

Enter the Cube

by Nicholas and Daniel Dobkin
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Chapter 6: EZ Phone Home

The kids all piled in, carrying their stuff. The hallway led down a stairway to another heavy steel door; they pushed through it into a long corridor covered with worn outdoor carpeting, smelling somewhat of mildew, interrupted at irregular intervals by doors with numbers on them: 1511, 1512, 1513... Some of the digits were missing. Clara was the last one through; she closed the door behind her, noting the markings: "ROOF ACCESS. AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. KEEP THIS DOOR LOCKED." It wasn't.

"Well, this sure looks like a hotel, at least," said Nicholas.

"Yeah, we go to a place just like this in Stockton when my parents go to visit Grandma," said Tennyson. "Smells like this one, too."

"Are we going to stay here? It's gettin' pretty late, even if we can call home. I'm tired!" said Cane. The megavitamins were wearing off.

"I have to have my own room!" said Clara.

"Why?" said Brian.

"Why? Because I'm a girl! That's why. I'm not about to share my bathroom with you guys."

"Fine, fine, let's figure out how to get a room," said Nicholas. "Usually my Dad goes into the lobby."

"Where's that?" said Tennyson. "This doesn't look like a lobby. Don't they have a desk for people to register or something?"

"Yeah, yeah, the lobby is usually on the first floor. We need to go down," replied Nicholas.

“Well, here’s the stairway,” said Cane, pointing to another metal door close by the roof access. “Do we have to go all the way to the first floor?”

“That’s where the lobby is. Let’s go,” said Nicholas, and without further discussion he opened the metal door marked “STAIRS” and started down: a nice bed was beginning to sound awfully attractive to him too.

Erin, who had started down the corridor with Mr. Saturn, was in one of his oblivious moods: “The chicken heart moved out into the corridor -- BOOM BOOM! BOOM BOOM! rang for the elevator --” at which point he and Mr. Saturn happened to find themselves in front of one -- ‘FOURTH FLOOR aaaaah slllluurrrp!’. Six feet six inches tall -- in search of human blood!” He stepped into the mirror-walled elevator car as Mr. Saturn mumbled something about “chicken heart? chicken heart? I though I knew every boss...”

The rest of the kids had by this time made it to the twelfth floor -- or at least, to the landing marked “12” in big red letters. They were getting awfully tired. Nicholas was still wet enough to leave moist footprints on the stair rungs, but he kept doggedly proceeding down the stairs. Cane started to complain about his left foot and even Clara was rather downtrodden. No one seemed to notice that Erin and Mr. Saturn were missing. By floor 7 Tennyson’s loud complaint at each landing: “Seven! Still seven to go!” was beginning to get on the others’ nerves.

“That’s what you said on floor 8! And 9! They go down one at a time!” snapped Clara.

“Yeah, if you don’t have something better to say, shut up,” said Nicholas.

“Shut up yourself,” said Tennyson.

“My foot hurts,” said Cane.

“You shut up too,” said Nicholas.

“Shouldn’t we look for an el--” started Brian, for the fourth time.

“You shut up too!” said Nicholas. “No more complaining! Let’s get to the bottom of this stair!”

Finally they reached the door that said “L”. They piled out into a bigger room with several worn couches and divans. Cane immediately collapsed onto the first chair, with Tennyson, too tired to even bother sitting down on top of him, sinking to the floor next to the chair. “Get off of me,” mumbled Cane out of habit. Clara stretched out on the couch and sighed. Brian was completely winded and fell face first onto a padded bench. Nicholas took the second armchair, which turned out to recline backwards, leaving him trapped.

Just about then there was a DING DING! and two doors opened up just in front of Clara. Out stepped Erin and Mr. Saturn. "It's outside of your door! And it's coming to eat you up!!" said Erin. Mr. Saturn still looked puzzled.

Erin noticed the kids. "Oh, where were you guys? I was waiting and then figured you'd gone to the lobby, so we took the elevator."

"Elevator? ohhhh," said Tennyson.

"I told you," said Brian, but no one heard him.

"Why didn't you tell us there was an elevator?" said Nicholas, unable to see Erin from his position folded up inside the reclined recliner.

"You didn't ask. Look, you guys take a rest, I'll go find out about the phones." Erin walked over to what looked like the Registration desk. Behind it was a tall fellow smoking a cigarette. He had thinning black hair tied up into a pony tail, big arms that had the look of someone who had once been powerful, a beer belly spilling over a knotted belt, and a pack of cigarettes rolled up in his torn t-shirt sleeve. He was reading a worn-looking hardback book. Erin read the title: "THE EGAD CONSPIRACY-- *how back room deals sold out Eagleland*".

