

Enter the Cube

by Nicholas and Daniel Dobkin

Chapter 2: Not in Kansas Any More

When they opened their eyes, the play room was gone. What had been toy-cluttered carpeting was now thick green grass. A gentle breeze brought them the scent of flowers. A cobbled trail led away through the field. In the distance were huge structures that looked like mushrooms, protruding from the blue, gently rippled surface of a lake or river that surrounded the grassy outcropping upon which they found themselves. A wooden box in the middle of the trail blocked their view to what seemed north. Past the box was a brick wall which seemed to be floating unsupported in the air about as high as you could jump.

The kids were speechless for a minute or two.

“Where did your house go?” said Cane to Tennyson, vaguely implying that it was Tennyson’s fault.

“Was that your dad?” asked Clara.

Tennyson thought about this for a moment. “No. That was definitely NOT my dad.” And after further reflection: “He was way too cool to be my dad.”

“Do you think they drugged us and kidnapped us?” said Erin. “That would be cool.”

“If they kidnapped us, where are they? Why aren’t we tied up or something?” said Nicholas. “Where are we anyway? Were we zapped by aliens?”

“There’s no such thing. I saw a TV show about that on PBS last week,” said Clara. “Besides this doesn’t look like a space ship to me.”

“How do you know what a spaceship looks like?” said Cane.

“Psow! Psow! Die Earthlings! Crenelac the Magnificent will conquer your world!” said Erin.

“Come on, guys, let’s work this out,” said Nicholas. Clara crossed her arms and rolled her eyes up to the sky. Nicholas stopped and after an obvious effort said, “Oh all right, Clara, that includes you.” Clara was still upset but decided to give Nicholas another chance. “Come on, pay attention!”

“We have to attack them now before more ships land, sir! Call the President! Call the Navy! Call the Air Force!” said Erin. He was not paying attention.

Without thinking about it Clara, Tennyson, Cane and Brian had arranged themselves in a semicircle around Nicholas. Erin was still wandering back and forth

across the grass talking to himself: “Launch missiles! Oh, no, they used their shield! RUUUUUNNNN!!!!”

“Does anyone remember anything after that explosion thing?” asked Nicholas. “Did you ever see that guy before?”

“I’ve seen some guy like that before somewhere,” said Cane. “But I can’t remember where. Maybe it was at the comic store. Lot of weird people hang out there. Like, I saw Tennyson’s dad there looking at the Adult Animé section.”

“You did not, you’re making that up!” said Tennyson.

“Oh, you’re right, maybe it was your mom,” said Cane.

“You guys are just not serious about this,” said Nicholas. “Get to the point. Let’s think about this. We’re still wearing the same clothes we were. Oh, does anybody have a watch on?”

“Power up now! Or the aliens will destroy Washington DC and kill the President! Or maybe that’s ok after all. Power down,” said Erin in the background.

Clara held up her wrist. “We’ve only been here a couple of minutes. We got off school at 2:20, and we got to Tennyson’s house by about 2:35, and it’s 2:44 now. That’s not much time to go very far.”

“Maybe the aliens reset your watch with their advanced technology,” said Tennyson.

“What aliens?” said Clara.

“This is the end, commander! The Earthlings have defeated us, we must retreat!” continued Erin. The other kids ignored him.

Crunch crinch crunch crinch: the sound of someone (or something) walking on the gravel trail beyond the wooden box. Brian realized that he had been hearing this sound for a couple of minutes already. He tried to attract the attention of the group by waving but without success, as Nicholas had finished examining Clara’s watch and was looking for another idea: “All right, so it didn’t take much time, or maybe Clara’s watch really is broken. Does anybody recognize this place? Has anyone been here before? Do you see a phone so we could call our parents?”

Brian started to say, “I heard a funny sound--” but Nicholas interrupted him: “Not now, Brian, we’re trying to figure out where we are!” and Tennyson said “Oh that was just Erin anyway,” and Cane said “It was probably Clara burping,” which caused Clara to throw some gravel from the trail at Cane, who ducked so that the pebbles hit Tennyson. This precipitated another round of angry name calling.

Meanwhile, Brian walked around the box to find out what the sound was.

“I’ll never retreat! Crenelac the Magnificent is always victorious, you pusillanimous worm! But sir -- what does pusillanimous mean?” continued Erin, gesturing wildly as he lay in the grass.

“All right, calm down, calm down!” said Nicholas. “Clara, apologize to Tennyson! Cane, apologize to Clara! Tennyson -- well, just say you’re sorry. We have got to be more serious if we’re ever going to--” SPROING pook! pook! tingle tingle tingle. “What was that?” said Nicholas and Clara together.

Again: SPROING! pook! pook! tingle tingle tingle. And then crunch crinch crunch crinch. SPROING! pook! pook! tingle tingle tingle. It was coming from beyond the wooden box. Nicholas looked at Clara who returned his puzzled glance. Cane and Tennyson looked at Nicholas. Without a word, Nicholas in the lead, they walked cautiously around the wooden box.

