

Enter the Cube

by Nicholas and Daniel Dobkin

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Chapter 4: Peach Pitstop

They found themselves in a corridor brilliantly lit by ornate crystal chandeliers hanging from the high ceiling, and sunshine glistening through tall Bay windows. The walls were painted sky blue with occasional clouds. Recessed, arched alcoves terminating in solid plank wooden doors were placed about every 10 paces on alternate sides of the corridor. No one else seemed to be around. The first door was marked with a placard depicting the silhouette of a girl in a long dress. Clara noticed that the next door had a similar placard of a short man with a cap and a big nose (Mario?), and put two and two together: “Just a minute!” She ran back to the previous door and pushed it open a crack: “Yep! It’s about time, too. I’ll be right back.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Nicholas, slapping his forehead with the palm of his hand. “Good idea!” He pushed open the second door and stepped inside, quickly followed by Tennyson and Erin (“What about you, Mr. Saturn?” “Nope, I’m fine, haven’t had anything to drink this week”).

“What’s going on? Where did they go?” said Cane.

“What?” replied Brian. He still looked distracted. “Oh, they went to the bathroom, of course. I guess we can go next.” Cane appeared to have suddenly noticed just how long it had been since they got out of school: he crossed his legs and waited impatiently for the other boys to come out. After a moment the door swung outwards and Nicholas appeared, wiping his hands on his pants.

“Wow! That is sooo cool. The sinks and the toilets are plated with gold! Although it would be nice if there were some paper towels.” He stepped out of the way as Cane zipped towards the door.

Tennyson nearly ran into Cane as he came out: “Nicholas, there were perfectly nice cloth towels on the racks!”

“Oh, I thought those were curtains,” replied Nicholas. “Brian, did you want to use the bathroom?”

“No, thanks, I’m ok.”

“Are you sure? You look -- kinda’ bothered.”

Brian hesitated, as if he was going to say something else, but then nodded and said, “Sure I’m sure. I’ll go wash my hands.”

In a few moments, looking relieved, the boys (except for Brian) were all collected in the corridor, still waiting for Clara. “Geez, girls sure take forever in the bathroom. What do they do in there?” complained Cane.

“What do girls do in the bathroom?” said Erin. “The hidden mysteries are revealed in the new PBS series, ‘Girls and Bathrooms: Their Secret Lives’.”

Mr. Saturn looked up at Erin. “Well, I’m waiting.”

“Gee, I don’t know what girls do in the bathroom. Not sure I want to find out, either.”

“Why don’t you go in and look?” said Mr. Saturn. “It’s not that big a deal, trust me. Of course, from where I stand I’m always looking up their dresses anyway. I got in big trouble last time I told Princess Peach about that.”

Just then the door to the girl’s bathroom swung open and out came Clara. “Clara -- you look -- different,” said Tennyson.

Clara smiled. “I guess so! Wow, I’ve never been in a bathroom like that. There’s a manicure station, a facial station, a hair washer and dryer -- all automatic -- and a big jacuzzi tub! If I wasn’t so hungry I have taken a bath; there’s what looks like a clothes cleaner too.” Now that she had told them what to look for the boys realized that her hair was cleaned and curled, her face washed up, and her fingernails trimmed and slightly pink. She looked a lot more girlish than they were used to with Clara. They weren’t quite sure how to react to this new development, but fortunately Clara said, “Come on, let’s go find Tacey T. Oh, where’s Brian?”

“He’s still in the bathroom; I’ll go get him,” said Nicholas. He popped in and returned a moment later with Brian in tow. Brian’s hands were still dripping wet, and he looked distraught, but Clara didn’t notice as she led them down the corridor.

“Here it is, fourth door!” This door had a placard marked “Kitchen”, but they hardly needed a sign with the appetizing aromas wafting through the partly-open door. Clara knocked.

“Who is it?” said a high voice with a distinct Southern accent.

“We’re looking for Tacey T.,” said Clara.

The door swung open on the curious sight of a rather attractive female Toad whose turban had golden spots replacing the more common red polka dots. "I do declare! Children! Why, come in, come in, don't sit theah at the door. I am delighted! It's so kind of you to come visit me heah in the kitchen. What is your name, honey?", the last directed at Clara.

"I'm Clara, and this is Nicholas, Erin, Cane, Tennyson, and Brian. Oh and Mr. Saturn."

"How charmin' to make your acquaintance. Exceptin' Mr. Saturn, of course. What brings you heah to Princess Peach's castle? We don't get children very often, you know. Oh, I am quite forgettin' my manners. Would you like somethin' to drink?"

"Yes, please, that would be great!" said Tennyson.

"Come in, come in," Tacey said again, and led them into the kitchen. The kitchen was a long room with an oven in the corner, shelves covered with food and supplies against the back wall, and a counter at the right with a sink. Against the left wall was a range with numerous pots and pans hanging from a rack above it, and two Toads dressed in unusually high perfectly white turbans swirling frying pans full of mysterious concoctions over the fire. A third toad was chopping something at a table with bowls, a cutting board, and a rolling pin which occupied the center of the room. "Sit down, sit down, children," Tacey said, indicating low chairs around the table.

