

Enter the Cube

by Nicholas and Daniel Dobkin
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Chapter 7: Ghost Busted

“Get off me!” said Cane. “You should talk!” said Brian, who was under Cane. “I can’t get off you until Tennyson gets off me!” replied Cane. Nicholas rolled off to the floor, which was covered with a beautifully embroidered but unyielding rug. He turned back and helped Clara up; she in turn pulled Tennyson off the pile, allowing the rest of the kids to disentangle themselves.

“Well, that was one heck of an escape!” said Nicholas. “Thanks, Clara, even if you did wait until the last minute.”

Clara wasn’t quite sure how to respond to such unusually graceful behavior. Tennyson smiled at her and pressed her hand: “That’s right, that was fantastic, Clara!”

“Fantastic? She almost took long enough to get us killed!” complained Cane.

“I guess we should’ve left him behind,” said Erin, getting off of Brian.

“No, we need the comic relief,” said Mr. Saturn. “Thank you very much, Clara. Starman don’t like folks like me at all. I was toast.” He executed as much of a bow as his stubby legs allowed.

“Yeah, way to go, Clara,” said Brian from where he was still lying on the floor. “I thought we were done for.”

“Well -- that’s very nice of you all,” Clara replied, and then remembering Cane, “or most of you. I guess we’re safe for the moment. What do we do now?”

Nicholas helped Brian up and then stretched and yawned. The shock of the Starman attack was wearing off. He began to take in his surroundings. A row of bookshelves lined the back wall. Chandeliers lent a pleasantly yellow glow to complement the light from a crackling fire in the fireplace. An elegant coat rack stood near the door, and on a comfortable-looking green recliner sat a ghost reading a book.

“It’s a ghost!” screamed Brian.

The ghost jumped up in surprise. “A ghost! Where? Where?” he said. Then he stopped and bonked his head with the book, or tried to, as the book went right through his head and came out the other side. “By Jove, what a damn fool I am, it’s me!” He stood up straight and bowed politely. “And where are my manners? Let me introduce myself: I am Neville, ghost in residence here in the study, at your service and your family’s, I’m sure.”

Brian’s voice squeaked a bit at first as he answered. “Umm... how do you -- do? I’m -- uh -- Brian and we’re -- um --”

“We’re trying to find out how to get home,” interrupted Nicholas. “Do you think you could help?”

“And who do I have the pleasure of addressing?” asked Neville.

“Oh, sorry, I’m Nicholas and this is Clara and Tennyson and that’s Cane and you’ve already met Brian and over there are Erin and Mr. Saturn.” The latter pair, having already evaluated the ghost and found him only moderately shocking, were over by the bookshelves checking out the reading resources.

“I’m honored to welcome such distinguished guests to the Mansion. Of course we shall be grateful for the opportunity to be of assistance, but first, we must elucidate the potential complications. Just where, pray tell, is your home, did you say?”

“I didn’t,” replied Nicholas. “We come from -- from the real world, not from a game.”

“By my faith, the real world? Remarkable. Now, I must inquire, how was it that you ended up here in the mansion? I was so absorbed in my novella that I missed your entrance completely.”

“We used the ocarina--” said Nicholas.

“--that Luigi gave to Clara --” interrupted Tennyson.

“--because the Starmen were about to kill us!” said Cane.

“--and I only just remembered the melody in time,” finished Clara.

“Ocarina, indeed? From Master Luigi? Ah, we must inform the master directly, he’ll be overwhelmed with excitement.” The grandfather clock chimed twice: 7:30. “Ah, but first I have an engagement with Mistress Lydia. I shall be back promptly, be assured.” Neville put his book on the divan and walked straight out of the room through the middle of the wall. A moment later he reappeared: “By Jove, I’m forgetting my manners again. Granted, one’s

memory becomes a bit porous, one might say, after one's been dead for a while. Have you broken your fast this morning yet, children?"

"Is my fast broken?" said Cane, looking down his shirt front.

"He means have we had breakfast," said Brian.

"Precisely," added Neville.

"Breakfast! Wow! That's a great idea, I'm starved!" said Cane.

"You see, the Starmen attacked before we were even awake," said Nicholas. "We didn't have time to do anything but grab our stuff and go."

"Starving children, indeed. Would never do. Utterly ghastly hospitality. Come, children, I shall locate some comestibles to tide you over until the Master is found. I'll guide you, just follow along." Neville opened the door and left the room in a more conventional fashion.

"You coming?" said Clara.