Brian was standing in front of an absolutely bizarre little creature. The thing was about stomach-high to Brian (who wasn't very big even for a fifth-grader). Two huge eyes above a frowning mouth with two nasty-looking fangs protruding, all in an orange brown head shaped like a squashed carrot pointing up. The body was a sort of yellow column with no arms, and the creature was walking determinedly forward on very short legs (if there were any at all) terminating in rounded dark brown shoes or feet that looked like shoes. The creature moved straight at Brian, and Clara gasped: "Look out, he's going to bite!"

Brian ignored her and jumped up in the air, amazingly high, landing right on the head of the creature with a SPROING! The creature turned into a puff of white smoke with a pook! pook!, followed by a tingle tingle as silvery flakes of something dissipated into the surrounding air. All the kids were speechless in amazement. Clara missed the background drama, and looked back: Erin was also staring wide-eyed at the line of goombas.

Brian suddenly noticed the other kids and calmly said, "You jump on their heads. Remember, Nicholas, you told us last week, when you were just starting Melee again."

"They're goombas!" said Nicholas. "Holy cow. WE'RE IN THE GAME!!" He sat down on his butt in the grass.

Tennyson said, "What?", and pretended to faint (naturally landing on top of Cane). Cane's somewhat muffled voice could be heard from beneath him: "Get off me!"

Clara looked at Nicholas and then at Brian. There were about 20 goombas still in sight. "You are completely out of your mind," she said to Nicholas. "There is no way we could possibly be INSIDE Smash Brothers. That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard, even from a boy." A pause, then: "But, Brian is right, you jump on their heads." And with that she turned down the path, and, leaping in the air, landed right on top of the next goomba: SPROING pook! pook! tingle tingle tingle.

By this time Tennyson was sitting up in the grass only partly on top of Cane (one leg and a bit of hip). They got up and tried SPROINGing goombas. It was ridiculously easy, as the poor creatures made no attempt to defend themselves or avoid the kids. Brian, having proved his point, felt no further need to remove them, and Clara soon lost interest as well, leaving the remainder to wander off behind the brick wall past them on the trail.

Within a couple of minutes no more goombas were left in sight. "So what was that for?" said Cane. "You don't really think we're inside a video game? I mean, I can't believe I agree with Clara but that is the stupidest idea I've heard since Tennyson thought of drying the cat in the microwave."

"I did not!" said Tennyson.

“Oh, sorry, since you did it without thinking of it.”

“I did not! I put the cat in the microwave as an experiment; she wasn’t even wet. Besides that wasn’t as dumb as the time you tried to plug a scissors into the wall to make it motorized.” Tennyson stuck his hand out and starting shaking wildly to give the impression of receiving an electric shock.

“I did that on a dare!” said Cane.

“I don’t know,” said Clara. “This is crazy but those things were just like goombas in Super Smash Brothers Melée. And isn’t this place just like the Mushroom Kingdom? How many places have you been where a brick wall can just hang in the air like that?”

“Well, there are blocks like these in nearly every Mario game there ever was,” said Brian. He thought for a moment. “That doesn’t really help, does it? I don’t know any real place that has blocks hanging in the air.”

“There’s just no other way,” said Nicholas, still sitting in the grass. “This is the right grass, those are the right giant mushrooms, the lake, the mountains, the wooden box -- it’s all just the way it should be. Goombas too. Either somebody is playing one heck of a joke on us or -- well, there’s nothing else it could be. You guys’ll see: I bet you the next thing is a Koopa coming down the path.”

“Are you sure? I mean, what do we do now? If we’re really inside a video game?” Tennyson looked like he really had gotten a shock. “Are there phones in Smash Brothers?”

“Melée,” said Brian.

“Melée, whatever. How do we get home? How do we get help?”

“There might be a phone at Fourside,” said Brian.

“Where’s that?” said Tennyson.

“Oh, that’s the place which is the giant city with the UFO’s,” said Nicholas.

“Where is it? How do we get there?” said Tennyson.

“Maybe we have to be abducted,” said Erin. “By the aliens. Cool! Take me to your leader! We will conquer you and steal all your game magazines!”

“You know, I remember there are helicopters there too,” said Nicholas. “Maybe we can catch a ride on a copter.”

“How do we do that?” said Clara. “After we defeat the Yoshies, we go to Peach’s castle, and from there Congo Jungle. That’s if we get that far.”

“You think we’re in adventure mode?” said Brian.

“Makes sense,” said Nicholas. “Look over there!” He indicated a worn, arrow-shaped wooden sign on a post, with flaking white paint: PEACH’S CASTLE.

“Owww!” said Cane. “Get off me!” But instead of Tennyson, on top of Cane was a two-legged yellow creature with a green turtle shell and big round eyes: obviously a koopa.

“What did I tell you?” said Nicholas. “There is no question about it. We are in the game.”

“Ummmph!” said Cane. The koopa wasn’t really bothering him, in fact it seemed not to notice him at all. It stepped off his head and onto the grass, and continued walking with a curious awkward gait down the path.

