about what day it is. If you ride our train you'd best learn our ways. Harruumph!"

"Don't worry about it, Nicholas, I didn't see this issue anyway," said Brian.

"We did," said Nicholas. "Oh, yeah, that reminds me! I'm supposed to call Hedley Medley T. Can I borrow the front page for a second?" Nicholas yanked the handset from the wall and dialed the number in the article. A voice in the handset mechanically noted: "*5 coins for five minutes. Pay up, you miser.*" Brian handed over the coins and went back to the paper; Nicholas popped them in the slot next to the controls. *Ding ding ding ding BONK. "Okay, go ahead and talk. Sucker!"*

RING. RING. RING. "Hello and good day, you've reached Hedley Medley T., standing guard as always to protect the Mushroom Kingdom here at the Chess Board Field. How can I be of service, unless of course your intentions are inimical to the interests of our beloved Princess Peach in which case I shall be reluctant to provide you with any kind of assistance at all."

"Oh, hi, Hedley, this is Nicholas."

"Nicholas? Nicholas... oh, yes, with the children! We were so sorry to hear of your demise. How is ghostliness?"

"No, no, we're not dead. At least not yet. We're just riding the ghost train. We escaped from the Starmen."

"How wonderful! You're still alive, and all your charming friends, and Cane as well. Oh, in that case, your brain still works. Perhaps you can help me with a vexing dilemma. Should I try knight to king three or king's bishop to queen's bishop five?"

"Gee, Hedley, it's sort of hard to say without being able to see the board." *Even if I knew*, though Nicholas. He didn't play much.

"Dash it all, you're right! No matter, how can I help you?"

"Well, this newspaper article says we're supposed to call you to say we're still alive and stuff."

"Oh, quite so, quite so! Yes, well, since you're alive, could you ask Princess Peach to provide a relief for me? As you might recall I importuned you on this topic at our previous encounter, but it seems that little has resulted. I've now been here for several weeks, I should think."

A background voice -- Parakarry, Nicholas remembered -- broke in: "Gawd, it's 'ardly been five days, an' all ya' do is play chess an' complain about me drinkin' beer an' whippin' ya."

"Yes, of course, five days and six nights, quite so," said Hedley.

"Look, Hedley, sir, I'm sorry I forgot to talk to Peach last time, but I don't know what we could do now," said Nicholas. "We're probably not going to be at the castle any time soon."

"Well, of course, but perhaps if you happen upon a Committee meeting up there at Snark or Lark or wherever it is, you could have a word with her, eh wot?"

How the heck does he know where we're going when he doesn't even know we're alive? thought Nicholas. But Mr. Saturn's caginess had not been entirely lost on Nicholas: "I'm sorry, you've got me pretty confused. We're going to--" (Nicholas thought fast) "Johto, to learn Pokemon training, I always wanted to do that! Anyway, thanks, just let the folks at the castle know we're okay. Oh, and thanks again for their help." He pressed the OFF button and leaned over to replace the phone console, but Erin grabbed it.

"Hey, mentioning Johto, that gives me an idea," said Erin. "I'm going to call up Professor Oak and ask if something can escape from a Pokeball."

"Oh, you're not still looking for the Parrot," said Brian.

"Yeah, that's right," said Erin.

"Yeah, yeah, the parrot!" said Cane. "Let's get out the Pokeball again. I'll bet he's hiding INSIDE the Pokeball, we never looked there!"

Erin ignored him and punched menu buttons until he got to Directory Assistance. "Hi, could I get the number for Professor Oak?"

A tinny voice replied: "Dat vill be four coins for de answer to your question."

"Oh, okay," said Erin, grabbing the coins out of Brian's pack without asking. *DING DING*

DING DING. "So?"

"The answer is yes. Of course you can get de number for Professor Oak. He is famous and many people vant to call him, so of course I know how."

"Well, what's the number?"

"Dat vill be five coins, for the actual number."

"What! I already paid you."

"No, dat vas for de question of whether I could get ze number. Ze number itself, zis is extra."

"What a ripoff!" said Erin, but he paid, despite Brian's glare.

DING DING DING DING BLONGGG. "Five seven two seven three four nine two two zero vun. Sank you. Sucker!"