She bustled over to the shelves and placed six beautiful china cups on a silver tray, and then took a large silvery tea kettle from the range. "Koopaa tea, honey?" she said to Brian. He nodded and she lowered the tray and filled a cup for him. "Sugar, honey? Or maybe some honey, sugar -- oh, you know what I mean." Brian nodded; Tacey picked up a cube of sugar with silver tongs and dropped it elegantly into his cup. Soon the children were all armed with steaming cups and saucers. The boys looked at each other; none of them had ever had tea to drink at home and they weren't quite sure what to do. They stared at Clara, who sipped with rather more elegance than they were accustomed to. The boys did their best to imitate her, except Cane, who tried to guzzle the tea as if it were Gatorade and burnt his tongue in the process. Tacey T. gracefully ignored his indiscretion and sat down with her own cup.

"So, dears, what brings you heah to the castle?"

"Well, we're trying to get to Fourside," said Nicholas. "Hedley Medley T. said that maybe you could help us. He said there's some sort of copter that stops here."

"Oh, honey, that would be the Paula Coptah, be heah a bit aftah seven. Why that would give you loads of time. I'm sure that the Princess would just adoah havin' you children join her for dinner, if you don't mind."

"That would be great!" said Tennyson. "I'm really hungry." Clara glared at him. "I mean -- yes, thank you, Miss Tacey."

“Dinner would be -- really nice, I’m sure,” said Nicholas. “Do you think Princess Peach would mind?”

“Why, I’ll write her this minute, honey,” said Tacey, and true to her word she grabbed a recipe pad off the table and scribbled something; then she reached up to a cord hanging from the ceiling and pulled. BOOOOOOOOONGGGGG. A winged koopa popped into the room from a small door in the corner. “Oh, ParaDocs, honey, could you be a deah and take this right up to Peach? Much obliged.” The koopa touched his leather helmet in a brief salute and flew back into the little door. “Now, I’m sure the Princess will want to meet all of you charmin’ young people, so we must get you dressed properly. My, oh, my. Clara, sweetheart, that will never do. Tee-shirt and slacks are no way for a young lady to dress in the castle. And of course it’s black tie for you young men. Dahjeelin’, would you be a honey and take the boys ovah to the wardrobe room?” The toad at the center table collected his chopped vegetables into a metal bowl and, turning, bowed to the boys, making them feel a bit silly. “Come on, honey,” said Tacey to Clara. “I’ll find somethin’ for you in my closet. Off you go, come on,” and the boys dutifully followed Darjeeling out as Tacey shooed Mr. Saturn away from her skirt and led Clara down the opposite hall to her chambers.

Darjeeling led them down a somewhat confusing maze of corridors and stairways. As he opened a door marked with the silhouette of a dinner jacket, Nicholas cried out: “Just a minute!” and ran down a short corridor off the main hall. At the end of the hall was a round pink object with tiny orange feet and a fuse on the top: “Gallopig Goombas! Bom Bettie! I am so honored to meet you.”

“Why thank you so much,” she hissed from her fuse. “It’s not very often anyone remembers me! You are a very courteous young man.”

“Well, you’ve helped me win a lot of battles. Your Mega Bomb always blows through! I couldn’t go by without saying hello. Listen, I always wondered if it hurts when you blow up.”

“No, just tickles a bit, dear.”

“Well, look, I have to go get dressed for dinner, but it was very nice to meet you in the - well - flesh? You know what I mean.”

“That’s very sweet. Look, I heard that you are going to dinner with Peach. Watch out for Luigi, and make sure you talk to Dr. Mario: he is very knowledgable and very helpful, as well. Oh, and incidentally, I happen to know that the Princess has an extra beam sword she just might be willing to part with.”

“Thanks! Um -- I have to go, so -- keep your -- um -- fuse lit!”

“You’ll go a long way with such thoughtfulness, young man. Good day.” Bom Bettie bowed (sort of) and then continued her waddling way down the hall to the armory.

Darjeeling led the boys into a huge room, dominated by six very long racks on which hung all sorts of jackets and pants. Along the walls were shelves with shoes, caps, and ties of various kinds. At one end was a large glowing pair of dials: an old-style radio. Darjeeling turned to them and said, "Come in immediately, stand over there," in an Indian sort of accent. "Please wait just one minute while I turn on some appropriate musical entertainment." He walked over to the dials and twiddled them; the kids heard brief swatches of music and talk, and then:

"There's a lady who's sure
coins that glitter are gold
and she's buying the stairs to
Star Haven..."

"Ah, yes, very good," said Darjeeling. "You see, children, I have recently changed my second place of employment from The Information Station, where we brought knowledge to young inquiring minds but where the management brought ignorance worthy of the Inquisition, to the Golden Oldies station, where we will cheerfully rethread your heads and bring the past to the present for the future. Indeed, it is a great improvement. But let us now turn to the task of choosing the appropriate apparel and accessories.

He pushed a set of buttons and all the clothes rotated along the racks with a whirring noise. As the jackets zipped past he grabbed one off the rack for each boy without bothering to slow them down, followed by a pair of pants. He then led the boys to a shelf with a rack of bright red bow ties all market with a prominent golden "D.K.", as the music continued in the background:

"It's been a hard days night
and I've been workin' like a goomba
it's been a hard day's night
while I've been beatin' up a koopa
but when I get to my room
I get some cake made of shroom
and then I feel all right."

"What's DK for?" asked Cane.

"Oh, you see, Donkey Kong stopped by several months ago, and was found by the Princess to be inappropriately attired for tea, upon which revelation he was forced to depart in shame, so he has taken the precaution of shipping a large number of items of his preferred apparel to us for storage in the wardrobe, against the possibility that he will once again find himself in need of formal dress."