The kids looked down the path. A bunch of koopas were meandering in a somewhat disorganized fashion towards them. Clara said, "If you jump on their heads they just go into their shells. I think you have to throw them into the water or something like that."

Tennyson said, "They don't seem to be bothering anyone." Cane glared at him. "Maybe we should just ignore them."

"He's right," said Clara. "Let's just try to figure out how to get to Fourside." The koopas were now walking past the kids, taking no particular notice of them. Pacifism seemed like a profitable course to everyone.

"If we go down the path, we'll come to a big tower where the Yoshies hang out, and past that there's a huge green pipe that leads to the end of this stage," said Nicholas. "Why don't we go that way? Maybe we can find a Toad to ask about Fourside."

"Well, OK, go ahead," said Tennyson. "Ow!" A koopa had bumped into him and was blindly walking over his foot. The koopas didn't seem too bright.

So Nicholas started down the gravel path and the kids fell into a ragged sort of line behind him. Erin meandered back and forth, vaguely keeping up. "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore! Woof! Woof! Excuse me," leaning over a koopa, "are you a Munchkin?"

The path led past a tall brick tower, dodging Koopas, under another one of those disconcerting platforms hanging unsupported in the air, and up to another stone abutment about 6 feet high. Brian went first, and as he got to the top, they heard a funny *crunching* noise.

"What's that?" said Cane.

"I was hungry," came Brian's somewhat muffled voice from atop the abutment.

Brian came back and helped Cane up with one hand. In the other he had a rather remarkably appetizing red apple.

"Where'd you get that?" said Cane.

"It fell down from the sky," said Brian. "It's an item. An edible one. Crrrunch." He took another bite.

"Wait a minute," said Nicholas. "Where are those coming from?" They looked up. Almost directly above them they could see the bottom of another mysteriously airborne platform. The top of the platform wasn't visible, but they could hear the distant sounds of what seemed to be an argument:

"Yeeek meeiiieie shrruuuumiiiiiee!" went one screaming voice.

"Ooookiiee mooorreeeeeiii!" replied another. Some sort of box went flying over the side of the platform, spewing smaller objects as it fell.

"Get down, everybody!" said Nicholas.

"No way!" said Cane. He ran to where the box had fallen and reached in. "Look! Burgers! Mmm, I love cold hamburger."

Another burst of high-pitched screaming reached their ears. This time some sort of wooden pallet flew off the side of the platform. "Look out, you dufus!" said Clara, grabbing Cane and throwing him to the side just as a large metal object struck the ground where he had been.

“Hey, keep your hands to yourself, I saw that -- thing coming!” complained Cane. He reached down to pick up the object. “It’s a ray gun,” he observed. “Cool! I wonder if it works.” He immediately pointed it at Tennyson and pressed the trigger button. There was a ZIPPITY sound and a cracking lightning - like flash struck Tennyson’s left arm.

“Owwww!!! You’re crazy, you could’ve blown my arm off!” said Tennyson.

“Oh, don’t be silly, they just give you a sort of electric shock,” said Clara.

“Uhh -- I knew that. I knew that.” said Cane.

“Yeah, when we get home I’ll get my softball bat and you can be the ball. It just hits you in the head,” said Tennyson. “Owww!” A Homerun Bat had delivered a glancing blow to his head as it fell down. The pallet made a *thunk* as it struck behind the kids a moment later. Tennyson picked up the bat and looked suggestively at Cane.

“Fly, my pretties, fly!” said Erin.

“Calm down, calm down,” said Nicholas, grabbing the end of the bat. “Let’s all agree, no more using items on each other, right?” he said, looking at Cane, who started to say ‘he started it’ out of habit, but then reluctantly nodded. “Good, let’s keep our eyes open and get out from under that platform before they throw something heavier.”

They proceeded more carefully over the top of a small rise to a plateau with a cylindrical pipe-like object sticking out about 8 feet from the ground. Below them, past a steep terraced slope, they could see a white wooden pier protruding partway into the water towards a round tower that seemed to be made of a green stone. Above the pier were a series of large platforms at varying heights.

“Well, this was your idea,” said Tennyson. “You wanted to get to the tower. What are we going to do?”

“I guess we could -- swim to the tower,” said Nicholas, continuing to walk down the slope.

“Uhh -- I don’t know,” said Brian. “In the game, when you go into the water -- you don’t come back.” This stopped the kids.

“He’s right,” said Clara. “You never see what happens to them but -- I don’t know if I want to find out whether I get extra lives.”

“OK -- we’ll -- have to jump up on the platforms,” said Nicholas. He started walking towards the nearest one, which was suspended a bit before the pier about 12 feet in the air.

“No way!” said Cane.

“With the thoughts I’d be thinkin’, I could be another Lincoln, if I only had a brain,” said Erin.

Nicholas stopped about 5 paces before the first platform, leaned back and got a running start down the grassy slope. With a grunt he leapt into the air. “Wow!” said Brian, who had forgotten how easy it was to jump up on to the heads of the goombas. Nicholas virtually flew through the air, much farther than he could manage in the long jump in PE, and managed to grab the platform at the end of the arc and pull himself up.