Erin waved them to go on without him. "We'll be here," he said. "I'm not hungry yet." He turned back to the bookshelves. "What's this one? It looks like a quick read," he said, pointing to a book so thin it was very difficult to read the title printed on the binding.

"Oh, I recognize that one. **The Wit and Wisdom of Kolorado the Explorer.** It's a short book."

"Well, let's see." He moved to the next rack. Two full shelves were filled with a series of monstrously thick books with identical red and green covers. "What are these? Hmmm... **The Life and Good Works of Mario**, volume I." Erin pulled the book off the shelf with difficulty and laid it down on the table, with a loud thump. "Wow, that is one heavy book." He helped Mr. Saturn up onto the chair so he could see, and opened the book. The inner cover had a brief blurb and what looked some reviewer's remarks:

The beginning of a life of virtuous distinction: volume I of Mario's authorized autobiography. Required reading for Mario's fans or anyone wishing to follow in his illustrious footsteps.

Read what the reviewers said:

"Repetitive and self-aggrandizing. Mario, to hear him tell it, has done nothing but good deeds from birth. If he were really that sweet he'd dissolve in water!"

-- Authority T., The Toadtown Times

“Begins with promise but bogs down in unneeded detail and mind-numbing drivel by the time the self-proclaimed hero is out of diapers. If you wanted to understand how Mario rose to his current celebrity status, don’t bother to read this book!”

-- Kover J. Udgin, *Koopa Village Review*

“Too long.”

-- Mark Penguin, *Chill Out Magazine*

“Hmmm,” said Erin. “Looks like they didn’t like it very much.”

“Well, if you knew Mario you’d probably agree. Let’s take a look.”

Erin opened the book at random to a spot about in the middle; it happened to open at a chapter heading. “Chapter twenty-seven: I Save My Fourth-Grade Class. Yow. Chapter twenty seven and we’re only at fourth grade!”

“Well, Mario has a lot to say about how wonderful his life has been. Look at this!” Mr. Saturn pointed with his nose at the bookshelf. Erin squatted down and started counting the books:

“Volume 29: Mario Defeats the Dinosaurs. Volume 32: Mario the Kart Racer. Volume 37: Intimations of Flatness. Volume 39: Paper Mario Takes Shape.” He looked down the shelf: “Geez! There’re about fifteen more volumes. Who could possibly read all this stuff?”

“The powerful intoxication of celebrity, my young friend. I’ll tell you one thing, nobody’s asked me to write my life story!”

“Let’s see what else is in here...” Erin moved to the next book case. He picked up a moderately thick blue-covered book and read the title: “‘Bowser’s Guide for Young Koopas: How to Capture Beautiful Princesses and Devastate your Rivals, by Bowser the Magnificent, King of the Koopas and Emperor of the Surrounding Spaces’. Has anyone around here ever heard of the idea of modesty?”

“Oh come on, Erin, it’s called marketing,” said Mr. Saturn. “Now here’s a good one: ‘A History of the Metroid Wars’, by Vingot and Samus Aran. That sounds interesting; I’ve always wondered what turned her into such a hard character.”

“Yeah, that looks fun. Let’s read it.” Erin pulled the book out and laid it on the reading table. He put Mr. Saturn on the table next to the book and pulled up the very elegant, leather-covered reading chair. He read aloud: “Chapter 1: The Origin of the Brinstar Controversy. Authorities differ widely on the beginnings of the Metroid tragedies, but we feel strongly that one must begin with the dubious financing of the Brinstar Corporation. This fraudulent transaction set the stage for the unfortunate chain of events that was to follow. Let us first examine the charter upon which the Corporation was founded. In general structure, the charter

differed little from those of similar ventures of the time, being composed of a legally required preamble stating the aims and means of the joint development partnership...”

Meanwhile Neville led the others down the corridor. The walls and ceilings were elegantly appointed with carved wood trim and amply lit by stylish chandeliers like the one in the study. They proceeded down a wide staircase with intricately decorated wooden banisters and thence through another corridor. Neville was chatting all the while:

“You see, the rebuilt mansion was modified in several respects from the original plan. The Master has added an enhanced grand ballroom in addition to the more modest dining room to which we are repairing currently. Though I must say that those of us ghosts who have re-established ourselves here in the mansion find the new design -- how shall I put this delicately? - not an improvement on the more traditional arrangements to which we had become accustomed.”

“What is he saying?” whispered Cane.

“They don’t like the floor plan,” said Brian.

“Who?”

“The ghosts.”

Neville spoke again: “Oh, here we are, just through that door,” gesturing vaguely to his left.