"Dang, did anyone get that?" said Erin.

"Five seven two seven three four nine two two zero one," repeated Brian. "Here, I'll do it." He took the handset from Erin and punched the number in himself.

Ring Ring Ring. "You have reached Oak Research, where we can help you access the huge untapped Pokemon consumer market. For Sales, press one; for customer service, press two; for accounts receivable, press three; for press releases press and release four; for technical support, press star three star one four one five nine two six five three five pound two star seven one eight three eight and be prepared to derive the best rational approximation to an elliptic integral of the second kind; for accounts payable press six and remain on the line during the subsequent two hours of intolerable screeching noises and endless insulting rants from our executive staff; for all other inquiries, press zero and wait patiently as long as we deem necessary. The current queue time is six hours and four minutes. Thank you for calling Oak Research. You have reached Oak Research, where we can help you make up your mind about which button to press since apparently you can't manage this feat yourself. If you don't have fingers, press eight--"

"Geeze, Erin, press a button!" said Cane.

"Yeah, yeah, I just wanted to examine all my options," said Erin, pushing the 0 button. In only a few seconds a very pleasant female voice answered: "Oak Research, you can pay us now or pay us later, the choice is yours."

"Hi, I'm Erin, I was just wondering if I could ask a question about Pokeballs. I mean, ask Professor Oak."

"If a Pokeball has malfunctioned you need to contact technical support. Please press star three star one four one five nine six--"

Erin interrupted. "Yeah, yeah, I know that, but this is a more general question. I'm looking for a parrot--"

"Oh! That's where it came from. I'll put you through to the Professor immediately, he'll want to talk to you right away." *Beep click beep.*

"This is Professor Oak," said a cheerful male voice. "How can I help you?"

"Hi, Professor, I'm Erin Hollin, and I was wondering what happened to this parrot that I put in this Pokeball I found in the bathroom, and--"

"Oh, wonderful! I was hoping you'd call. That parrot you captured is just dandy! He makes a perfect playmate for my Togepi's, and a charming companion for my Jigglypuffs. Where ever did you find him? I must have another!"

"Oh, so that's what happened!" said Erin. "I was going to ask if they could have escaped from the Pokeball, but I guess you just took him in."

"Well, here at the Laboratories we always have room for Pokemon in need. Would you like to speak to him?" The voice became tinny as the speaker turned away from the handset and called out: "Rashomon! Rashomon! Would you like another cracker? No? Well, fine, there's someone on the phone for you."

A loud rustling sound, punctuated by complaints and shrieks, followed. "Yeah, who is it?" said the parrot's screechy voice.

"There you are! It's Erin. Remember, you tried to kill me yesterday."

"Oh, it's you." The voice dropped. "Listen, if I had known what a sonuvabitch you were I never would have tangled with you. I admit defeat. I'll talk. I'll tell you anything! Just GET ME OUT OF HERE! If I have to choke down one more stale cracker I'll explode."

In the background Professor Oak's voice could be heard: "Oh Rashomon, the Smoochum want to play, can you come by as soon as your call is finished?"

"Not the Smoochum! Erin you've GOT TO SAVE ME."

His experience as Bowser had gotten Erin thinking. "I don't know," he said silkily. "What assurance can I have that you won't have another go at me? Who hired you, anyway?" the last being a calculated risk.

"How did you know that?" said the Parrot.

"Rashomon? Rashomon! They're waiting," said the Oak voice in the background.

"Oh, geeze, allright, allright, anything. Killing you was just a side job. I was spying on

Luigi. I was hired by a Star Spirit named --" There was a *SWOOP* and then a *THUNK*, as if the phone on the other end had been dropped. The kids could hear running footsteps and shouting voices: "Professor, are you all right?" "I'm fine, Amy, fine -- it wasn't after me, it was going for the parrot." "Oh, the poor dear. Head blown clean off. A Q-laser, it looks like." "Yes, there's the hole in the window. How rude! That will be a pretty penny to fix." "And he was so cuddly, too." "We lose more playmates that way." *CLICK*.

"Wow," said Nicholas. "I wish Mr. Saturn was here. There's a lot going on and I get the feeling we don't know about most of it."

