

Enter the Cube

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Chapter 20: The Black Bag

“Ow! Get off me!” said Cane, pushing Erin from where he had landed on Cane’s face in the attempt to reach Brian. Erin rolled off of the pile of kids and landed on the floor.

“I can’t believe you did that, Brian,” said Erin. “We’re back. It’s so boring. Then again, what did I expect from Brian?”

“I’m not so sure we are,” said Tennyson, sitting up. The kids were more or less in the middle of the room. A large five-shelf video rack stood next to a plasma flat panel display television, the bottom three shelves filled with neatly stacked game disks in carefully-labeled jewel cases, the fourth with alphabetized movie disks. The GameCube and three controllers lay on the floor in front of the television, the control cables running in precise parallel lines up the back of the TV rack, held in place with plastic cable ties. The top two book shelves held board books ordered by size, and the bottom four were respectively occupied by paperbacks, comic books and manga (that was the shelf that was too short for books to stand upright), school texts, and oversized and reference books. On the desk there was a plastic rack labeled SCHOOLWORK, with the three trays marked IN PROGRESS, COMPLETE, and OVERDUE, neatly stacked on top of a DVD player, next to a little metal-mesh can containing the pencil sharpener, three pencils, a blue and a red pen, and a ruler/protractor. “Is this my room? Did I have a plasma display? And a DVD player? And Virtual Fighter Nexus? [‘the Nexus’ added Brian] that’s not even out yet.”

“Okay, if it’s not yours, then I got dibs on the teevee!” said Cane.

“It’s your house,” said Brian, pointing out the window to the treehouse. The big hole in the flimsy plywood wall, the remains of Nicholas’ attempt at elevated bowling the previous

summer (he had tried to run away before Tennyson's dad found out, and had never gone back to pick up the 7-10 split), was clearly visible. Next to the window, the fake pendulum clock chimed the half-hour: 4:30.

The sound of a key in a door came from down the hallway. Clara leapt to her feet and reached for her magnum, before realizing that the only weaponry in the room was the plastic Winchester sticking out of the toy box. Nicholas had rolled to prone position as his hand searched for a non-existent assault rifle. Their eyes met and they laughed, embarrassed. The door could be heard swinging open. Tennyson's mom, her arms filled with shopping bags, bustled down the hall past the entry to the playroom. "Afternoon, dear, how was school?" she said without actually looking, as she made her way to the kitchen. Erin had gotten to his feet and turned back to help Brian up when the clip-clop of her heels on the linoleum suddenly terminated with a double *THUNK*, accompanied by the dull sound of glass breaking inside a bag. Mrs. Jones, shopping bags absent, reappeared in the entry, paying attention this time. "Good Lord! What have you done to your clothes?"

This seemed a curious question to Nicholas, requiring a pause for inspection. While Erin's attire was substantially intact, the other kids could only be described as a mix of filthy and tattered, with a bit of blood thrown in for effect. Mrs. Jones' gaze reached Brian, whose cuts were bleeding copiously again, turning his shirt a dripping crimson. "And what in God's name happened to you, Brian?"

"I'm fine, I'll be fine," said Brian, trying to press the bandages back in place. "Just cut myself on some -- plants."

"Just a cut? Just a cut? Why, you look like you were bitten by a lion! Is this the same Brian Chang who hid in our closet for two hours when a butterfly landed on his face?"

"Brian is a very brave boy, Mrs. Jones," said Clara, helping Tennyson to his feet.

"Really? You're Dr. Dumont's daughter, Cary, Cara--"

"Clara, Mom," said Tennyson, embracing her possessively. Mrs. Jones' eyes widened and a wisp of a smile crossed her face, immediately replaced with her mom-in-control persona. "Well, explanations can wait, we need to see to Brian immediately. Into the van, everyone, we'll deal with the groceries later." She took Brian with her left hand while removing her cell phone from her purse with her right. "I'd better call Mrs. Chang. Are you certain you can walk, Brian? Tennyson, dear, grab a towel from the bathroom, at this rate he'll soak right through the seat

covers.”

Ten minutes and several phone calls later, a properly solicitous nurse was carefully slicing Brian’s tee shirt off with a pair of surgical scissors while the attending physician inspected the damage. “Son, you’re gonna need a bit of surgical repair here,” the doctor said, dabbing Brian with gauze while reciting a list of required supplies to the nurse.

Mrs. Jones shoo’d the rest of the kids into the waiting area near the entrance of the Urgent Care center, just as Nicholas’ dad strode in through the automatic doors. “Hi, Dad!” said Nicholas. “Wow, this is great!”

Mr. Brunell put his briefcase down on the magazine rack. “Hi, Nicholas. Hmm. I think you need a shower when we get home. Hello, Elaine, thanks for taking them in. Hello, Clara, how is your father?”

“How should I -- I mean, he’s fine, isn’t he?” she said, suddenly disconcerted.

Tennyson mussed her hair affectionately. “I’m sure he is.”

Mr. Brunell completed his inspection of the kids. “Brian?”