While Darjeeling helped the boys carefully fold their clothes into backbacks and go through the unfamiliar exercise of donning a bow tie and cummerbund, Tacey T. was rummaging through her astonishingly extensive closet (half of which, admittedly, was devoted to racks of turbans of varying size, color, and configuration) for the right look. First she had

Clara try on a pink frilly thing with billowing sleeves and multiple ribbons around the ankle-length skirt (“Oh, deah, much too old-fashioned, ah’m afraid.”) Then there was the nearly-transparent, black-nylon vee-cut blouse and silk pant suit (“Honey, you got the look but you ain’t got the curves to go with it.”) Finally, she settled on an elegant formal bare-shouldered gown, with a long slitted skirt and white gloves.

By this point, Clara was definitely having second thoughts about the whole affair. It seemed like a lot of trouble to go to for dinner. Why couldn’t they just grab a bite in the kitchen with Tacey T.? She didn’t object to nice clothes, but she had never been very interested in fashion and found the gown uncomfortable and somewhat embarrassing. She couldn’t understand how this was going to get them home and said as much to Tacey T.

“Honey chile, nevah underestimate the powah of just the raht amount of bare flesh on the minds of men and Toads -- assumin’ they have minds, which is not always apparent to the untrained eye. Maybe ah’m gettin’ ahead of mahself a bit, but your momma’s not heah, so I have to stand in her stead.”

“My mother died when I was little. I live with my dad. He doesn’t have me dress up much.”

“Oh, ah am so sorry, sugar, ah had no idea. Course that means its all the moah important for me to look aftah you, chile. You just mind what ah say, chile: the wise always dress for the occasion, no moah and no less. Now heah’s a nice purse and valise for your other clothes and such; and don’ let me catch you with that Supahscope at dinnah! Lahd knows dinners at the Palace are difficult enough without bringin’ heavy weaponry.”

Tacey T. looked up at the clock on the wall. “Oh, deah, we must be gettin’ on. Where are those boyfriends of yours?” There was hardly time for Clara to make a disparaging remark before the boys could be heard arguing as they came down the corridor. Mr. Saturn said “Erin, I think I’ll be off to the Library. Peach and I are not congenial companions. I’ll meet you at the heliport.” Without further ado, he waddled over to what looked like a light switch, fiddled, and disappeared into a passage that suddenly appeared, and just as suddenly disappeared, in the wall. Darjeeling dropped the boys off and hurried back to the kitchen to finish preparing the dinner vegetables.

It was hard to tell who was more nonplussed. The boys were dressed in identical black tuxedos, each with a signature red bow tie, white shirt, and shoes polished to a mirror finish. Clara’s brilliant gown stood out even more strikingly against their dark clothing. “You look -- great,” said Tennyson, uncomfortably aware of the other boys.

“You know, you really do,” said Nicholas.

“Umm -- thank you,” said Clara after a nudge from Tacey T.

“Well, take her arm, honey,” said Tacey to Tennyson. Tennyson looked uncomfortable but even Cane didn’t dare to heckle him with Tacey looking on. So with Tacey in the lead and

Tennyson and Clara making a surprisingly elegant couple, they made their way back through the tea room and up the corridor to the main dining hall.

The big double doors swung open to reveal a huge, high-ceilinged, brightly-lit room, filled with music and the noise of excited conversation. The room had a tiled checkerboard floor bisected by a huge red carpet with gold edging leading to a blue door at the back. There were four long tables set with glistening silver and huge crystal goblets. Dual stairways led to a raised platform at the back of the room. The walls were the characteristic sky-blue of the castle with dark blue hangings around the top.

Standing around the tables and in little clumps around the room were a large number of guests: the kids recognized toads, koopas, penguins, dark-skinned dryites, and nomadimice, all conversing in an animated fashion as they consumed beverages and snacks handed out by elegantly-dressed Toads carrying silvery trays. In one group with a couple of penguins were two pointed guests glowing so brightly they were difficult to look at directly. Nicholas tugged at Brian's shoulder and whispered in awe: "Look! Star spirits!" Near the end of the largest table, standing by a particularly fancy high-backed chair, stood a tall woman with curly red/orange hair and blue earrings, dressed in a long pink-and-blue frilled dress with lacy sleeves: Princess Peach herself.

At that moment Peach looked their way and rapped on the table with a jeweled rod. "Quiet, please, everyone!" she said in a voice accustomed to instant obedience. As the din died, she spoke again: "Let's welcome our special guests --" (at this point a toad dressed in a tuxedo with a red bow tie handed her a list) "-- Clara, Tennyson, Brian, Cane, Erin, and Nicholas!" She began to clap politely, initiating a wave of applause from the crowd. She leaned over to speak to a dapper mustached toad standing on her right.

"Everyone please be seated!" called the Toad. "Tayce T., please bring the children here to be seated."

"That's Ole Fuss T., the Ministah of the Castle," whispered Tayce T. to the kids as she shepherded them towards the head table.

Fuss T. officiously greeted Tayce and led each of the children in turn to a place at the table. Tennyson found himself placed at Peach's right hand. She turned to welcome him to the mushroom kingdom, flashing a glistening smile. He hadn't realized just how gorgeous the Princess was up close; he stood there dumbfounded staring at her as she turned away to see that the other children were properly sited, while Clara in turn glared at him from her place directly across the table.

In a moment the other children were led to their places. Nicholas started to sit down but was halted by a loud "hmmm hmmm" from Fuss T. and a kick in the shins from a short mustached fellow in a white coat, with a huge black bag who was on his right.

Princess Peach spoke again to the crowd: “I know we’re all ready to enjoy another of Tayce’s delicious dinners, so without further ado, Fuss T. will lead us in the anthem of our beloved Mushroom Kingdom.”

