

Enter the Cube

***by Nicholas and Daniel Dobkin
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Chapter 3: A Quiz in Time Saves Nine

“Koopo Corp. presents the sixty-fourth semi-quadri-annual Trivia Quiz-off, sponsored by Club 64, the peerless place at the pier, right in downtown ToadTown next to all your favorite shops. Also brought to you by Frankie’s Shops, “from Boo to You with a Smile”! I’m your host, Mr. Hammer! And let’s have a big round of applause for our four-time champion, Spiky T.!”

By this time the kids were able to see again. They were in a sizable room arranged as an auditorium, with a brightly lit stage on which stood a helmeted koopa, dressed in an absurdly bright red tuxedo, and carrying a small hammer in one hand and a microphone in the other. Next to him, behind a grey wooden podium decorated with multicolored lights, stood a koopa looking somewhat uncomfortable in the spots, wearing a leather helmet and goggles, and a shell decorated with blue and orange polka-dots. The floor stepped up away from the stage, and rows of chairs held a remarkable mixture of viewers: there were koopas, Toads, ghost-like creatures, goombas, koopa paratroopas, and penguins with blue feathers and orange beaks. A couple of Yoshies seemed to be acting as ushers, shoving the wildly applauding fans back away from the stage. Two koopas sat behind huge dolly-mounted cameras with “KPVT KoopaVision TV” on the side. A third camera was suspended by huge crane arm above the stage.

“It’s the quiz room,” said Brian.

“I knew that,” said Nicholas.

“I can see this is going to be a great crowd!” said the emcee, looking out into the audience. “We’ve got a great show for you -- and as you know, we’re opening with a challenge match tonight! This is your chance to go head to head against Spiky T himself. Remember the winner could take home up to 500 coins, that’s right, 500 coins could be yours if -- my, oh, my, koopas and friends, look at this! We’ve got kids! Real human kids!” Mr. Hammer leapt off the stage, followed by a bright yellow spotlight, and strode down to where the kids were uniling themselves in the front row, where the warp pipe had dumped them.

“Welcome to Trivia Quiz-Off!” said Mr. Hammer, shoving his microphone into Brian’s face. “And you are?”

“Urrff. I’m -- uh -- Brian.”

“Brian, pleased to meet you, have a whack!”, said Mr. Hammer as he struck Brian on the behind with the hammer, in what he apparently thought was a friendly gesture of greeting. “Why don’t you introduce us to your friends?”

“Owww. Well -- uh -- that’s Nicholas and -- um -- Cane and Tennyson, and, uh, Erin and, well, she’s Clara.”

“Let’s have a big round of applause for these young fellows and this absolutely charming young lady!” said Mr. Hammer. He started to whack Clara on her butt with the hammer, but she grabbed it right out of his hand with a look that would have turned a goomba into smoke right then and there. Fortunately this little scene was drowned by the raucous applause from the audience. “What do you think, folks! Should we give one of these youngsters a chance at those 500 coins?” Screams of approval from the wild audience -- the Yoshies started throwing goombas into the air to keep them off the stage.

“Come on, kids, who’s ready to take on Spiky T?” The koopa nodded politely behind his podium. “Don’t be shy, step on up!”

The kids looked at each other and in unison Clara, Nicholas, Erin, Cane and Tennyson said: “Brian!”

“What?” said Brian.

“What. It’s you! Get up there!” said Cane.

Mr. Hammer didn’t wait for Brian to make up his mind, but grabbed him by the arm and practically dragged him onto the stage: “Well, folks, let’s have a big hand for our volunteer contestant Brian -- Brian -- Brian T!” he said as he practically threw Brian behind the second podium. Brian tried to explain that his last name wasn’t T. but his modest protest was drowned out by the wild screams of the crowd, which seemed even more unruly. The Yoshies were so busy tossing audience members back away from the stage that they lost their sense of direction and sent a couple of goombas flying over Brian’s head before they noticed.

Mr. Hammer: “Alright, folks, you all know the rules, each contestant alternates first chance at answering for 50 life points, their opponent gets a shot if they blow it” [boo! boo!] “for a hundred life points, ten questions total, and a one question sudden death playoff” [sudden death! sud-den death!] “if we’re tied at the end of regulation, may the best koopa -- I mean the best contestant win and the loser disappear!” [dis-a-pear! dis-a-pear! whoooo! as the Yoshies flung the chanters towards the back row, where they landed on a group of Penguins who were sitting quietly eating ice cream].