“Oh, anybody can do that!” said Cane, and took off down the slope. With a cry of “Kowabunga!” he jumped wildly up, overshooting the edge of the first platform and catching his foot, resulting in an inelegant face plant.

“Nice job,” said Tennyson.

“Jump jump here, fall fall there, we hardly ever pause -- That’s how we while the day away! in the merry old land of Oz!” said Erin as he leapt.

“Come on,” said Nicholas. “We’ll have to jump from platform to platform. Be careful! we don’t know what happens if you fall in the water. Watch for koopas!”

But it was difficult to remember caution in the exhilaration of flying from one platform to another. Cane had succeeded in executing a reasonable facsimile of an airborne somersault between the second (low) and third (high) platforms, and turned around to return: “watch this, guys!” (Clara had given up glaring at them by now.) Tennyson and Nicholas turned to see him flip over twice and land on his back on platform 2 (“ooohmpph”).

While the three boys competed in recklessness, Clara was helping Brian to carefully negotiate the series of platforms. They had reached the third (high) platform and were contemplating the nearly horizontal leap to the last one. Cane executed a difficult leap from the low fourth platform, just managing to catch the edge of the last platform and prevent a fall into the open water below. Clara said “Be careful! What if you fall in the water?”

“Only a girl would think of that. I’m not gonna fall,” Cane replied. He pulled himself up on the platform surface, grabbing something yellow as he did so.

Clara, forgetting Brian, ran to the edge and jumped for the last platform. She landed safely enough on the final platform -- only to slip on the banana peel that Cane had just dropped.

“Aaaah!” screamed Brian. Nicholas, watching from the fourth platform, gasped as Clara dropped out of sight towards the water. Tennyson was frozen, while Cane looked back, a bite of banana in his mouth, to see what the fuss was about.

“I’m melting! melting! Oh, wotta world, wotta world...” said Erin.

“I am not neither melting!” said Clara. She was rising haltingly, held in the arms of a winged turtle -- obviously a koopa paratroopa. “Wow!” was all Tennyson could say.

The winged koopa gently deposited Clara onto one of the flat stone steps protruding from the tower. Clara said “Thank you very much!” The koopa gave the slightest nod of acknowledgement and turned to fly away, mumbling to itself -- “mapple mupple”.

After this unexpected brush with danger, the boys proceeded more cautiously to join Clara. Tennyson helped Brian on the last hazardous leap over the open water. When they were all gathered on the stone slab, Nicholas tried to look up to see the path to the top of the tower. However, there was a second stone slab blocking his view.

“How are we going to get up to the top?” said Nicholas.

“We can climb,” said Clara. “Look, the stones aren’t at all close together. You can get your feet and hands in between them.” She demonstrated, jamming her left foot into a crack and reaching up for the handhold at the next row of stones.

“Well, I guess that’ll work,” said Nicholas. “Clara, you go first.” She looked back and mouthed “Duh!”. “Then Brian, Tennyson, Cane--”

“No way! He’s gonna fall on me again!” said Cane.

“Not unless he wants to end up in the water too. Erin is next, I’ll go last. And don’t any of you guys fall cause you’ll end up on me!”

“Don’t look down, Brian!” said Tennyson. Brian didn’t look too happy about it, but he took to the wall, carefully observing where Clara put her hands and feet (which also kept his eyes directed upwards).

“Don’t get too close to each other or you’ll get your hands stepped on!” said Nicholas. In a moment, there was a line of kids distributed along the wall.

“Should we rest here?” said Brian to Clara as she climbed right past the next stone terrace.

“Naw, let’s go right on up,” said Clara. “This is ea-- OWW! What was that?”

The other kids looked up to see an object about the size of Clara’s head zip by. It had obviously bounced off her on its way down.

“Koop shell?” said Nicholas.

“Nope, Green Shell,” said Brian.

“Right,” said Nicholas. “Where’d it come from?”

Just then they heard a bizarre high-pitched laugh. A greenish round face with huge yellow eyes was poking over the edge of the tower top. It laughed again and dropped a smaller object. This time Clara was alert and dodged: the object just missed Brian and landed SPLAT! on Tennyson’s upturned face.

It was a hamburger. The top bun fell off and went spinning down to the water. Ketchup dripped down Tennyson’s cheek and a pickle was perched on his nose. “I wanted that!” said Cane.

“Get your own!” said Tennyson, and jammed the hamburger against the stone wall so he could take a bite. It was after snack time, after all.

“Let’s get under that platform!” said Nicholas.

“Which one?” said Clara.

“The one you’re next to! Look out!” said Nicholas. While Clara was distracted the creature had come up with another projectile: a goomba. If the goomba could talk it would probably have been saying, “Let me go!”. Then it would probably change its mind, as the Yoshi holding did so.

With the warning, Clara was able to dodge the falling goomba, and Brian somehow managed to bounce it off his back so that it went spinning into the water. They couldn’t see quite what happened when it hit, though there was a sudden flash of light and a POP that convinced them they didn’t want to find out what happens if you fall in.