“He’s in with Dr. Lee,” replied Mrs. Jones.

Mr. Brunell nodded. “Okay, Erin, looks like you’re the only one who, shall we say, kept your nose clean. So, just how did the group get this messy in the two hours since school let out?”

“Well, it all started when Cane and Tennyson pulled down the tee vee set with the control cables, and then Gannondorf got angry -- you see, he was doing an experiment in Tennyson’s room, and we were messing it up, but of course we didn’t find all that out until much later -- and projected us into the Mushroom Kingdom. Of course, I knew immediately what had happened, but it took a while for everyone else to figure it out. Anyway, we headed off to Peach’s castle. Of course we had to get past the Yoshies, and after Tennyson knocked the last one into the water with the Home Run bat, I rescued Mister Saturn from the platform -- he ended up coming with us almost the whole way, I wonder what happened to him? Anyway, we took a warp tube to the Quiz Room, where Brian whipped Spiky Tee, and then we had dinner with the Princess!” Erin began to pace the room, warming to the opportunity. “It was a social whirl, of course. Everyone who was anyone was there: Samus Aran, who we met later in Casinopolis,

Kirby -- did you know he once tried to romance Princess Zelda? didn't go well -- Doctor Mario, and of course Luigi couldn't keep his hands off Clara until the Princess scolded him about it. He gave Clara the ocarina, which was fortunate for us though we didn't know it at the time, and Nicholas got a beamsword from the Princess herself. Did you ever notice how everything you get in the game later turns out useful?" The audience for Erin's tale grew, unnoticed, as one or both of the parents of the rest of the kids arrived, greeted their children, and inquired after Brian's status. "...Then Wendy and I had a romantic dinner under the stars, until Dave showed up and wanted to return the sleigh, and I talked him out of thirty thousand bells..." The story continued while the nurse led Brian, garbed in a paper hospital gown as there wasn't much left of his tee shirt, back to the lounge area. Mr. Jones finally showed up, carrying two packs of ice cream sandwiches that were just going to melt sitting in the van: the famished kids consumed them in short order (Cane having three in the time it took for Erin to describe how he had rescued Brian from certain death through ingenious use of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy -- particularly the third book as it was heavier than the others -- while Brian rolled his eyes in dismay). "And do you know, we were making twice as much money delivering sandwiches during the battle as even eel smuggling! What a business! And medical supplies, triple hazard fee! But then I made a critical, no, a tragic error of judgment -- I foolishly stopped to explain to poor Brian how gross margin works, you see, and while I was doing it, Brian scanned me -- without even asking! -- and then Skolar appeared in the hall -- gee, I hope Wendy got away, I wonder if she's okay? -- and he melted right through the door, and I tried to stop Brian but it was too late, and just as I flew across the platform he pressed the button -- a knife straight into my heart, I tell you! -- and we were back."

The room filled with applause, not just from the kids and the parents but the receptionist, the FedEx delivery fellow (it was a slow day), and Dr. Malamud, who had stopped for a cup of coffee. "Well, Erin," said Mr. Brunell "you've spun some tall tales before but that one sets a new standard of extravagant incredibility. Jane, if that boy doesn't have a career in the theater it's a waste of a great talent."

"Wait! wait!," exclaimed Erin. "No, no, you've gotta' believe me, that's exactly how it happened! Right, Brian?"

Brian paused thoughtfully. "Well -- not exactly." The adults burst into laughter, just at the moment when Mrs. Chang finally arrived (she had been at a meeting in south San Jose with her phone off, and when she finally got the message she was so frantic she got pulled over by the Highway Patrol on 101, only escaping a sizable speeding ticket by playing the voicemail back for the sympathetic officer). While Cane licked the melted ice cream cake from the last sandwich off his fingers, Nicholas, Tennyson, and Clara formed a kid wall to protect an embarrassed Brian from

his alternately frantic and upset mother, as Mrs. Jones and Mr. Brunell helped calm her down.

The doors slid open again and Dr. Dumont entered. Clara's eyes filled with uncheckable tears as she ran to embrace her father. The tall, slightly graying man politely greeted each adult and then each child by name, and then knelt to speak to his daughter. "I distinctly recall requesting that you be home by five, young lady. It is now almost a quarter after, and this is not home." Clara nodded, biting her lip.

"But sir, she had to help Brian!", interrupted Tennyson.

"I see, Tennyson, thank you," replied Dr. Dumont gravely. Then turning back to Clara: "I was not aware that you and Brian were socializing with any regularity, nor that it was your habit to come to the aid of boys harmed in the course of what I believe you have described as their 'stupid' activities. Is it perhaps the case that you bore some responsibility for his injuries?"

"No, no, she wasn't even there!" said Nicholas. "It was my fault, I was too slow. I should have sliced -- I mean, I should have stopped Brian from, uh, climbing the fence, it was too sharp. Clara came back -- I mean, came later."