"Good evening," said Erin. "We're looking for a phone to call home, and maybe also some rooms for the night. Could you help us?"

The man looked up. "Whaddya' doin', bodderin' me, kid? Where's yur fadda? or mudda?"

"That's kind of the problem; we got into the game cube here and we'd like to call our parents."

"Oh yeah? Well we ain't got no pay phones heah, just what's in da rooms. I could maybe let you use da office phone but it ain't woikin. Ain't never woiked right, dat's what I say. You wanna room, you getta phone wid' it."

"I think that might be OK." Erin looked back at Clara and thought a moment. "Actually, I guess we would like two rooms, maybe next to each other if that could be arranged. How much is a room?"

"Oh, course ya got da little lady what gets her own room, right? Goils is like dat. How much, hmmm? Dat depends on what kinda room. How tired are ya? Ya want someplace ya can sleep, ya better get one on the upper floors, it ain't so noisy mosta da time. Ya tired?"

"Well, actually I think we are very tired. You see, we didn't exactly plan any of this. We were just going to play some video games after school. But then we ended up fighting Yoshies and playing the quiz game, and we had dinner at Peach's castle, and then the helicopter ride and this battle and -- well, it's been a long day."

“Long day he sez. Long day! I’d like just have a long day. What haven’t I had? I’m tellin’ ya, everywhere bad, we been dere. Earthbound, we been dere-- Mother 4, we been dere -- cancelled, rejected, deleted, we been dere -- Lost Underwoild, we been dere. My worthless brodda, he grabs a Casey bat and what does he do? he hits ME three times in a row, anybody ever hoid of hitting anything three times wid a Casey bat? Nobody ever hits anything more than once EXCEPT MY BRODDA HITS ME!” He was getting a bit red-faced and spitting in Erin’s face as he talked. Erin backed off a couple of steps. The man lit another cigarette and calmed down as he took a long drag. “Sorry, kid, ya’ know sometimes I get a little bit carried away. I guess I kinda get annoyed what wid everybody always sayin’ how great my brodda is, it’s Poo ‘dis, it’s Poo ‘dat, and wat dat I looked afta him all when he was little, does anybody rememba Winnie? Not your fault. You kids must be tired, eh? I tellya what, I got a coupla whatcha callem adjoinin’ rooms, I give ‘em to ya for thoity coins a night. Can’t get a betta deal dan dat anywhere in town, not even in Onett! Waddya say?”

Erin turned to call to Brian: “Can we afford sixty coins?”

“Yeah, that’s ok, I’ve got quite a few left still,” replied Brian. He took his bag of coins out of his backback and walked over to the desk, limping slightly.

“Kid, ya got somethin’ to loin about whatcha callit negotiatin. Don’ tip ya hand quite so easy. Ah, dat’s ok, I ain’ gonna joik ya around. Tellya what I’ll trow in a laundry token, you kids look like you could use some. I’ll even toin on the TV in da room, but don’t you be lookin’ at any doity movies now, right?”

“Uh... ok,” said Brian. “The rooms have a telephone?” Winnie nodded. “Thirty coins is what you wanted?” He counted them slowly out onto the desk.

“Yeah, thanks. Now just sign ya name heah and let me getcha keys.” The man rummaged in a drawer and took out two very ornate looking keys with numbers on them. “Head ya’ are, two quiet rooms, connectin’ door, you can lock it if ya want, fifteen eleven and fifteen twelve.”

Erin took the keys. “Thank you very much. What floor is that on?” said Erin.

“Oh, da fifteenth floor, what else?”

Tennyson, who had just got up, fell backwards on top of Cane. Brian turned to Erin and said, “I think we should take the elevator this time.”

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Rooms 1511 and 1512 were tucked away at the end of a short corridor opposite the elevator. Clara pointed the boys towards 1511 and took 1512; the boys all piled in and dumped their backpacks on the floor. Clara set hers neatly in the closet.

Each room had two double beds neatly turned down, a writing table and chair, a television set set into the wall, and a small bathroom and sink behind a sliding door. Between the beds was a nightstand, with a fancy telephone handset and another device the kids didn't immediately recognize. A connecting door between the rooms was set into the common wall by the windows, which opened to a truly lovely view of the still-glowing towers of Fourside. On the writing table was a copy of *Fantastic Fourside*. Erin opened the magazine and flipped through the pages, most of which were covered with advertisements for restaurants, nightclubs, and arcades.