By now Brian looked as white as the Boos in the audience. Cane and Tennyson had taken up the spirit of the event and were chanting in unison: “Brian T! Brian T! Brian T!”

Clara looked concerned; Erin and Mr. Saturn were adding their own private commentary: “Brian is dressed today in a lovely chartreuse and lemon combo with stylish soiled tee-shirt and matching swirly underwear.”

“Yes, Erin, Brian’s world-weary wrinkled look is the perfect complement for Spiky T’s tight leather helmet and shiny black shell elegantly decorated with Pikachu sequins! What a couple they make. ”

“What sequins? I thought those were polka dots.”

“Welcome to the fashion world, Erin.”

“OK folks, first question goes to --” (a huge arrow suspended above the contestants’ heads spun dizzily for a few seconds before settling down to point at the helmeted Koopa) “ Spiky T.!” (wild applause) “For 50 life points, Spiky T., how many windows are there on the biggest house in Goomba Village!” (wild boos from the koopas -- “down with Goombas! Goombas stink!” and high-pitched screeches as the goombas waddled into the crowd of koopas) “Your choices are: one -- three -- or FIVE!!!!!!”

Spiky T. looked pensive; the Toads seemed to think the answer was “one” to judge by their screams, the koopas favored five, and the goombas (who presumably knew) were still busy trying to knock koopas over on their behinds. The penguins seemed more interested in their ice creams than the action on stage. “Three!” said Spiky T. finally as the timer on the wall behind the contestants clicked down to 1.

“Oh, my, that is NOT right, Brian, for one HUNDRED LIFE POINTS, how many windows are there on the biggest house in Goomba Village, you’ve got five -- four -- three -- two -- one”

“ONE!” said Brian, though it wasn’t clear if this was his answer or a complaint about the speed with which the timer counted down.

“THAT IS CORRECT! One hundred life points!” At this a bright “100” appeared on the podium in front of Brian. The kids all cheered wildly, but were completely inaudible over the cacophony of the remainder of the audience.

“OK, folks, let’s roll! The next question goes to Brian: for fifty life points -- where are the star kids born? Your choices: Starborn Valley, Star Heaven, or -- Shooting Star Summit!”

The big counter behind Brian started ticking down but before it could click twice he spoke, more confidently this time: “Starborn Valley”. Spiky T. looked crestfallen as Mr. Hammer awarded Brian another 50 points.

Nicholas leaned over to Clara and yelled into her ear (the only way to be heard above the noise): “Where do you think we can find Tacey T.?”

Clara shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t remember where the Quiz Room is, and besides I’m not sure this castle is the same layout as the one from Paper Mario,” she shouted back. “I’ll ask the ushers.” She made her way over to the nearest Yoshi, a rather imposing fellow holding a billy club in his right hand and flinging a Toad by the foot with his left. “Excuse me, sir, I wonder if you could help me.”

“Neeker supperscououpe, moi deeeeere,” said the Yoshi in a squeaky voice. Clara finally decided he was complimenting her Superscope.

“Oh, yes, it’s very nice. Listen, could you tell me where to find Tacey T.?”

“Noo eeeet, weee r plaaoooining quioioiz gameeee,” said the Yoshi.

“No, I don’t want something to eat, I just want to talk to her,” said Clara.

“Woot youou seeeeou?” asked the Yoshi, bonking a koopa on the shell with his club (the koopa hardly noticed, as it was busy cheering wildly for a correct answer by Spiky T.).

“We’re just going to ask for some help in finding our way to Fourside.”

“Ahhhiiee, Fouiersaideeee! Taecie Tuiee helooooop. Thruuuouuu tieaaee rououmm duooone hauoul leyifttte fuuuur douers,” the Yoshi replied as it pushed a goomba over onto a Toad’s toes.

“Through the tea room, down the hall, turn left, go four doors?”

“Yeeeiiss uvv korrrrseeee,” it said, joining with the other Yoshi to shove a koopa under one of the seats.

“Oh, thank you very much, you’ve been a great help!” said Clara. The Yoshi bowed very low, and was so pleased that it grabbed two nearby koopas by the noses and spun them in a circle. The koopas didn’t seem to mind that much except that they weren’t able to follow the contest while spinning wildly around the usher.

Clara returned her attention to the game. The glowing yellow numbers showed that Brian’s lead had narrowed to 50 life points, and the big counter showed “10”: the last question.