"Yeah, well, he was a stinky Captain Flint anyway," said Erin, though he looked a little sad. "I'm gonna' go check out the lounge car." He stood abruptly and strode down the corridor towards the back end of the car.

Clara and Tennyson were conversing quietly, partly hidden behind the others' packs and items. "No, I haven't," said Clara. "I still think this is crazy. We're sticking our noses into the middle of a war. Kids don't belong in something like that. Didn't you see Grave of the Fireflies?"

"No, what's that?" replied Tennyson.

"Oh, never mind. This is like Star Wars, where Obi Wan says to go off on a damn fool quest -- except we're the fools. My father always tells me you have to face facts no matter what they are, and the facts are that we don't even know what we're trying to do, but we know that we're likely to get caught or killed trying to do it. Does that make any sense? I think you guys are just fooling yourselves that we have any kind of chance. It's like you think you're living in a movie, but this is real life." Tennyson raised his eyebrow. "Oh, you know what I mean! I don't know if it's real or what but it seems like it." She kicked him in the shin. "Hurts, right? That's what I mean."

"Well, if you feel that way, why did you come along?" Tennyson tried to be cheerful but he looked hurt by more than a sore leg.

Clara looked away and was silent for a moment. "Dad says duty is the guiding principle of an honorable life. When you betray your word you lose part of yourself."

"But you never promised to go with us. None of us volunteered for any of this. It was an accident."

"That's not it. I mean, every time we got in trouble whoever could help has done their part. You and Cane defeated the Yoshies, and Brian got the coins to get us to Fourside, and Nicholas has really been a good leader, and Erin found out about the plot on Ark. If I stayed behind, I'd be taking advantage of everything you guys did and then leaving you to your fate."

"That's silly. You helped with the Yoshies and dealt with the Twins. You were the one who captured that crazy robot parrot. You've saved us a bunch of times already. You don't owe us anything."

"Are you trying to make me go away?"

"No, no, I mean -- I don't know what I mean. I'm glad you came. You may think we're crazy but I think we've got a much better chance when you're along."

Clara smiled and squeezed Tennyson's hand. "My father also says sometimes you just have to trust your feelings and not try to make sense of them."

"He does? That doesn't make a lot of sense."

"Nope, it doesn't. Do you wanna get a snack?"

Tennyson nodded; they rose and walked hand in hand towards the lounge car, stepping aside politely as a fat ghostly lady dressed in a horrid yellow and chartreuse polka-dotted blouse appeared through the sliding door and waddled down the corridor.

The lounge car was much like those familiar to Clara from train trips with her father: huge picture windows reaching partway across the ceiling covered the walls, providing a panoramic view of the ocean outside. In one corner there was a large television monitor, and across from it two video game controllers and a screen; at the other end of the car was a small snack bar. Near the entry two Yoshies sat on the swivel chairs next to the windows, munching nuts (tossing the shells on the floor around them). A round Kirby-like fellow sat on the other side of the car, talking in some unintelligible tongue with a ghostly figure in a robe that reminded Clara of Obi Wan Kenobe. A mother Boo and two little boos in pointed hats sat by the window eating transparent glowing sweets from a basket in front of them. Erin stood at the snack bar talking to a bulbous ghost with a broad smile and stubby arms, dressed in the same blue uniform as the conductors. Tennyson recognized Wisp from Animal Crossing. "I guess times are tough everywhere," he whispered to Clara.

"Erin, what's up?" said Tennyson as they walked over. "Anything good?"

"Naah, it's pretty dull," said Erin. "I watched the teevee for a few minutes -- but it's not all of Fantasia, they just keep playing *Night on Bald Mountain* over and over again. And the only games you can play are the ones with ghosts, like you can play the boos in Paper Mario but you can't play the rest of the game. See the sign up there?" He pointed to a placard tucked up on wall over the door. It said: G-RATED ENTERTAINMENTS ONLY.