"Is that true, Clara?" She nodded but said nothing. "I have told you repeatedly that I expect you to be true to your word in every case. However, to come to the aid of a person in need, even in default of other obligations, is sufficient cause for actions otherwise improper. And to do so in the absence of bonds of affection shows both courtesy and judgment." The slightest smile crinkled the eyes behind his thick glasses. "Clara, I'm pleased to see that you are finally showing some signs of maturity. You've done well." Dr. Dumont stood up again and turned to Brian. "It appears that the invalid is sufficiently recovered to be able to complete his convalescence without further medical aid?"

"He'll be fine, but nothing more vigorous than walking for at least three days," said Dr. Lee, clapping Brian on the shoulder. "Here's a flyer, and Miss Clausewitz will give you bandages and some Neosporin. Bring him in right away if you see any signs of infection or he starts running a fever; otherwise schedule an appointment for next week." The doctor turned to Brian: "You're a real trooper, son. I've seen a lot of adults who would have shot me for putting them back together without topical anesthetics everywhere."

"Thank you, sir," Brian replied.

“Well, in that case, since I have seen many of you all too infrequently of late, and as we are all gathered together if only by chance,” continued Dr. Dumont, “may I suggest that we make it a happy chance and repair to, say, Fresh Choice together for dinner?”

“Cottage cheese and ice cream!” shouted Cane. “Yes! Clara, your dad is even better than Wendy!”

“Better than Wendy?” said Mr. Brunell, raising a quizzical eyebrow as he and his son made their way to the car. “Okay, Nicholas -- what’s really been going on here?”

“Gee, Dad,” Nicholas replied, cinching his seat belt. “Do you want the truth or something you’d believe?”

It didn’t take long for old habits to reassert themselves. The kids wandered out impatiently to hand out in front of the restaurant while the adults talked.

“How ‘bout we get some ice cream?” said Tennyson, leading Clara to the neighboring shop window. “It’s been a while.”

“I’d rather not ask my dad for money,” she replied. “He doesn’t think I need stuff like that.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it, I’ve got lots of coins, didn’t I tell you?” said Cane. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a little dark felt bag tied at the top with a golden string.

“Yes, the archetypical artifact, the supreme souvenir, the unique Designer Marble Bag of Death!” said Erin.

“I remember that bag,” said Brian. (“Redundant!” interjected Erin.) “You picked it up in Luigi’s treasure room to put coins in. Are there any left?”

“That would be cool,” said Tennyson. “Though I don’t suppose they’re worth anything here. Come on, Cane, let’s see.”

It took Cane a moment to untangle the knot. He upended the bag onto one of the deserted outdoor tables. About 20 of the familiar bronze coins rolled out onto the food-speckled plastic.

“Hmm,” said Cane. “Feels like there’s still something in there.” He shook the bag and out dropped first one, then a series of objects that glistened brilliantly in the fading sunlight.

“Whoah!” said Tennyson. “Golden diamonds!” He picked one up. The faceted jewel, nearly the size of his thumb, scattered blinding bronze-tinted rays across the amazed faces of the group as he turned it in his hand. “Geeze, where did you get these, Cane?”

“I dunno, they must have been in the bag. Well, it’s okay, Mr. Luigi said we could keep anything that wasn’t put away, I heard him!”

“I think that’s the fourteenth time you’ve reminded me,” said Brian. “Mr. Luigi isn’t going to do anything about it now anyway.”

Cane counted the jewels. “Look at that! Seven! One for everybody and one extra for luck!”

“Geeze, Cane, you don’t have to do that,” said Nicholas. “I mean, they’re yours, you found them, you can keep them if you want.”

“Naah, I mean, you guys helped. Even Clara, except when she spoiled my perfect shot at that Beauty Bummer--”

“--bomber--” said Brian.

“That’s what I said. Well, it’s okay, anyway, you’re my friends, I want you to have them.” He handed one glistening treasure to each of the kids.

“Thanks, Cane,” said Clara. “But I don’t think they take diamonds at Baskin Robbins,” she added. “We still need money.”

“I could trade in Virtual Fighter at the game store,” said Cane, pointing at the next set of windows past the ice cream store, garishly decorated with cover scenes and posters that seemed to Nicholas more nostalgic than enticing.

“Where’d you get that?” said Tennyson. “Is that the one in my room?”

“Yeah, you said it wasn’t yours!” said Cane.

“I think a huge diamond is a fair trade for a video game,” said Clara, taking Tennyson’s arm.

“Even one that’s not out yet,” said Brian.

“All right, go ahead,” said Tennyson. “You think you can get enough for ice cream for everybody with that, Cane?”

“No problem!” Cane replied, holding the package in front of him like a talisman as he strode confidently into the game store. “And seconds, too!” Just inside, at the GameCube demo rack, two fourth graders were staring fixedly at the display.

“Whoah, how did you find that, Alvin? I wonder if that’s in the game. Just imagine what Sonic would be like if he was drunk! Oh, hey, Cane, look at this! A new cut scene! Have you ever seen anything like it? Oh, and here comes Shadow and Metal. Oh, man, I gotta find how to play this part, that would be so cool.”

“Play it?” said Cane. “Play it? I don’t need to play it -- I lived it!”