“Spiky T’s big chance to tie the game: where does the Dry Dry Railroad lead? The choices: Mt. Rugged Station, Boo’s Mansion Station, or the Northern Area Ski Resort. Five seconds -- four -- three -- two--”

“My. Rugged Station, of course,” said Spiky, managing to project confidence and modesty simultaneously.

“That is right! It’s all tied up! Folks, we’re headed into a SUDDEN DEATH ROUND after this word from our sponsor.”

Mr. Hammer seemed to relax and leaned over to chat quietly with Spiky T. and then with Brian. Nicholas was unable to locate a monitor anywhere but from somewhere he could hear a pre-recorded sound track and voiceover: “after a night at Club 64 -- anywhere else is such a bore -- who could ask for more -- every moment has excitement in store -- at the one, the only Club 64! The Peerless Place at the Pier -- open weeknights until 10, Saturdays to midnight, the best food at prices you won’t believe!”

Clara had managed to return to where the other kids were seated. In the temporary quiet they could actually converse. “What’s been happening?” she asked.

“Oh, Brian’s been doing great!” said Tennyson. “But that koopa is really good -- he got three hard ones in a row at the end to come back.”

“Yes, it’s been a contest for the ages -- human vs. koopa, rookie vs. veteran, leather vs. cotton -- a confrontation that reaches beyond mere trivia to the very essence of what makes quiz shows compelling,” said Mr. Saturn.

“Yeah, money,” said Erin.

“What did you find out?” said Nicholas.

“I think the usher Yoshie said that Tacey T. is just across the tea room, down the hall and to the left,” replied Clara. “Should we leave now or wait--” But just then the lights came back up on the stage and the crowd screamed again.

“Welcome back to SUDDEN DEATH!” said Mr. Hammer, waving his namesake wildly above his head as he paced in front of the contestants. “As you know, the rules are simple: I’ll ask one question and the first contestant to press his buzzer and give the correct answer within three seconds wins. If that contestant gives the incorrect answer he loses. The pressure is ON! Only one question! Only one correct answer! Who will be the Only One Left STANDING? ARE YOU READY TO FIND OUT?”

“YES!!!!” screamed the toads. “GO GO GO GO!!!!” screamed the koopas. “eek eek dibble dibble” said the goombas. Nicholas tried to remind the kids to make sure to hold onto their items but it was too noisy to be heard.

“For the GAME, contestants, here is your last question; remember you can’t press your button until I raise my hand:” (sudden silence as everyone waited to hear the final question) “What is the code name of the first boss in hero mode of Sonic Adventure 2?” Mr. Hammer waited for a moment to allow the tension to build and then dramatically raised his hand.

Spiky T. started to press his button and then hesitated just long enough for Brian to beat him to the punch. “Brian!” said Mr. Hammer. “Three -- two -- “

Brian gulped and said: “Big Foot!”

“Big Foot is your answer?” Brian nodded, pale but determined. “We’re waiting for a signal from the judges...” A light went on over the stage: “That is correct! Brian wins!”

The crowd burst out into an intolerable screaming cheer. Spikey T. leaned over and politely shook Brian’s hand, and seemed to say something in his ear, though of course it was impossible for anyone else to hear. Then he started to glow bright purple and seemed to suddenly twist and shrink simultaneously like a wet rag being dried; a brief anguished cry and he was gone. Brian stood frozen with dismay, though in the noise and chaos no one else seemed to notice. Mr. Hammer screamed into his microphone: “What a match! We’ll be back with our SuperKoopTroopa Challenge after a word from our sponsor, Frankie’s Shop!”

With that remark, the lights on the stage dimmed, and Mr. Hammer said “OK, folks, refreshments out the door and to your right, be back in 20!” The kids rushed onto the stage to congratulate Brian, who seemed shaken as he accepted a bag of coins from Mr. Hammer. Big double doors were thrown open in the side of the room and the crowd stampeded out into the hallway, dragging the kids into the crowd with them. The rowdy audience burst into a lovely hexagonal room with a high ceiling and a stairway in the center leading to a raised platform, on which were set tables covered with exotic foods; Nicholas recognized goom nuts, lemons and limes, and dry pasta. Clara shouted over the din, “We need to go through the room! follow me!” They forced their way through the milling crowd, stepping on several Toads (“sorry!”) and passing right through a couple of Boos, and escaped into an open hallway at the opposite end.