Cane rushed ahead towards where he seemed to be pointing and reached out to grab the doorknob: “Wow, I can almost taste that bacon!”

“Oh, no, not that door, young Master!” said Neville, but it was too late. As soon as Cane’s hand touched the knob, the door flew around, smashing him against the wall. Clara gasped. Nicholas put his hand to his mouth. Tennyson’s jaw dropped.

The door slowly pulled back from the wall. Where the kids expected to see a bloody pulped mess, instead there was Cane: flattened to the thickness of a piece of paper but otherwise apparently unharmed. The support of the door being removed, Paper Cane flopped down from the head and floated out away from the wall, twisting sinuously like a wind-blown leaf until he landed, slightly crumpled, on the red carpeting.

“Wow,” said Nicholas. “This way we can just roll him up and put him in our pockets.”

“He’ll eat less,” said Clara.

Brian knelt down and grabbed the flattened Cane; he started doing something complicated that Nicholas wasn't able to follow. "What are you doing to him?"

"Origami." He had folded Cane's arm and hand into a complex, symmetrical figure. "See, it's a paper crane!"

Tennyson looked at it. "A Cane Crane. Something of an improvement on the original."

Clara slapped him gently on the head. "You are terrible. Brian, unfold Cane! You guys."

"I wouldn't have thought you'd be coming to his rescue," said Nicholas.

"Come on, how would you like to be flattened and then have your friends play paper airplanes with you?"

"That's origami!" said Brian. "I don't know how to do paper airplanes."

"That's not the point!" said Clara.

"Oh dear," said Neville, "I do wish he had listened more carefully."

"He never does," said Brian.

"Well, fortunately the charm only lasts a moment. Saints be praised! look; he's beginning to reflate already." Neville pointed to Cane's toes, which suddenly popped up off the floor.

From the expression of the flattened face, it appeared that reflatting was an unpleasant process, but at least it was mercifully brief. In a moment the three-dimensional version was restored, holding his temples and muttering, "Oh, my head!"

Neville tried to help Cane up but his hand passed through Cane's body. "Stop that! That's wierd," complained Cane.

"Oh, I am so sorry, Master Cane, but if you'd only listen carefully we could avoid these little *contretemps*."

"That means when you mess up," translated Brian.

"Precisely, Master Brian. The dining room is through *this* door. Shall we?"

The thought of food was sufficient to restore Cane to full health (or at least full hunger). He charged right through Neville to the door. The others followed more politely behind and entered the dining room.

The dining room was centered around a huge wooden dining table covered with a white tablecloth and several candelabra. The walls were decorated with false columns and wooden arches, each surmounting a large oil painting, with intricately carved woodwork below. A Toad was puttering away at the table when they came in; he looked up and smiled at Neville. He was wearing a tall white hat atop his Toad-esque head gear and had curly mustaches, the first they'd seen on a Toad. "So, it is ze jeune garçons, oh mais non, c'est une belle jeune fille aussi! What vill you be sinking of nexte, Monsieur Neville? You are ze strangest ghost I have ever had ze privilege to meet."

"Children, may I present the esteemed head chef and culinary master of the mansion, Monsieur Bonapa T.? And Monsieur, I am most honored to introduce to you Mistress Clara, Master Nicholas, Master Brian, Master Tennyson, and Master Cane. They have been without refreshments this morning. May I be so bold as to trouble you to provide them with a modest repast, whilst I seek out the Master?"

"But of course! It would be a pleasure, n'est-ce pas? Sit, children sit! I vill provide an illustrious meal worzy of the King of Siam! Oh, mais non, zat would be too spicy, yes? But perhaps a paté, de quiche Lorraine, and of course ze piece de résistance -- a spinach soufflé. Does zis not make the mouth water and ze heart pound?"

"Um -- could I have some hash browns?" said Cane. For once Clara didn't roll her eyes; she was thinking the same thing but hadn't the nerve to say it.

"Oh, but of course, les pommes frites! 'ow could I have oubliée ze potatoes? Sit, sit, my children, I vill return in ze blink of an eye with a feast to satisfy ze appetite of a boolossus!" He bustled out through a swinging door into the next room.

The kids sat down in oversized, heavily padded chairs, their legs dangling far from the floor. Nicholas whispered to Clara, "Do you think there will be anything we can eat?"

"I don't know," said Clara. "My dad once took me to a fancy French restaurant and it was terrible! There was some stinky cheese and soup filled with onions, and I had to chew the meat for hours."