Nicholas opened the connecting door and called to Clara. "Come on, let's try calling home. I'll go first." The other kids sat down on the edges of the two beds while Nicholas pressed the speakerphone button: BEEEEEEEEEEP. "Sounds like a regular phone. I wonder if I need the area code?" He punched in his home phone number, hearing the familiar touchtone sounds. RING - - - RING - - -

"Hello." It was definitely a kid's voice. Nicholas thought it sounded strangely familiar, but not at all like his little sister, Melissa. He decided to charge ahead:

"This is Nicholas. Is Mom home?"

"Nicholas. I don't know any Nicholas. My Mom is in Pallet Town, I don't know if she's home, call her there!"

"Ummm -- are you -- Melissa?"

"Melissa! What's the matter with you, you can't even tell boys from girls? Who are you, anyway?"

"I told you, my name is Nicholas, and I'm trying to call my Mom. Who are you?"

"Tom Ato, who do you think I am? Wait a minute. Is this Brock? Brock, it is you, isn't it? Not funny! Call me when you have something for me to eat. Goodbye!" CLICK.

"Geeze louise, Nicholas, can't you dial your own home phone right?" said Clara. "Move over, let me try!"

She punched the buttons: RING - - - RING - - - RING - - - RING - - - RING - - - RING. "Hmm, the message machine should pick up..." Clara mumbled to herself. Then:

"Ohhhh, man." It was a male, teenager type of voice. "Yo, this is Rickey." (The sound of a yawn.) "Whoah, it's not even noon yet! Who the hell is calling me at this hour?"

Clara looked momentarily disconcerted but wasn't about to concede defeat after upbraiding Nicholas a moment before.

"This is Clara. Is Dad home?"

“What Dad would that be, Daddy? Sorry, dude. Ain’t no Dad here -- unless something happened with Serena that I should know about. You one of Serena’s friends? I was just bein’ friendly-like, you know, I didn’t realize she’d just like have a cow, man. I mean, lady. You’d think it was, like, her first time, I mean, do you think she and Nigel were just holding hands? yeah right. What did you say your name was, dudette?”

Clara was blushing but not ready to give up yet. “I’m trying to reach Dr. Victor Dumont. Dumont. Can you help?”

“You need a doctor, dude? I mean, that’s heavy. Too early for that. Ohh, my head.”

“No, no, he’s my dad.”

“He’s not a doctor?”

“Yes, he’s a doctor -- well, he’s a doctor of philosophy, that’s what he said it means.”

“You broke your philosophy? Dude, that’s heavy. Go hassle Nigel, I can’t cope.”
CLICK.

Clara closed her eyes in thought. “Seven two five three seven three nine. Three seven three nine. That’s what I dialed.”

Cane stood up. “I can’t believe you guys. What is there to a phone? Press the buttons. And she says I’m a dufus.” He pushed Clara aside, causing her to land in Tennyson’s lap. While she was busy deciding whether to be upset or secretly pleased, Cane ostentatiously pushed buttons.

Brian was shaking his head in the background. “You guys, this isn’t going to work,” he said quietly, but as usual no one was paying any attention. Erin and Mr. Saturn had retired to the writing table; Mr. Saturn was making derogatory comments about the various establishments advertising their wares in *Fantastic Fourside*.

RING - - - RING - - -

“Hello, what?” It was a deep, raspy, unfriendly sort of voice. Cane didn’t hesitate.

“Yo, this is Cane, who’s that?”

“Cane? That’s no name for a Koopa. What kind of creature are you? I don’t waste my time with Toads and other lowlifes.”

“You callin’ me a lowlife? I’ll whip you in Paper Mario any day. Smash Brothers. Wave Racer. Doesn’t matter. I’m the best.” Clara rolled her eyes.

“Is that a challenge?”

“Any time you want. Is this George? What are you doin’ in my house? Are you messing with my stuff?”

“YOUR STUFF! Is this Baby Bowser again? This is NOT FUNNY, young koopa. Spending your time on stupid phone tricks when you should be practicing for the ultimate destruction of that meddling scum Mario! Get back to work immediately!”

“Work? Work! I’m too young to work. I’m too me to work,” replied Cane, pressing the SPEAKER button with a quiver of dismay.

“Unusually insightful,” noted Mr. Saturn from the corner. “Yep, when he’s right, he’s right,” added Erin.