"Right. And nothing to read except a couple of brochures for ghost resorts. Seems like ghosts go on vacation to watch things rot. Not very exciting if you ask me. I think I'll try sneaking into the ghost car. Maybe I can smear some of this stuff onto my face and look like a zombie." Erin walked back to the passenger car, squishing Ectobits over his nose and across his cheeks. Tennyson and Clara continued to the snack bar, where for two coins Clara bought them a box. They munched the curious confections, chocolate on the outside and puzzling but tasty ectoplasm on the inside, as they watched the ascending sun glint off of the waves far below.

Back at their seats, Nicholas and Brian had finished squabbling over the *Toadtown Times* comics. (Most of the strips were only okay, but there was one called *Koopa Kops* that had Nicholas in stitches every time he saw it.) The speaker clicked again: "Good morning to everyone;

I hope you're having a pleasant trip so far. This is your conductor speaking; I just wanted to point out a couple of notable landmarks on this part of our route. We are completing our crossing of the Pokemon Sea, dotted with picturesque islands whose traditions date back before Pokemon the Movie 2000. If you look to your left you can see that we have reached GoldenRod City in Johto. The city was originally built for the Pokemon Games Gold and Silver Jubilee, and features a five-story shopping mall. It is also home to the Johto Bullet Train station, directly below and slightly in front of us at the moment."

From behind him Nicholas could hear one of the little boos: "Mommy, mommy, I want to see!"

"Just stick your head through the floor, dear, and do be careful of the tracks!"

Then somewhat muffled: "Oh, there is it, wow, can we go down?"

"Now now, Ophelia, maybe some other time."

Meanwhile the narrative continued: "The bullet train to Saffron City in Kanto departs in thirty-two minutes; ghosts wishing to make a connection should float through the floor at this time. GoldenRod city also holds a giant radio tower, visible off to the right. Across the sea to the west lies Hoenn, famous for its pivotal role in Pokemon Sapphire and Pokemon Ruby. As we cross the peninsula we will pass over the Misty Marine Preserve, where you'll be able to see various water Pokemon frolicking happily together when they are not dining on each other. We'll be calling your attention to other particularly notable sights from time to time during the remainder of our short journey."

Cane returned, holding a little blue card in his left hand. "Hey, Brian, gimme some coins, I wanna hit the snack bar!"

"Okay, just a minute," said Brian. "Just let me finish this article." He was reading about the financial troubles of the KoopaVision Corporation, which had been badly affected by the scandal resulting from an admission by a Goomba that the quiz shows were fixed.

At this point Erin, face still covered with chocolate, plunged back into the car, turning around to push the door closed behind him. The mean conductor stuck his head through the steel partition as it slid fast and grunted, "And stay out!" After a few steps Erin stopped running and tried to wipe his face clean, which merely resulted in spreading chocolate stains onto his clothing. Having recovered his composure, he made his way back to where the others were sitting.

"So, how'd it go?" said Brian.

"Well, the ghosts-only cars are much nicer than these! The seats are bigger, and each one has its own built-in headstone that shows the name of whoever is sitting there along with 'rest in peace' or 'he died with his boots on' or probably whatever you ask for, and there're a couple of special casket-shaped seats for vampires, and there's a plastic tarp dispenser for zombies to collect their body parts--"

"I meant, how did the zombie disguise work?" interrupted Brian.

"Oh, not very well! These conductor ghosts are a lot smarter than Neville. I hardly had a minute to read your 'wanted' poster."

"My WHAT?" exclaimed Brian.

"Oh, your 'wanted' poster. Somebody wants to have you killed."

"What? How do you know that?"

"Oh, it says: 'WANTED. KID. DEAD OR DEADER.' And it has a picture of you. And a big reward, I forgot how much 'cause I had to run back here, maybe ten thousand coins. Hey, where you goin? That conductor is mean! Brian!" Brian was walking down the corridor, ignoring Erin's pleas. "You know, that conductor does look a bit blue," reflected Erin.

"I don't think Brian is very afraid of ghosts any more," said Nicholas.

HISSS. The door slid open. Brian strode ahead, stomach slightly queasy, but the conductor was busy arguing with a balding man in faded slacks: "What do you mean? I'm Malcolm Crowe!"

"You don't look dead to me. You're just that die-hard Willis slumming again."

"No, no, I'm a ghost. It's a non-judgmental life choice -- I mean, death choice. I'm coming to terms with my self-dissolution."