Clara and Brian had climbed under the shelter of the next rock overhang, and reached back to pull Tennyson (still chewing on the hamburger) in. Cane scrambled up

behind, with Erin and Nicholas bringing up the rear. With all of them on the narrow slab of stone there wasn't much room.

"Okay, what do we do now?" said Nicholas.

"Well, we can't go back," said Clara. "We've got to get to the top of the tower."

"What do we do (chomp) (swallow) when we get there?" said Tennyson, finishing the last of the hamburger. "That was a good hamburger but that Yoshie's pretty mean."

"Oh, of course, that's what that thing is!" said Nicholas.

"Obviously," said Brian.

"If we try to climb up again he's going to drop something else on us," said Clara. "I bet it's not another hamburger."

"Why do we need to climb?" said Brian.

"What else are we going to do?" asked Nicholas, skeptically.

"Oh, this," said Brian, and gathering himself, he jumped straight up into the overhanging stone. It was hard to say exactly what happened but he somehow went right through the solid stone.

"Wow," said Tennyson. "That's pretty good. I forgot you could do that."

"How could you forget?" said Nicholas. "I only told you about that last week."

"Fine, then, you go ahead," said Tennyson, rubbing the top of his head dubiously.

They heard a high-pitched chuckle from above them and Brian called out from around the stone, "Hey, somebody get up here, the Yoshie is after me!"

Nicholas and Clara looked at each other, nodded, and jumped as high as they could. Zip! through the stone they went. Cane started to say "I can do that" but Tennyson cut him short: "just jump!" and they did. Erin stayed where he was: he seemed content to let the other kids try this first.

The idea of jumping into solid rock was still sufficiently disconcerting that the kids all closed their eyes as they went. The scene that presented itself to them as they opened their eyes would have been funny if it wasn't so desperate: Brian was running around in a circle with the Yoshie chasing after him. The tower top was about 20 feet in diameter with patches of white hard stuff that appeared to be slippery, the remainder being stone that was so mossy it looked like it was covered with fresh-cut grass. Above them were two more thin wooden platforms tilted at a slight angle. A couple of Yoshies seemed to be asleep on one of the platforms; the other held a cluttered pile of miscellaneous junk. A short human or humanoid in a huge, outrageously colored turban was pacing back and forth out of range of the circling combatants.

Nicholas didn't stop to think, but jumped to grab the leg of the Yoshie as it ran by. The Yoshie was covered with a sort of smooth scaly hide like a lizard, but it was amazingly strong. It didn't even seem to notice Nicholas, but just kept on running. He was thrown off after a few steps, and nearly rolled off the tower edge before Clara could scamper over to snag him by his pant leg, which pulled his pants partly down but stopped him. "Do you mind?" said Nicholas, trying to pull his pants up.

“Well, fine, next time you call roll off into the water,” she replied. Their incipient tiff was interrupted as Brian tripped and the Yoshie kicked him rather viciously, laughing all the while.

The little man said, “What a bunch of dorks, you could hardly be stupider, how’d you even get this far? Grab a Yoshie? -- you might as well grab Bowser. Fine, don’t use any items, no skin off my nose.”

“The items!” said Clara.

“Tennyson, Cane, you’re the ones with weapons! get him!” said Nicholas.

Cane pulled out his ray gun and took aim at the Yoshie, which was about to deliver another blow to Brian: ZIP! The Yoshie looked stunned and turned to see what had happened. Clara and Nicholas ran to help Brian while Tennyson ran at the Yoshie with his Home Run Bat and took a huge swing just as Cane let loose with another shot. The ray gun hit Tennyson on the leg as Cane ducked to avoid the bat.

“Watch where you’re shooting!”

“Watch where you’re swinging!”

“What was I saying? Morons with items -- still morons!” said the little man.

“Yoieeeeeoouueeeiii!” The Yoshie was doubled up with laughter for a moment and forgot he was supposed to be attacking the kids.

“Who is that guy anyway?” said Cane, disentangling himself.

“Oh, it’s a Toad,” said Brian.

Clara had helped Brian away towards the edge of the tower, and Nicholas turned back to the conflict. “Stop that, you have to work together! Cane and Tennyson, you have to be at -- at right angles to the Yoshie so you don’t hit each other!” Cane and Tennyson looked puzzled as they tried to remember what a right angle is. “Cane on Tennyson’s left so he can cover you if the Yoshie attacks.”

The two were sorting the instructions out just as the Yoshie recovered itself and went after Cane. Tennyson waded in with his bat swinging wildly; he landed a lucky stroke on top of the Yoshie’s head (eeeeaaaowowowo! it wailed) but then hit himself in the calf (yeooooow!) and fell on top of Cane again. “What a joke! I couldn’t make up something worse than that!” said the little man.

The boys struggled to their feet and got back in position. Cane snapped off two raygun shots and it was the Yoshie’s turn to double over in pain rather than laughter. (“Oy, even a megavitamin ain’t gonna help that ache!”)