Fuss T. walked to an open area in front of the raised platform and placed his hand over his (presumably) heart. The orchestra struck up a martial tune and everyone (except the children, of course) burst into a rather out of tune rendition of what was obviously the national anthem:

From the Dry Dry Desert
to the Shy Guys Toys
From the Southern Sea
to the Penguin’s noise
We’ll protect our castle
and our Princess, too,
Even though she’s kidnapped
every week or two.

Everyone burst into wild applause and then the Princess sat down on her elegant high-backed chair, which was apparently the signal for dinner, as everyone else plunked their bottoms down at that point.

Toads bustled up to each diner with a beautifully engraved white and gold card, and patiently waited for them to make a selection. Nicholas picked up the card: it was a dinner menu. It read like this:

The Mushroom Kingdom

Princess Peach Toadstool, Presiding

--dinner menu--
Friday, July 27th

APPETIZERS

Koopa leaf
Goonnut
Lemon Lime
Mushroom
Coconut

MAIN COURSES

Koopasta
Fried Shroom
Fried Eggs
Honey Ultra
Deluxe Feast

Watermelon
Jelly Ultra
Hot Shroom

Dessert

Coco Pop **special: Tacye T's special cake**
Lemon Candy
Big Cookie
Kooky Cookie
Maple Super
Special Strawberry Cake
Shroom Cake
Nutty Cake

toppings:

Honey syrup
Maple syrup
Jam
Jelly

Beverages

Tasty Tonic
Super Soda
Special Smoothy
Koopa Tea

Thank you for joining us at Peach's Castle to share in the delicious cuisine of our beloved Mushroom Kingdom. Enjoy your meal!

--Tacye T., Supervisor, Kitchen Staff

Nicholas' jaw dropped. He hadn't realized until now how hungry he had become; he was tempted to order everything, but he could almost hear his Mom's voice at his shoulder, and contented himself with goomnut, koopasta, tasty tonic, and a big cookie for dessert. Clara ordered a frugal repast of deluxe feast, shroom cake and koopa tea. Cane, seated on Peach's left, was not inclined towards restraint and his plate was soon piled high. Peach was too polite to show her distaste for such behavior by more than a hostile glance, and focused her attention on Tennyson, who had been more moderate in his choice of fare. Erin ordered all the appetizers and a special smoothy; Brian selected Koopasta and a soda.

The urgent task of arranging dinner having been disposed of, the children turned their attention to their tablemates. Between Brian and Clara was a round pink fellow with short legs, seated on a pile of cushions: Kirby! Brian immediately turned and politely introduced himself: "I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr. Kirby. I'm Brian, and that's Clara."

Kirby bowed slightly but had nothing to say, as he was watching the waiters pile food onto an unusually large platter in front of him. It was quickly apparent that he had ordered double portions of everything on the menu. In a moment, a veritable feast was piled steaming in front of him. He stood up, to the extent he could on his short legs, and leaned towards the plate: his mouth grew into a huge O, as he demonstrated a new meaning for the colloquialism “inhaling your meal”.

Clara’s jaw dropped. Tayce T., who was puttering around the room supervising the waiting staff, said from behind them, “I declah! Just impossible, that Kirby. Can NOT be taught to behave in a civilized fashion, even though Lahd knows he has a gentle heart. Now, chile, don’t you even THINK about emulatin’ such habits.”

On Brian’s right was a large ape with graying fur, a long beard, and several missing teeth, wearing a curious squarish hat: he recognized Cranky Kong from his early days playing Nintendo 64 games. “Youngster, you’ll never grow strong eatin’ like that!” said Cranky. “You mind ol’ Cranky, I know what’s good for ye’. Why, if D.K. had listened to me when he was young he wouldn’t ‘a gotten into some much trouble with K. Rool over that silly crystal coconut. That boy hasn’t got the sense of a Pineapple. Ought to ‘ve given him to the Kremlings to raise as one of their own, woulda’ been more at home. He could bring home a hundred golden bananas for all I care, he’s still a disaster...” Cranky’s rant continued on as Brian nodded politely at each imprecation.

On Clara’s left was a mustachioed man impolitely wearing a green hat, white gloves, and wrinkled coveralls held up by blue suspenders: Luigi. He was lustily devouring a green jelly ultra. Noticing her attention, he turned and smiled, revealing a few bits of coconut caught in his mustache. “You musta be Clara. You kids are the talk of the castle, you know. It’s so thoughtful of you to show upa when Mario’s not around -- he’s such a glory hound, he’d be sticking his nose into everything you do just to makea sure he gets all the attention. Were you going to eat that a shroom cake?”

“That’s my dessert, I’m not ready to eat it yet.” Clara wasn’t sure what to make of Luigi; she tried not to think of herself as dainty, but she was put off by his earthy habits. Still, it didn’t do to offend such a famous character. “But it is a lot for me to finish; would you like to share it?”

“I woulda be honored, little lady,” replied Luigi, carefully wiping a spot of jelly on the table with his napkin until it was completely clean. He seemed to have different standards for his environment and his person: a significant portion of his meal had already ended up on his shirt. “You come a visit me at my house, yes? We can share more than a piece of cake a,” said Luigi, placing his hand on Clara’s bare shoulder. “You know -- the master bedroom is a very special! You should come a visit -- you don’t need to bring your friends, we can have more a fun thata way--”

Peach’s sharp eyes and ears had been following these events from across the table, as she rapped on her chair with her rod and spoke sharply: “Luigi! What did I tell you about your behavior?”