While the two argued Brian was left free to explore the car. On the wall next to the Security Vacuum holder there was indeed a large poster:

WANTED: KID.

DEAD OR DEADER.

over a recognizable photograph of Brian, clearly taken in the pool room shortly after the demise of Inky, as the pieces of the pool table were still strewn against the wall. The text continued:

Accessory to Murder -- Property Damage -- Rendering Assistance to PacMen. Goes by the name of "Brian". May be traveling in ghost disguise; AKA Spirit of Christmas Past.

REWARD 10,000 COINS OR EQUIVALENT IN CURRENCY OF YOUR CHOICE.

Below that were a smaller set of photographs of some of the other kids:

STICK (that was with a photo of Cane)
AARON (with Erin)

REWARD: 500 coins
REWARD: 500 coins

On separate charges: Kidnapping and Molestation

CLARISSA	(a photo of Clara)	REWARD:	5000 coins
TS ELIOTT	(Tennyson's image)	REWARD:	5000 coins

Reward guaranteed upon presentation of the corpse or residual spirit, by PacGhost Guild and Protective Association. Signed: Blinky.

The bald man was rattling the chains that the conductor was wrapping around him as Brian returned to the mixed-being car. By that time Clara and Tennyson were back, so he described the poster to the group.

"What about me?" said Nicholas, feeling left out.

"Being on a wanted poster is not a distinction!" said Clara. "Besides, how come Brian gets a bigger reward than I do? Probably just because he's a boy."

"You got a bigger reward than me!" said Cane enviously. "Five hundred coins! I'm gonna go complain. Clara worth ten times more than me?"

"Dividing in his head, wow," said Brian, impressed.

"Come on, even Cane can count zeroes," replied Erin.

"He couldn't in Math Manipulatives last month," said Brian.

Nicholas had by this time gotten over his resentment and started to reflect on the situation. "Wait a minute, you know, maybe we'd better get under cover. What about the baggage car?"

"We can't go to the baggage car!" complained Cane. "I've got a dining reservation!" He held up the card, adorned with a little Jack o' Lantern logo and a block number. The ceiling speaker clicked: "Attention in the train: dining car reservations seven, eight, and nine, your tables are ready. Dining car reservations seven, eight, and nine, please proceed to the dining car, where the Maitre d' is waiting."

Nicholas looked at the number on Cane's card: 231. "I think you'll be joining the ghosts from starvation if you want to wait until your reservation comes up to eat. Come on, let's get our stuff and move."

Erin was standing on Clara's backpack to grab Mr. Saturn's bag when the speaker clicked on again. "Attention, passengers. We're sorry to disturb you again, but we are having some difficulties with the tangibility generator. Occasional intermittent failures may occur over the next half hour. Ghosts should not be inconvenienced, though you may wish to take precautions for any corporeal luggage you are carrying; our conductors will be passing through the cars with complementary levitation spells. For our live customers, we know you have a choice in transportation and we thank you for riding the Jack o' Lantern line. We hope that we'll remain your preferred means of travel after your imminent demise. We'll keep you advised as repairs proceed."

"Demise," said Cane. "Demise. What the heck is that? It sounds bad."

"Death," said Brian. "Imminent. That means soon."

"What? what? Can't they even use language I can understand when they're trying to kill me?"

"Shut up," said Clara, eyes hard. "What do we do now, Nicholas?"

"Clara's right, let's stay calm--" Nicholas started to say, when the light suddenly brightened as the walls of the train flickered and disappeared. As the seat backs faded Nicholas could see the little Boo waving to him: "Bye bye!" Then the kids were plummeting downwards.

It seemed like they were falling more slowly than would have been the case back home, though it was hard to tell for sure given their considerable height. Nicholas shirt began to flap in the wind as he dropped butt downwards. The other kids were falling with him, and out of the corner of his eye he could see some other figures similarly plunging from rearward cars. Over the whipping of the wind came Erin's voice shouting a familiar tune:

"All the kids are falling down,
falling down,
falling down,
all the kids are falling down--"

and then as one all the other kids finished the verse:

"SHUT UP ERIN!"

Plloooooommmpphh!!