Tennyson got up, unobtrusively releasing Clara’s hand, and squeezed in by the phone, causing the mattress to sink enough that Cane lost his balance and slid backwards into the middle of the bed, legs dangling in the air. Tennyson moved a pillow out of his way (on top of Cane’s face) and addressed the group: “I think we’re not going to get anywhere this way. Let’s try one more time... I had to call the tardy line this morning, so I remember the number. I’ll dial it, but I bet I don’t get the school!” He punched in the numbers, reciting them so the other kids could check him: “Seven four two three nine nine one!”

RING -- RING -- RING -- RING -- Then there was the CLICK of a message machine picking up. Tennyson felt a moment of optimistic surprise, then the greeting began: “You have reached Princess Peach’s Library in her castle in the Mushroom Kingdom. Our office hours are 9:30 in the morning to 7 in the evening each weekday. If this is Mr. Saturn, please be advised that your books are cumulatively four hundred forty two weeks overdue; it is Library policy to turn your account over to the Metroid Bounty Hunter’s League at four hundred fifty total weeks. Please return your books if you do not wish to be reduced to a cinder after dismemberment. If this is not Mr. Saturn, please leave a message after the tone.” BEEEEEP.

Mr. Saturn didn’t bother to look up from the magazine. “They’re always saying that. Actually, the Princess is too cheap to pay the BHL’s fees.”

“You just left that message,” said Erin, pressing the SPEAKER button.

“Well, the truth is a dangerous weapon and I used it,” replied Mr. Saturn.

“I can’t decide if he’s really brave or really dumb,” said Nicholas.

“Is there a difference?” said Erin.

Brian took advantage of the momentary lapse in the conversation to call their attention back to the contretemps with the phone: “I guess it’s obvious that these phones don’t call our

home; they call places in the game world. We weren't dialing the wrong numbers, we just can't call the real world from here. What are we going to do now?"

"Hey, who had the idea of phoning home anyway?" said Cane.

"I think it was Tennyson who suggested it," said Nicholas.

"Tennyson! I shoulda' known. What a dufus idea!" said Cane. "Anybody would know that you can't just call home, you hafta have a magic supercommunicator or transmogrilater or like that."

"You're just making that up!" said Clara. "There's no such thing as a transmogri -- transmogri -- whatever."

"No such thing!," said Erin feigning surprise. "And I just paid twenty-seven ninety-nine for my model 32Z with leather grip and automatic grill heater! Why, when I find that Transmogrilator salesman I'll give him a piece of my mind! If I have any left after today."

"Oh, that's not what I meant," said Clara, stamping her foot. "Besides I didn't hear you -- or for that matter, anyone else -- proposing that the phones wouldn't work."

"Then it's Brian's fault! He's the one who said we should go to Fourside!" replied Cane, not easily turned aside from his search for a scapegoat.

"Wait a minute," said Brian quietly. As usual he was ignored.

"Wewease Bwian!" said Erin, and chuckled. "I don't get it," said Mr. Saturn. "Oh, you had to be there," replied Erin.

Tennyson took over the defense: "It's not Brian's fault. We all agreed to go looking for Fourside; he didn't make us do it."

"Besides, all I said was that we might find a phone in Fourside," said Brian. "Like that one!" he finished, pointing triumphantly to the nightstand.

"Okay, okay, let's get serious about this," said Nicholas. "It's kindof all our fault. We didn't really think about it when Tennyson suggested finding a phone, we just sort of all accepted that that's what we should do. We didn't stop to discuss what else we could do; we didn't consider that maybe a phone here wouldn't call home, we didn't even ask if there were already phones in Peach's castle!"

"Obviously there's at least one in the library," said Clara. "Unfortunately," added Mr. Saturn.

"So instead of trying to figure out who's fault it is, we need to try to figure out how to get home. Okay?"

“I don’t know, I think it’s a lot more fun to blame somebody,” said Cane. Everyone glared at him. “Oh, okay.” Everyone was still glaring at him. (Cane had a lot of glare stored up in the group and was apparently using some of it up.) “Well don’t look at me! I don’t have any ideas for getting home. I’m just good at complaining about it.” He stopped for a moment. “Gee, I guess that’s true.”

“For once I agree with Cane: we certainly can’t rely on him to get us home!” said Clara. “We have to figure this out.”

“Good, we’re all agreed,” said Nicholas. “Any ideas?”

“We could ask Professor E. Gadd,” suggested Brian. “He does a lot of research. Maybe he would know a way.”

“Who is that?” asked Tennyson. He was not a Luigi’s Mansion fan.