“Oh, oh, so sorry, Princess. I was just inviting the nice younga lady -- and her friends, of course -- to visit me at my mansion.”

“Yes. Clara AND her friends. For sodas.”

“Yes, of coursea, what else?” Peach’s glance said *you know perfectly what else had better not be involved*. Luigi took the very strenuous hint and turned to acquaint himself with Erin, who was sitting to his left.

Erin was not paying attention to Luigi as he was watching the woman at his left. She was dressed in a remarkable suit of some sort of armor which covered her completely except for where she had removed her helmet, revealing an elegant but scarred visage with short-cropped blondish hair and a curious tattoo on her cheek. The Toad waiter on her left was heaping a huge portion of what was clearly raw meat onto her platter. She signaled him to stop when the plate was completely covered with bloody slices; the tablecloth nearby was splattered and stained. The waiter quickly sidled back out of range as she stood up and aimed the laser gun mounted to her right hand at the platter. There was an intolerably brilliant but very brief flash -- PSSSST! - - and when Erin could see again, she was meticulously slicing pieces of the now-cooked beef with a nasty-looking bowie knife she had pulled from a waist-mounted sheath. “Wow,” said Erin. The lady glanced at him and continued to eat. “Warrior Woman Blast Browns Beef, Stroganoff Stymied! Film at eleven,” said Erin. The warrior woman ignored him and slashed another slab of beef. “Do you always cook your food that way?” asked Erin, not to be denied.

“To whom am I speaking?” she finally responded, in a gravelly hard-edged voice.

“I’m sorry, I’m Erin Hollin, I’m in fourth grade at Mountain Elementary.”

“Umm. Game player,” she grunted, not bothering to reciprocate.

“Certainly. Smash Brothers, Paper Mario, Diddy Kong Racing, Donkey Kong, Pokemon Stadium -- and Metroid, of course. Though sometimes I watch more than I play.”

“It’s different playing and being there.”

“I’ve noticed.”

She looked at Erin dubiously. “You haven’t noticed much yet, I’d say.” She slurped up a slice of beef. “An opponent trying to poison you has a harder time if the poison has to go in before the food is cooked. The beam also contains a significant proportion of mid- and deep-ultraviolet; kills bacteria and decomposes any adulterants on the surface of the meat. Besides, it frightens children.” She turned back to her food, obviously not wishing to converse further. Erin gave up and turned to Luigi; in a few moments the two were engaged in a comparison of the relative merits of ectoplasmic and conventional vacuum cleaners.

Nicholas had courteously offered his napkin to the gentlemen sitting on his right, whose persistent sneezes had overwhelmed his own handkerchief and napkin. “Thank --- A CHOOO!! -- you, young -- AA AA -- man -- aa CHOO!”, he said, blowing his nose loudly. At Tayce’s direction, one of the waiters deposited a pile of napkins at the man’s side, and he nodded thanks as he sneezed again. The man was dressed in a white laboratory gown and wore a cap with a reflector. He reached down next to his chair and pulled up a black bag. “AAA AAAA CHOOO!” He rummaged through the bag, pulling out every imaginable sort of bottle, vial, pillbox, and syringe, before: “Well! finally!” He pulled two large multicolored capsules out of a green glass bottle and swallowed them with a big swig of tonic. “Ahhhh! That ought to do it!”

“Are you feeling better?” said Nicholas.

“Yes, thank you, young man. I simply can not get rid of this cold without my megavitamins.”

“Suffering shy guys -- you must be Dr. Mario! This is really neat. I’m Nicholas; I’ve used the megavitamins a bunch of times in Smash Brothers. They’re great.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Master Nicholas. How is it that you’ve come to visit us here at the castle?”

“Well, we were just playing Super Smash Brothers, and Cane and Tennyson fell on the game pile, and then this wierd guy who wasn’t Tennyson’s dad pointed a wand at us and there we were in the Mushroom Kingdom! So we battled against the koopas and then got up the tower and beat the Yoshies, and Clara got a Superscope, and Humtee Dump T sent us to his friend Hedley Medley T and he told us to how to get to the castle, but we got caught in the quiz room and then got out and --”

“Yes, thank you, I see. So this is a very recent development. Do you always dress so elegantly to play Super Smash Brothers Melée? I didn’t remember children being quite so attentive to their haberdashery.”

“Oh, well, Darjeeling T. got these for us. I think Donkey Kong left them here.”

“I see. I hope you’re enjoying your visit here at Peach’s castle. Will you be staying very long?”

“Well, we’re really on our way to Fourside, but the copter doesn’t come until seven, so we had time for dinner, and Tayce T. said we should come, so -- um -- here we are.”

“Fourside. Lovely place. Striking architecture. Mediocre accomodations, though. I was there on a case not so long ago and had to spend the night; the cuisine simply doesn’t hold a candle to Tayce’s most forgettable efforts.”

“You mean the food there is bad?”

“Exactly, very astute of you. What are your intentions at Fourside?”

“We were going to find a phone to call home. Although I must admit that so far it’s been pretty cool here in the Mushroom Kingdom. Except when the Yoshies almost dumped us in the river, that is. But I guess we’d better get home before our parents start getting upset.”