“Good, good,” said Nicholas. “Cane, drive him towards the edge -- good! Now, Tennyson, knock him off AND HIT THE YOSHIE THIS TIME!” Tennyson pictured himself at the plate in Little League: *feet planted, swing level, hit through the ball -- I mean, Yoshie -- WHACK!* The green creature flew in a parabola away from the tower, wailing in his cute high voice, until he hit the water with a POOF!

High fives were in order -- even Clara joined in the celebration as Cane and Tennyson, after a couple of misses, slapped hands high and low, while Nicholas went to help Brian up. Erin had finally made it to the top and appeared to be talking to the turbaned little man.

Unfortunately, the ruckus had awakened the two sleeping Yoshies. One of the Yoshies jumped up and slid down the platform, leaping off straight at Tennyson before he had a chance to raise his bat. Cane, however, alertly snapped off a ray gun shot -- ZIIIP! -- causing the Yoshie to lose its balance as it hit the slippery center of the tower. This gave Tennyson time to whack the poor fellow on his head with the Home Run bat. The Yoshie staggered off balance toward the edge of the tower. Clara and Nicholas ran up behind the creature and delivered enough of a push to send him sliding off the mossy rim and into the drink.

That gave the third (and the kids hoped final) Yoshie time to get to the tower top. As the Yoshie faced his four adversaries (Brian was keeping out of the way), Erin launched into an unusually relevant monolog: "It's a beautiful day here at Top-'o-the-Tower Field. We join the game with two down in the first inning, and Tennyson up at the bat."

Not to be outdone, the Toad did color commentary: "Yes, Erin, Tennyson is hitting .453 so far this season with two Yoshies batted in, topping the stupid kids league in the early season stats."

"The Yoshie is wrapped up tight in his shell, looking in for a sign -- here comes the pitch, looks like a spinning-shell slider -- a big swing from Tennyson --" CRACK! eeeoowwww! -- "going! going! -- it's gone! A home run into McMushroom Cove," shouted Erin. "We'll be back right after this message from People Who Throw Toads off Towers And Like It." The Toad glared at him from under his huge hat. "So, Humptee, so you were gonna tell us how to get to Fourside, right?"

"When did I say that? In your dreams, you banana-brain. You guys couldn't get to Peach's castle in the first place and you'd probably never figure out how to get to the heliport on the roof. You'll all fall off the green pipe before you get ten steps."

"Erin -- who's your friend?" said Nicholas.

"Oh, this is Humtee Dump T.," replied Erin. "He spends a lot of time on the tower, so he knows a lot about what goes on here. He was just telling me we can catch the helicopter to Fourside from the roof of Peach's castle."

"I was doing no such thing. I wouldn't tell you how to get to the castle if you gave me a Golden Diamond! My dork brother at the Checkerboard Field -- his name is Hedley Medley T. but I call him Hed M. T. for short -- he would go around telling stupid kids how to get to Fourside. I don't do that kind of thing. You can all fall in the lake and get replaced for all I care." The Toad was pacing back and forth across the tower while he talked, ignoring the kids except when they were in his way.

Meanwhile Clara and Brian had climbed onto the wooden platform and started to look through the junk pile. "Look at this, Clara! There's all sorts of useful stuff here. Some more apples, a couple of hamburgers --"

"Boys, all they think about is food!" said Clara. "We've got just a treasure trove of weapons here! Freezies, detonators, flippers, bunny hoods..." as she picked up several and tried to figure out what would fit into her pockets.

Humptee turned to watch them: "Yeah, go ahead, muck around like Pikmin in a mulch pile! Waste all the time until the next guard shift comes -- all those Yoshies

coming to trounce you while you just fiddle with items and waste precious time. Typical clueless kids.”

“Oh, when does the guard change?” asked Brian.

“What good would it do to tell you? ‘four thirty, what’s that? is that the big hand on the 8 and the little hand on the 3?’. I wonder if you can even tie your own shoes, punk.”

“He is such a helpful guy,” said Erin to Nicholas. “I really like Humptee; I myself would not join the People Who Throw Toads off Towers unless they had really good food at their meetings.”

Nicholas, finally catching on, grabbed Clara’s wrist: “we have about five or six minutes, guys! Clara, Brian: pick out two or three of the best items each, and throw some food down to us! Cane, Tennyson, collect the food items. Then we’d better get going!”

“Boy, Nicholas, when you’re crrrunnnchh! right, you’re right munch munch munch” said Cane, working on an apple intercepted on the fly on its way to Tennyson’s hand while they shoved each other competing for the other food.

“Stop that,” said Nicholas.

“Here,” said Clara, tossing a huge brown donut with yellow icing to Cane and another to Tennyson.

“Than-mmphph--ks!” said Cane, alternately shoving donut and apple into his mouth.

Clara pulled a silvery object out of the pile: “Look, a heart container!” said Brian. “I’ll take that one.”

“OK,” said Clara, handing it to him. She grabbed a long thin object that looked like a mix between a telescope and a bazooka:

“A superscope!” said Tennyson. “Good Idea!”