“Oh, he lives in Luigi’s Mansion and studies the ghosts that haunt the Mansion,” said Brian. “Yeah, he *invented* the Poltergust 3000!” added Nicholas.

“The what? Oh, never mind, it doesn’t matter ‘cause how do we get there?” said Tennyson.

“Well, Luigi gave me this,” said Clara, taking the ocarina out of her backpack. “It’s supposed to get me to the Mansion if I play the right tune.

“Where does that leave us? Are you going to come back for us?” said Cane.

“Of course she would,” said Tennyson. “Wouldn’t you?”

Clara looked embarrassed and took Tennyson’s hand back in hers. “Of course I would come back. Oh, but I don’t know if it’s just me, maybe we would all be able to go.”

“Gee, I’m not sure that’s such a great idea,” said Brian. “Isn’t the Mansion all haunted? I’m afraid of ghosts. I mean, they’re fine if you’re not there but we’d be in the game, not playing it.”

“Yeah, that’s a good point, how do we deal with the ghosts?” said Nicholas.

“How do you capture ghosts inside a mansion?” sang Erin, to a tune that sounded vaguely familiar to Clara though not the others (it was, of course, from *The Sound of Music*). “How do you find the Poltergust and then -- How do you suck the ghosts behind the transom? the dining room ghosts? the family room? the den? How do you capture ghosts inside the mansion? How do you hold their slime inside a pen?”

The other kids were mystified. Mr. Saturn made a clapping sound with his nose against the nightstand. “That was amazing, Erin! A new high (or low).” Erin bowed to his appreciative audience and ignored the kids.

Nicholas decided it was time to return the favor and start ignoring Erin again. “I think Brian is right; we’d better not intentionally head to a haunted mansion unless we have some idea of how to deal with the ghosts. What else could we try?”

“What about the Princess?” asked Tennyson. “She helped us to get to Fourside because we asked. We never thought to ask her if she could help us get home.”

“That’s right!” said Clara. “She is the Princess, after all. Even if she doesn’t know herself, she would know a lot about the Mushroom Kingdom; she might know someone there who can help us.”

“And of course she could command her subjects to help if she wanted,” added Nicholas. “Yeah, and cut off their heads if they refused!” added Cane. (“Off with her head! off with her head!” said Erin. “Hardly up to your standard, don’t you think?” said Mr. Saturn. “You’re right, I’m running as fast as I can just to stay in the same place, all right,” replied Erin.)

“One problem: do we have enough coins left for copter fare?” asked Nicholas.

“Oh, yeah, we’re fine,” said Brian. “I got five hundred coins at the quiz, and so far we’ve spent -- um -- sixty-six for copter fare here and sixty for the rooms. That leaves us almost four hundred. We’re fine.”

“Okay, that’s settled then,” said Nicholas. “Tomorrow we’ll take the copter back to Peach’s castle.”

“When?” said Tennyson. “Yeah, do we have time for breakfast?” asked Cane. “And where do we go to get it?”

Nicholas was stumped. “That’s a problem. We don’t actually know when the copter gets here going the other way. I guess we’ll need to ask the hotel guy.”

“What if it doesn’t stop here except on the flight we took?” said Clara. “I mean -- maybe it flies in a circle, so we would have to go the rest of the way. That might take a while.”

“Well, if that was true we’d certainly have time to get breakfast tomorrow!” said Nicholas.

“All right!” said Cane.

“Do you think you ought to call the desk tonight?” asked Brian.

“Oh, I don’t know, it’s getting pretty late,” said Nicholas. “We can check tomorrow morning. I’m going to get ready for bed.” He yawned and then stopped. “Hmmm. How do I get ready for bed? I don’t have my toothbrush or my pj’s.”

“Or toothpaste, for that matter,” added Tennyson. “Or clothes to change into.”

“At least we have bath towels,” said Brian. “I checked. They look clean too.”

“I’m not wearing a bath towel to bed!” said Tennyson.

“That’s not what I meant. But how are we going to wash our clothes? I mean, without running around with nothing on.”

“Wash our clothes?” said Nicholas, dismayed. “My Mom does that. I don’t know how to wash clothes.”

Clara rolled her eyes. “Boys! Still, you’re right. I wish I’d kept that gown. *I’m* certainly not going to run around naked while my clothes are in the wash, but it sure would be nice to have something clean to wear.”

“Too bad,” said Mr. Saturn.

Clara glared at him. “I can see why you got in trouble with Princess Peach.”