“Nicholas, I think you may have need of my services in this quest. Let me see.” He rummaged through his bag. “First, take some of these.” He handed Nicholas another green bottle, which Nicholas stashed in one of the many pockets that graced his new clothes. “Megavitamins are quite useful for minor injuries as well as colds and sinus headaches. Remember to take them with a full glass of water, not more than two at once; you can take two more in two hours if the injury is severe. Don’t use them for ray gun burns or frostbite, and don’t mix them with megatatoes!” He gave Nicholas a paper-wrapped bundle about the size of a baseball. “This is a party ball. It is indicated for excess hostility and also can be used in the case of an upset stomach. Pull the string at the end to make it expand to full size; then throw it in the air immediately prior to catastrophic annihilation. In the ensuing debauchery you can generally make good your escape, if you have the moral courage to depart when the departing is good.”

Nicholas nodded as if he had understood Dr. Mario’s remarks. “That’s really great, I’ll be on the lookout for -- um -- butchery--”

“Debauchery, son, it’s an important distinction. That’s all right. Are you armed? What about your companions?”

“Well, like I said, Clara got the Superscope, and Tennyson has a Home Run Bat. Cane found a ray gun and shot Tennyson with it -- that was funny!” Dr. Mario didn’t look very impressed. Nicholas continued with more sobriety: “Brian took a heart container, and Eric took Mr. Saturn -- well, I guess you should say Mr. Saturn went with him.”

“You’re with Mr. Saturn? Excellent. Attend closely to him; he is vastly experienced, and beneath his frivolous exterior beats a heart as true as it is misplaced. They have their hearts underneath the liver, you know. I had occasion to attempt surgery on an earlier Mr. Saturn and suffered the embarrassment of erroneous placement of the incision. Sad to report, due in part to my ignorance, he passed away quite untimely. I took advantage of his demise to become familiar with Saturnian anatomy, which is quite distinct from that of humans, Toads, or Koopas, though reminiscent of the Penguin arrangement. So you yourself are then lacking weapons beyond your fists?”

“Well, yeah, I guess that’s right.” Nicholas hadn’t thought about the matter until it was brought to his attention; now he felt a bit left out.

“Let us correct this regrettable inconvenience. You’ll need all the firepower you can manage in Fourside and thereafter.” He raised his voice across the table. “Excuse me, Princess, may I have a moment of your attention, please?”

Peach was distracted from an intense discussion of forehand volleys with Tennyson, who had been taking lessons since first grade and had been charmed to find someone interested in his tennis game. “Dr. Mario, it is always a pleasure to devote a moment to you. What ‘s on your mind?”

“It has come to my attention, esteemed Princess, that my young companion here faces the remainder of his expedition armed only with his native courage and discretion. It is my thought that those intrinsic traits might better serve the defense of himself and his friends if coupled with a more direct means of application of forceful persuasion. Is it not the case that you have a beam sword given you by Link in compensation for lodging during a period of pecuniary difficulty on his part, which however you do not intend to employ as the blade is the wrong shade of purple for the frilled pant suit and too long to go with your Amazon outfit?”

“Dr. Mario, your memory and your erudition both remain remarkable. I have such a sword. Perhaps it would be more useful in less -- fashionable hands?”

“My thought exactly.”

Peach turned to Fuss T. and whispered something. He hustled off through the big double doors behind the head table.

Cranky Kong hadn't stopped for a moment, which at least gave Brian lots of time to finish his dinner. “That numbskull DK was such a bad shot with the hand cannon that once he got me right in the behind when he was supposed to be trashing Army Dillo. I had to use up all the potion I was going to sell to the danged fool. You need TNT to deal with Army Dillo anyway, anyone with half a brain would know. I tell you it's enough to make you put in for a transfer to the X-Box, son, I--”

The whole table had suddenly become dead silent. Everyone was starting at Cranky. The way Peach looked at him, it was lucky she didn't have the beam sword in her hand. “WHAT DID YOU SAY?”

“Um -- I -- um -- I was -- uh -- talking about -- uh -- quack! Quack. She lives in the box. It chases you, you know, we have a lot of trouble in Congo Jungle with her. Takin' bananas, too, I just can't abide her b --

“Good. Quack is the ONLY BOX I want to hear mentioned in this castle. IS THAT CLEAR?”

“Sure, Princess, sure, Quack in the box, no complaints by me, oh no...” Cranky mumbled to himself, and suddenly found a reason to attend to his dinner (fried eggs with maple syrup, for which curiosity Brian was quite willing to forgive him if the result was a moment without complaints).

While the Princess was occupied with Kranky Kong, Tennyson turned his attention to the Star Spirit sitting to his right. The Star had toned down his brightness to allow for the close quarters at the table; now Tennyson could see that he wore a pink bow tie. "I've never met a Star Spirit in person before. I'm Tennyson."

"It is my pleasure, I'm sure. My full name is rather laboriously long; Skolar will do."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Skolar. What is it like being a Star Spirit?"

"That is in itself a curious question, Master Tennyson. What is it like being a human child? What is it like being a rock? Perhaps such questions are best left to metaphysics. You should ask rather: what does a Star Spirit do that is notably different from the activities of a human child, in order that you may construct your own perhaps muddled analogy with the events of your own life. Recall that only one's own mental state is directly accessible to consciousness and that even internally one's perceptions are as much inference as experience."

"Uh -- right." *What can I ask to get an answer I can understand?* "Do you like the food here?"

"Star Spirits don't eat, of course, Master Tennyson. Not in the fashion of pure material creatures such as yourselves. Our energy is provided by the fusion of hydrogen nuclei adsorbed at high density into a transition metal matrix structured to catalyze tunneling through the electromagnetic repulsion barrier; due to the high energy efficiency of the process, a single dose of protons at conception is quite sufficient to provide for the normal exigencies of existence. Therefore I have only an esthetic appreciation of the substance of the feast."