As she pulled the superscope out, something that looked like a ball with feet and a big nose rolled out of the pile down the sloping platform and fell onto the tower top. “Ow!” it said in a high-pitched voice.

“What’s that?” said Erin.

“Oh, just a Mr. Saturn. They’re useless,” said Clara.

“He’s a cute little fella’,” said Erin, walking over to pick the tiny shape up.

“Who you callin’ cute?” said Mr. Saturn..

“You can talk!” said Erin.

“More than that, I have something to say, which is more than seems to be the case with you kids,” said Mr. Saturn. “But I guess you did figure out Humtee, that’s something.”

“You wanna’ come along with us?” said Erin.

“A Mr. Saturn, that’s a wonderful idea,” said Humptee. “Carry that smarty pants thing around everywhere you go and look like a dork. He thinks he knows every place in Smash Brothers!” (“Melée” said Brian). “What a jerk!”

“Guys! guys! we’re almost out of time, let’s get rolling!” said Nicholas. “Thanks for everything, Humptee!”

“Thanks?” said Cane, puzzled. “All he did was insult us.”

“You *are* a dufus,” said Clara.

“What? what did I say?” said Cane to Tennyson.

Tennyson rolled his eyes: “When she’s right, she’s right. Come on.”

Nicholas led the kids over to the far edge of the tower top and leaned over. Below them was a huge green pipe that ran across the water to the neighboring shore. Even from a distance they could see that the pipe was filthy and covered with what looked like a mixture of dirt and oil. At the end of the pipe was a big cylindrical tee forming an outlet; a sort of viscous oily substance bubbled up above the rim of the outlet every few seconds.

“Whoaah, we’d better be careful. I’ll go first,” said Nicholas, lowering himself by his hands and then dropping the last two or three feet. His feet started to slide out from under him, and his arms spun briefly as he regained his balance. “Come on, Brian, I’ll help!” he said, turning around carefully on the pipe. One by one the kids dropped down.

Just as Erin hit the pipe they heard a high pitched squealing from above them. “The Yoshies! Come on!” said Nicholas. A green big eyed head protruded over the tower edge and chuckled as it dropped what looked like a big piece of ice -- a Freezy -- narrowly missing Clara. Another Yoshie head appeared, laughing uproariously.

Clara’s eyes narrowed. “Go ahead, greenie, make my day,” she said through clenched teeth as she brought the superscope up to her shoulder. PSSSEUUUUOPP! The second Yoshie bounced up into the air as if he’d been kicked by a giant boot; the first one discretely backed off out of range.

“Don’t mess with Clara when she’s mad,” said Tennyson. Clara smiled at him.

The kids made their way carefully along the slippery pipe and up a ladder of steel rungs. Several goombas were milling around on top of the platform at the other end when the kids got there, uncertain of what to do. Cane jumped in the air and landed on one of them -- SPROING pook! pook! tingle tingle tingle, but the other kids had no enthusiasm for eliminating the pathetic creatures. “Come on,” said Nicholas, “let’s get going!”

They headed up the hill, dodging goombas making their waddling way towards the pipe. When they reached the top of the hill, before them was a curious scene: a huge expanse of land covered with some sort of big square tiles, alternating black and white.

“It’s a giant checkerboard!” said Tennyson.

“It’s a giant chessboard!” said Brian.

“Checkers!” said Tennyson.

“Chess!” said Brian.

“What’s the difference?” said Clara.

“What’s chess?” said Cane.

“Who’s that?” said Brian. He pointed at another curious little man with a huge colorful mushroom-headed turban -- another Toad. The Toad was seated on the grass

next to the huge board. As they approached it became apparent that before him was a chessboard. A winged koopa wearing an old-style leather flying helmet was hovering on the other side. The Toad reached down and slid a piece forward. "Check," he said in a surprisingly low voice.

"Hedley Medley!" said Erin.

"Indeed, well met, young Erin," replied the Toad. "My brother informed me that you and your colleagues might soon drop by for tea. If you can attend me for but a moment whilst I dispatch my friend Parakarry's knight, forcing an exchange of rooks and exposing the back file to an attack by the remaining rook -- well, to be concise, I anticipate a victory within four moves at the most."

The koopa rolled his eyes: "Which game are you lookin' at, mate? 'ad too many brews, I'd say," he said. He reached down with a foot and slid a piece -- a bishop -- diagonally across the board.

"Oh, bloody good show, Para, old chap. Worthy of Russ T. himself. Indeed, I shall have to rethink my position. Well, I'd best attend to our guests." He turned away from the board and bobbed over to the kids. "Let's see now -- you're Erin, the smallest is Brian, you must be Stick--"

"My name is Cane!"

"Quite synonymous, of course. Then Kipling -- I mean, Byron -- Keats? -- Browning -- Dickinson -- no, oh Tennyson! Quite. And Nicholas. Oh, and the lovely young lady must be Clara. How charming, my dear, of you to come visit us. I'm sure Parra is charmed, too."

"Fat chance, mate. 'edley is just avoidin' the game as he knows I'm goin' to eat his lunch!" said Parakarry.