Cane apparently had no interest at all in whether clean clothes could be obtained or how to get them. He had wandered over to the armoire and pulled the doors open, discovering a large flat-panel television display and another more mysterious device. He hunched over the box reading instructions and then called to Brian: “Hey Brian, gimme’ a couple coins.”

“What for?”

“This thing. I wanna charge up my gun.” He directed Brian’s attention to the embossed placard:

PowerUP RAYGUN RECHARGE STATION
Just plug the Universal Adaptor into your power receptacle
Fits every weapon known to Nintendo
Two coins per charge

Below there were three cables with differing plugs attached and a slot for coins. Brian dug into his pouch and gave Cane a couple of coins; PLINK PLINK! The green START button lit up. Cane pulled out his ray gun and mucked around until he found the right cable, then pressed START. Clara watched with interest, and then asked Brian for two coins herself. “I’m sure my room has one too. I’ll go charge my Superscope. Then I’m going to take a shower, so you guys stay out! I’m locking the door.”

Meanwhile Nicholas and Erin were arguing over beds. “Mr. Saturn doesn’t need to sleep on a bed. Geez, the bed’s small enough just with both of us!” said Nicholas.

“Fine, you can share with Cane! I’ll bet Brian doesn’t mind Mr. Saturn, right, Brian?”

“Where am I going to sleep?” asked Tennyson. “I’m not sharing with Brian and Erin *and* Mr. Saturn. I’ll fall off the edge of the bed!”

“I guess you could share with us,” said Nicholas, indicating Cane, who was now perched on the edge of the bed watching TV.

“Share with Cane? No way! He’ll kick me all night.”

“How do you know? Did you do a sleepover at his house?”

“I don’t have to, he’s just like that.” Cane was ignoring them, his attention consumed by the image on the box. “Besides he’s going to stay up ‘till all hours watching that stupid thing. I’d rather sleep on the floor!”

The connecting door opened up. Clara appeared wrapped up in a huge bath towel, with a second smaller one bunched over her hair. Mr. Saturn whistled until Tennyson buried him under a pillow. “Can you guys keep it down! Always fighting over stupid things. Tennyson can use my other bed.”

“I thought you said we had to sleep in here!” said Brian.

“Mmmmp hp mphp mfjmmf frmm mpmmph,” said Mr. Saturn.

“Um -- thanks -- I guess,” said Tennyson, letting Mr. Saturn up.

“Bleaaah!” said Nicholas. “You *want* to share a room with *her*?”

“Gee, thanks,” said Clara.

“Well, it’s not personal, you’re just a girl!” said Nicholas.

“To remove foot from mouth, step 1: stop talking,” said Mr. Saturn.

“It’s better than being stuck on the floor in here!” said Tennyson defensively. He gathered up his backpack and followed Clara. Clara ushered him into the room and shut the connecting door behind her.

“Where’s she going to get dressed?” said Brian.

“In the bathroom, stupid,” said Erin.

“I’m still waiting for that discourse on girls’ bathrooms,” said Mr. Saturn.

“Well, you can wait another night,” said Erin, yawning. “I’m going to sleep. Turn off the light, will you?” He pulled the covers up and rolled over, crunching Mr. Saturn’s nose under his elbow.

“Geerroff me!” said Mr. Saturn.

“That’s my line!” mumbled Cane. Then he turned his attention back to the TV set. He had been channel surfing for about 15 minutes so far, and was up to channel 73:

BEEP! A room with a podium in front and a group of toads sitting in plush wooden chairs. One of the toads was standing in front of the rest working at an easel with a long wooden pointer: “If you will refer to chapter 3.1.2 of the ToadTown Master Plan, you will note that Merlin Avenue is not zoned for retail food establishments, except under the waiver to subsection 5.11 in which we see--”

BEEP! A garishly-dressed young man, vaguely recognizable as Link (the warrior from the Zelda games), was screaming directly into the camera. “When I’m through with Bowser there won’t be more than two bouillon cubes to stick in a cup of soup! I’ll masticate him! I’ll slice him up so thin you can eat him in a sandwich! Listen up you Bowsenated wimp! This is LINK talkin’ to you! You’re GOING DOWN!”

BEEP! “It’s a hard grounder up the middle -- and past Wills for a base hit! Johnson holds at second as Davis charges to field the ball. And here comes Alston -- it looks like Koufax is done for the night --”

BEEP! “Albert -- oh, Albert, how could we ever be happy like this?”

A very attractive young lady in a stylish gown, her arms wrapped around an overdressed, overmuscled, over-coiffed and rather wooden male lead: “Elizabeth, what does all that matter? It’s you that I love! I’ve always loved you -- and I always will whatever else happens.”