"Oh." *That wasn't it.* "Listen, maybe you can help with something that's been kind of bothering me. In my real life I don't really kill anything except maybe spiders, and ants if I step on them by accident. But even the first few minutes we were here we jumped on the heads of the goombas and they -- disappeared, I guess we killed them. And we knocked some yoshies into the water at the tower -- of course, they started it but still they didn't come out, I guess they were dead too. But nobody seems to mind a lot. Is it just sort of all right to go around killing creatures? Is it OK to kill some things and not others? Maybe they're not really dying here?" *That was great, Tennyson; this will be totally incomprehensible. Oh, well, try to stay awake.*

"Master Tennyson, do you eat meat in the real world?"

"Yeah. Whoppers are my favorite. Burger King, you know? I like fried chicken too."

"Each bit of meat that you eat is the remains of a formerly living animal, killed on your behalf."

"Okay. I mean, I understand that. Wow."

"Therefore the moral onus assigned to inducing the end of a being is indeed dependent upon the circumstances. In simpler terms, yes, it is ok to kill some things and not others."

Furthermore, the standards of behavior in any given place and time are conditioned by history, culture, and circumstance. Thus, as you will no doubt find, the consequences of what appears to be death for most denizens of the game worlds are not quite the same as those in your world, and the rules of conflict are correspondingly less onerous. Here you will suffer no shame from killing an opponent in battle -- but be aware that your opponent has correspondingly no scruples about eliminating you!"

"You mean that there's no such thing as a murder or a murderer here?"

"Not at all. Were you to kill the Princess asleep in her bed, you should be a criminal as well as a coward, and the new Princess would have you executed. Yet if you were to defeat her in a formal contest, you would accrue only the victor's glory. Still, it is of utmost importance to remember that the rules that we use in our world, and that work very well for all of us, would be both inappropriate and immoral in your world -- the real world. Have you defeated your friends at some time in, say, Super Smash Brothers?"

"Yeah, sure," replied Tennyson, happy to have a question so easy to respond to. He had been afraid of some philosophical inquiry that would've made him look as stupid as he felt.

"In doing so, your character defeated the character they were controlling, correct? Yet this action would in no way justify you killing your friend, or them killing you. You must learn the ways of our worlds to survive in our worlds and return to yours, but you must unlearn those ways when you reach your goal." Skolar paused for a moment, perhaps reflecting upon the ability of his accidental student to absorb further moral instruction. "You should realize that you will need to learn much about our worlds, for there is no easy way to return to yours. But there is much of beauty, charm, and excitement in the worlds we inhabit. Further, there is great opportunity here for the improvement of your character, and that of your colleagues. I foresee that you will learn much in the days to come."

"Days? Oh, my, but what will my parents think? Am I going to miss school, too? Well, I guess that's not so bad except that I'm going to be in big trouble about it. We all thought we'd get home soon. What are we going to do if we're here for days?"

"The impatience of youth! My child, time experienced in the game worlds is not the same as that of your home. I very much doubt your parents will have had time to miss you by the hour of your return, as I have no doubt at all that you shall succeed in returning."

Tennyson was distracted from pursuing the point further as Fuss T. had reappeared with a large box, from which he had removed a beautiful gem-encrusted sword hilt. He was demonstrating the working of the sword to Nicholas: "Press here and twist to extend the blade," he said, as with a HISS-BOING a glowing sabre popped out of the flat face of the hilt, "and pull here and here simultaneously to retract," BLUUUUP! and it was gone.

"Wow!" said Nicholas. "I mean, thank you very much, Mr. Fuss T.!"

"Don't thank me, I was only doing my job."

“All right,” said Nicholas, turning to the Princess. “Thank you very very much, Princess Peach.”

“My pleasure, Master Nicholas. Attend to my Minister’s instructions; use it wisely and well.”

“And thank you, Dr. Mario,” said Nicholas in a quieter tone, turning back to his white-coated companion. On Peach’s other side, Cane belched loudly and then turned red as everyone (except Kirby) glared at him. “Now, he deserves that bow tie, I’d say, just like Donkey Kong; you can take the boy from the belchin’ but you can’t take the belch out of the boy -- or -- well, uh -- kids these days! When I was young we were taught to behave at the table!” said Cranky Kong, as he took a long drink from his soda and burped audibly. “Oops, ‘scuse me.”

Cane, embarrassed by the unwanted attention, turned to the Star Spirit on his left. “Hey, wow, a Star Spirit. What are you doing here?” And then, remembering some manners: “Uh, I’m Cane, I’m in fourth grade.”

“Charmed, I’m sure. My name is Klevar. I’ve never met a human child in person before. Most enlightening.”

“That must be pretty interesting,” said Cane, pointing to the book that Klevar had been reading at dinner.

“Oh, yes, it’s just out: *Enter the Cube*, about a group of children from the real world projected into the Mushroom Kingdom. I was just reading about them having dinner with Princess Peach. See, it says so right here: ‘I was just reading about them having dinner with Princess Peach,’ said Klevar,” said Klevar.

“Wait a minute. You’re reading about us?”

“Exactly. Just the miracle of modern publishing. Amazing, don’t you think? Why, look at this: the next thing you’re going to say is ‘That’s incredible.’”

“That’s incredible! I mean -- wait a minute!”

“You just said that. Your next line is, ‘I don’t believe it’.”