"Quite so, my dear chap, quite so. Now, children, how can I be of service?"

"Well, we wanted to get to Fourside and Humtee said you could help," said Nicholas.

"By Jove! Fourside! Bloody good show! Exciting spot, eh wot? Lovely view. Couldn't have made a better choice myself."

"Yes, well -- how do we get there?"

"Blast it all, by the copter, of course. Stops in at Peach's heliport every day directly, a bit after tea. Or is that after supper? Of course, the chaps usually stay for a nip with Tacey T., leave for Fourside 'round sixish. Or is that the maintenance crew?"

"Where's Peach's castle? Can we walk there?" asked Clara.

"Oh, no, my dear, you should have to swim the river -- tut tut, just isn't done! Wouldn't think of it. No, no, no; you must take the warp pipe. Yes, of course. The warp pipe. Down the hill next to the brick wall by the banana nut tree. Oh and do be careful of the goombas, I just can't abide them, so impolite. Do be sure to give Tacey T. my regards. She is very fond of children, I'm sure she would be pleased to be of assistance."

"Thanks, Mr. T.," said Erin. "We really appreciate your help. Anything we can do in return?"

"Oh yes, thanks very much!" said Clara. Nicholas nodded.

“Oh, please, call me Hedley. At your service, Master Erin. Of course, if you must know, I should appreciate a word on my behalf with the Princess. I should dearly like a relief, as I’ve been on guard duty here for three days and two nights now. Not that I’m complaining, of course -- stiff upper lip and all that! Still, a proper meal and bed would be very much appreciated, if she could find it in her heart to provide me with a leave.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Hedley, we’ll mention it to her as soon as we get there.”

“Just Hedley. At your service and your family’s, I’m sure. Good day.”

“G’day, mates. Come on, ‘edley, move before the river freezes!”

Nicholas had taken several steps down the hill and directed the other’s attention to a tree now visible near the river bank, behind a group of goombas that seemed to be milling around with something in their mouths: “There it is. The pipe must be behind it. Let’s go. Thanks again, Hedley!”

“Quite, quite. Hmmm... pawn to queen’s rook 3.”

“Blimey! Checkmate.”

“Check? Check? By Jove, what shall I do now?”

“No, checkmate.”

“Yes, I heard: check, mate.”

“No, checkmate. You lost, the game’s over, you bloomin’ empty-headed Toad!”

“Oh. Oh, my. Good show, Parra old chap. Bloody good show.”

Meanwhile, the kids were making their way down the hill, dodging goombas as they went. The goombas were awkwardly holding beat-up golf clubs in their mouths and pushing golf balls through the grass, rather like a toddler with a tennis racket. What they planned to do when they got to the river wasn’t apparent: perhaps they didn’t need to breathe and would walk on the bottom (if they didn’t go poof on touching the water).

“There it is!” said Brian, the first to reach the tree. Just behind a green pipe about a meter in diameter stuck waist-high out of the ground. The inside of the pipe displayed a peculiar sort of shimmering, as if it wasn’t quite there.

“OK, let’s go,” said Nicholas. “I’ll go first, then Erin, Cane, Tennyson, Brian. Clara, you go last to keep an eye out for the Yoshies. Hold on to your stuff. Right?”

“Right,” Clara said. “Come on, get in!”

Nicholas hesitated for a moment and then took a deep breath and jumped head first into the pipe. There was a curious slurping sound and he disappeared faster than could be strictly accounted for by gravity. Erin grabbed Mr. Saturn: “Plop! plop! fizz! fizz!”, with Mr. Saturn replying, “Oh what a relief it is!” and in they went.

Cane was more reluctant, but Clara dealt with him summarily: “Boys! all talk and no guts. You are a dufus AND a wimp.” That did it: sluuuurp, quickly followed by Tennyson; Clara helped Brian in, tucked her Superscope into her belt, and reached up. Just as she leaned over the opening, she heard Hedley in the distance: “Children! oh, dear, children! I forgot to tell you where --” but then she felt a pull, starting from the hair and sweeping down over her from nose to toes: into the pipe she went. “Well, whatever he forgot, too late now,” she thought.

The ride through the pipe was moderately bumpy and extremely fast. Clara was reminded of the Space Mountain ride at Disneyland, where she had gone with her father the previous year -- but this time there were no seat belts and no assurance that they would come out safely. The tube dropped straight down initially and then abruptly pulled level and turned sharply to the right. Clara kept her arms stretched in front of her; on the sharper turns she bumped into the walls of the tube, which seemed dry and hard but very slippery. Ahead of her she could hear the other kids: “Whooooaahh!!” “Oooommpphh!” “Coooooll!” and the high voice of Mr. Saturn: “Of course I know -- ooof! -- where this goes --- owww!”

There was a sudden right turn, a drop, a bump back up, and a disorienting corkscrew through some sort of huge helical shape, and then FUMP! She landed on top of Brian. Clara was blinded for a moment by the bright lights and deafened by what sounded for all the world like applause.

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