“Oh, Albert -- kiss me, you fool!” The romantic scene shrunk to the left half of the screen while on the right half:

NEXT on Peach’s Romance Channel...

A Spear in Her Heart:

a warrior princess afraid of nothing --
except love

a deadly enemy who captures her heart!

EXCLUSIVELY on the Romance Channel. (Cane stuck his tongue out and pressed the button...)

BEEP! “It’s not the years -- it’s the mileage! Don’t let your racer end up like this! Tune up at Tails’, a full-service source for all your pod racing needs. Our expert maintenance

droids will have you back battling the sound barrier instead of the overtemp lights before you can say *Nika wapipi Sebulba!* “

“Cane, turn that down!” said Nicholas. “The rest of us are trying to get to sleep!” Cane pressed a button and the sound sank to an unobjectionable level. The last thing Nicholas saw before drifting off to an exhausted slumber was a rocket ship landing in a bucolic meadow, with a just perceptible hypnotic narration: “Next on the Pikmin channel ... Building a better bridge -- it takes determination and and it takes sticks. Both are equally necessary, and with our help you too can learn how to be determined and how to collect enough sticks...” Snore. Snore. Snore.

“Good night, Tennyson.”

“Good night, Clara. Sweet dreams. That’s what my mom always says to me.”

“My dad is really kind but he’s sort of formal. I just can’t imagine him saying anything like that. It must be nice to have a mom.”

“It is. But don’t tell her I said so.”

“Boys! Go to sleep.”

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Nicholas had to go to the bathroom. After an extended struggle with his intense desire to remain curled up under the covers, discomfort finally got the better of him and he wearily pulled his eyes open. Cane was still perched on the edge of the bed staring intensely at the television; the sound was turned down to a level just perceptible.

Nicholas got up and looked over Cane’s shoulder. There wasn’t much to see: the view through the windshield of a truck of some sort, which seemed to be driving along a perfectly straight road through a desolate, unmarked flat plain. Nicholas watched for a minute or so, assuming that some event was about to take place, but nothing changed. Finally he spoke: “What *are* you watching?”

Cane didn’t turn around. “The eighteen wheeler pro trucker channel.”

“But there’s nothing happening!”

“Oh, yes there is. He’s going for the twenty-fourth parking place.”

“Where? I don’t see a place to park.”

“He’s not there *yet.*”

“Oh. How much longer?”

“um... about five hours.”

Nicholas rolled his eyes upwards. “I’m going to the bathroom. And then I’m going back to bed. And *don’t* wake me up when he gets there. Good NIGHT.”

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Nicholas was dreaming about a large cardboard box, with a picture of Mr. Classen on the side. The eyes in the picture were moving; the box started to shake; then the whole world started to shake.

“Nicholas, wake up!” It was Cane, shaking his shoulders.

“Go away,” mumbled Nicholas without opening his eyes. “I don’t care about the parking place.” He turned over and tried to get back to sleep.

“Wake up!! wake up!!” said Cane.

“Urmfmurm,” said Nicholas, covering his ears with a pillow. Then there was a very loud explosion. It was NOT part of his dream. Nicholas jumped up in the bed, heart pumping. “What was THAT?”

“I told you, we have to get up!” said Cane. Another more distant explosion rocked the building. “Look!” He pointed out the window. Nicholas jumped out of the bed, catching his foot in the bedspread and landing face first on the carpet. Crawling over the chaotically tangled bedding he reached the window and stuck his nose over the sill.

The street below was packed with tiny white figures, punctuated with occasional yellow flashes (apparently the launch of some sort of weapon, as they were followed shortly by the sound of an explosion). A sort of chant or song was faintly audible: after a few repetitions Nicholas’ ear adjusted to the curious accent and made out -

*We are the Starmen
We never lose
We are the Starmen
We do as we choose*

endlessly repeated.

“Geeze louise, we’d better go!” said Nicholas.

“Duh,” said Cane.

“Come on, everybody up!” shouted Nicholas. He pounded on the connecting door to Clara’s room and threw a pillow at Erin, who was groaning and hiding under the covers.

“What’s going on?” said Tennyson, as he opened the connecting door. Another nearby explosion nearly knocked him off his feet.

“Some sort of attack!” cried Nicholas. “Come on! Grab your stuff, let’s get to the elevator! Get your weapons! Get your back packs! Get Mr. Saturn!”

“Thanks for noticin’ me,” mumbled Mr. Saturn; it was difficult to hear him as he was tucked under Erin’s arm.