“I don’t believe it. I mean -- dang it! Let me see that!”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Well, among other things it says right here: ‘Oh, no, I couldn’t do that.’”

“This is crazy!”

“Yes, so far it has been a very entertaining story.”

“Fine, OK, what happens next?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why not -- and don’t tell me because it says ‘I can’t tell you’!”

“All right, I won’t tell you.”

Luigi was chatting with Clara again, though being a bit more circumspect about where his hands went. “Now, my child, if you’d like to come and visit you really are very welcome. I keep the placea very clean, and there are loads of rooms you could sleep in. I’ve gotta the ghosts out of most of them. Of course,” with a furtive glance at Peach, “you’re alwaysa welcome to come by yourselfa, no?” He took a curious ellipsoid from the pocket of his coveralls. “Just playa the Horror Song and you’ll get a nicea portal into the study, stays open fora 30 seconds, lotsa time to come on over.” He whistled a snatch of a tune: “Like that, got it?”

“Not -- exactly,” said Clara, who was not very musical. Luigi placed his mouth closer to her ear and whistled the tune again.

Nicholas happened to look at his watch, and noticed that it was almost seven o’clock. “Excuse me, Dr. Mario, how late does dinner run tonight?”

“Well seeing as it is Friday, dinner will end early: no later than nine, I should say. On Thursday and Saturday, of course, it is more typical to feast until midnight.”

“Nine o’clock! Holy cow! We need to get going! Excuse me, Princess Peach, we have a copter to catch, may we be excused?”

“Oh, of course, I’m so sorry for forgetting. Thank you very much for coming, children. Fuss T. will show you to the platform.” Peach looked at her very elegant pocket watch. “You have more than six minutes, so there’s no need to hurry unduly.”

“Six minutes!” said Cane. “Ohmigosh, I can hardly move. I think I ate too much.”

“Come on!” said Nicholas. “Where are our clothes?” Looking around, he saw the backpacks and assorted items and weaponry neatly piled by the stairway on the left side, which was where Fuss T. was waiting. The kids said quick goodbyes to their tablemates (none with more relief than Brian) and zipped up the stairs calling thank-you’s to the Princess and Tayce over their shoulders, while Fuss T. gave them quick instructions to the platform.

As soon as they got into the corridor, the boys starting undoing their fancy clothes and dropping them onto the floor as they hurried towards the roof. Clara, bringing up the rear, was suitably aghast. "Boys!" she hissed under her breath, and then louder: "Wait up, I have to find somewhere to change clothes!"

Even Cane knew it was not appropriate to ask why she couldn't follow their example; he pulled his torn tee-shirt on and kept his mouth shut (for once). Clara stopped at a door with dual silhouettes -- apparently a unisex bathroom -- and was about to enter when suddenly a large rather chubby man appeared around the corner and ran into the bathroom in front of her.

"Sorry, eat a lot, go a lot!" said the man as he slammed the door shut.

"Who was that?" asked Erin.

"Gourmet Guy, I think," said Brian.

Clara ran to the next door in the corridor and pushed it open. Beyond it was a very bizarre sight: suspended in front of an incomprehensible, dizzying visual chaos was a large rectangular placard, hanging without visible support. It said:

FATAL ERROR 426H:
MEMORY OVERWRITE

TO AVOID THIS ERROR IN THE FUTURE
USE YOUR CONTROLLER ONLY ACCORDING TO
INSTRUCTIONS PROVIDED. IT'S NEVER OUR FAULT.

PRESS RESET TO WIPE OUT EVERYTHING.

"What is that?" said Clara.

Erin looked in the door. "Oh, Microsoft."

"Eeeuuu," said Nicholas. Clara gagged and ran to the next door: behind it was an empty storage room with some shelves and buckets. She jumped in and while the boys stamped their feet impatiently outside, carefully folded the lovely gown and packed it away. Nicholas looked at his watch. "Three minutes left, let's go!" Clara jumped out, carefully placed the valise containing the gown next to the wall, and on they sped down the corridor, up two flights of stairs, through a steel hatch and out onto the roof.

The door opened out onto a large flat area covered with interlocking tiles, wide enough for all the kids to walk abreast, but with steeply sloping edges leading to a frightening fall off the castle edge to the water. A chilly breeze was blowing as the sun descended below the hills looking west; the mushrooms cast huge shadows in the fading sunlight. In the sudden cold and darkness, their rooftop perch seemed precarious. "Where does the copter land?" asked Tennyson.

Erin pointed to a hexagonal platform, cast in silhouette by the twilight, suspended about 3 meters above the roof and somewhat beyond the flat region. At the edge they could see a bulbous outline: Mr. Saturn. “Must be up there,” said Erin.

“You sure? Maybe he’s trying to lure us up there so we’ll fall off the roof,” said Cane.

“He wouldn’t do that, would he?” said Brian. He didn’t sound confident.

“No, of course he wouldn’t!” said Erin, too cheerfully. “Mr. Saturn would never participate in a conspiracy to destroy innocent fourth graders by inducing them to foolishly jump to an unreachable platform thereby falling to a horrible drawn-out death, and I would never cooperate with his nefarious schemes!” He pointed upwards. “Never, unless of course I was UNDER THE CONTROL OF ALIENS FROM A UFO!”

A very bright white light had appeared from behind a cloud, nearly blinding the kids on the roof. The wind whipped up and a loud thumping sound drowned out their voices. The light rapidly grew closer and it was easy to wonder if it *was* a UFO coming to abduct them all.

Then Nicholas recognized the sound: “It’s just the copter! Look!”