The phone rang. Brian picked it up.

“Get out, get out!” said Winnie’s voice. “The Starmen is attackin’, get the ‘ell outta - CLICK-” The line went dead. Brian looked pale.

Clara appeared a moment later, her superscope at the ready. Nicholas threw open the door and the kids charged out into the hallway. Nicholas led the way down the hall to the elevator and pressed the CALL button. Just as he did so a loud explosion shook them almost off their feet and smoke poured out between the cracks in the elevator doors. “It wasn’t my fault!” said Nicholas. “I just pressed the button. It’s not my fault!”

“I guess that’s not going to work,” said Erin. “We’ll have to take the stairs.”

“The STAIRS?!” said Cane. “Not the stairs again!”

“Why, is there something wrong with them?” said Erin. He grabbed the metal door to the stairway and pulled. Black smoke boiled out into the hallway. “Yes,” said Mr. Saturn. “Thanks, I hadn’t noticed,” said Erin.

The chanting of the Starmen was growing louder; apparently they were inside the building. The sound was also coming from outside, as the tinkling sounds of shattering glass signified the destruction of many of the hotel’s windows.

*We are the Starmen
We never lose
We are the Starmen
We do as we choose*

It was getting a bit frightening, especially when accompanied by the ongoing destruction of the building around them. “What are we going to do now?” shrieked Cane.

“Keep calm, keep calm, we’ll figure something out,” said Nicholas, though he didn’t look very calm. He led the kids back into the room, and started looking around for something that would allow them to get down safely through the now-shattered window.

“Wait a minute!” said Tennyson. “Clara, what about your ocarina? Didn’t Luigi say you could use it to get to his mansion?”

“What about the ghosts?” asked Brian.

“I’ll take ghosts that might be there over Starmen about to blow me up any time!” said Nicholas. “Great idea, Tennyson! Clara, Clara, where’s the (BOOOOM!) ocarina?”

Clara was digging frantically through her backpack. “Here it is,” she exclaimed, waving the oblong instrument triumphantly in the air.

“Come on, come on, don’t celebrate, play!” screamed Nicholas.

Clara brought the ocarina to her lips and tried to remember the melody that Luigi had taught her. Her father had insisted on her studying piano and clarinet, but her practice had made little impression; music did not come naturally for her. After some awkward first attempts a melody of a sort came out:

“That’s the Smash Brothers music!” said Brian.

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” said Clara. “At least you recognized it. I’ll try again.” Her forehead creased with thought. A loud cracking sound -- automatic weapons fire -- echoed down the hallway, accompanied by the now chillingly loud monotonous chant, apparently coming from very close:

*We are the Starmen
We never lose...*

Clara looked distracted. She played another tune...

“That’s Happy Birthday!” said Nicholas, disgusted.

“Come on, she’s trying!” said Tennyson. He put his hand on her shoulder. “Just relax and try to remember Luigi at dinner yesterday. It was only yesterday.”

“If you don’t come up with it soon you might as well start playing ‘Taps!’” said Cane, looking outside the door. “The Starmen are coming down the hall!”

Erin put his hands to his mouth to emulate a trumpet and started singing: “Day is done gone the sun --”

Clara jumped in the air. “That’s it!” She put the Ocarina to her lips and started to play again. Brian recognized the song that Luigi had sung to her and nodded. The new melody seemed to grow louder and louder, and the space around her seemed to twist until the kids were staring down into a bizarre sort of tunnel that had appeared in the air at Clara’s feet, growing

larger and larger until it was more than head high. The rumble of the Starmen's feet and the pounding of their unending chant, punctuated by explosions and the zapping sound of rayguns, rose to a crescendo as the first Starman burst in the door.

"Come ON!" said Nicholas, pushing Brian into the tunnel. Erin went next, carrying Mr. Saturn, as Cane snapped off a ray gun shot at the invading Starman, freezing him for long enough for Cane to jump through. Tennyson grabbed Clara's hand and they jumped in. Nicholas threw a pillow at the next Starman and leapt as a blaster bolt crackled above his head.

"WE ARE THE STARMEN (BOOM!) WE NEVER LOSE! WE (CRACKLE) ARE THE STARMEN WE --"

Nicholas felt a wierd twisting sensation as if he were being folded inside out, and then landed on top of a mass of kids with a dull thud. He looked back down the tunnel: a Starman was pointing a nasty-looking gun barrel right at him, when ZZZZZZIIIP! the opening disappeared. For a moment everything was silent.