"I heard they eat esparo! It's some kind of snail," said Cane. "I ate a snail once on a dare. It was awful." He looked thoughtful. "Maybe I should've cooked it first." Brian looked like he was ready to throw up.

Tennyson leaned over to join in. "That's escargot. It's disgusting. The bread is really good, though; I usually just have lots of bread and butter when my family goes to places like that."

Almost as fast as he'd promised, Bonapa was back. The childrens' fears were quite unfounded; the appetizing aromas of quiche and fried potatoes were confirmed by an initially cautious nibble or two, and soon they were all squabbling over who had the right to the last

crumb of crust. Even the paté was found acceptable by Clara and Tennyson, though Cane refused to touch it (“already digested, doesn’t need my help”).

Once the most serious hunger pangs were assuaged, Nicholas remembered his manners and his curiosity. “Gee, this is great! Thanks, Mr. -- um --”

“Oh, you may just call me Bon, Monsieur Nicholas,” replied Bonapa T. Nicholas was very impressed that the Toad had remembered his name. “It is my pleasure, as velle as my, how do you say, my job here at ze mansion! It is wonderful to have someone else to cook for, n’est-ce pas? Until now, it is only Luigi and ze Professeur, and of course Mr. Fuggs, but ze other ghosts do not eat, you see, so it is a bit of ze ennui, a bit dull.”

Nicholas didn’t quite understand most of the reply but guessed that it was favorable. “Yeah, well, we really appreciate it! Even the -- um -- pattie?”

“Paté! Paté! Zut alors! you have so much to learn, but then zat is ze privilege of ze young ones, mon petit garçon.”

“Well, anyway, you see, we didn’t really mean to end up here in the mansion, but since we are, I wonder if you could tell us where to find Professor E. Gadd? We’re trying to get home, and we thought maybe he could help us out.”

“Le professeur E. Gadd? But of course! Sauf que -- however, hmmm, it is possible zat he is en voyage, zat is traveling, you see. But I can take you to ze shack of the Professeur, and if he is not zere, peut-etre his friend le Renard des queues will help you. He is very kind, zat one.”

“Thanks a lot!” said Nicholas.

Clara, who had been attending to the conversation while the others continued to stuff themselves, asked “Lerenar? I don’t remember him from *Luigi’s Mansion*.”

“Oh, la la, ma charmante petite fille, *le Renard*! Ze, how you say, ze Fox! Oh, but he does not live in ze mansion, of course, he is a friend of ze Professeur, visiting from le monde de la liberté -- ze Planet Freedom, I sink.”

“Oh, Sonic’s friend!” said Brian. Bonapa T. nodded approvingly.

“Précisément, mon ami. Ah, but ze Renard, he is not only ze friend of Sonic, but of many others; he is very clever and at ze same time very wise, plus que son age, non?”

“Well, that would be really helpful!” said Nicholas. “Either one. So could you show us where he is?” He stopped and with a visible effort added: “After we -- uh -- help you clean up.”

“Mais non, ze ghosts and I vill clean up after ze meal. Everyone is very ‘appy, yes? We can go see ze Professeur as soon as you are préparé, ready, non?”

Everyone except Cane nodded; he was busy finishing up the last of the quiche.

The Mansion was set off from whatever was beyond by a high hedge and a taller metal fence; an ornate gate blocked the narrow road which seemed to be the only entry to the estate. The professor's lab was in a modest building next to the front gate; the Toad called it a "shack", perhaps from habit, but it appeared to be a spanking new structure of glistening steel and concrete. The apparent size was also deceptive; as soon as they passed through the door it was immediately clear that the building above ground was only the gateway to a much larger underground complex, reached via a series of escalators and moving walkways. Bonapa T. begged off after showing them in, as he needed to return to his kitchen to prepare lunch. The kids were left to wander into the laboratory on their own.

"Where do you think we can find the Professor?" asked Tennyson.

"We might as well head down, there isn't much up here," said Nicholas, and hopped onto the rapidly descending escalator. Cane was groaning with dismay created by that last serving of potatoes and quiche, and as a consequence was too preoccupied to comment as Tennyson and Clara stepped hand in hand to descend. Concern for the state of his stomach absorbed most of his attention as they descended, so that he paid little heed to the music until it had grown quite loud:

*"...this is not simply my way NO NO!
my own style
gotta get a hold of my LIIIIIFE!"*

The music was so loud it was difficult to localize its source, as it echoed from the walls and control panels. Nicholas searched assiduously as he reached the end of the escalator and walked off in what he hoped was the right direction; the others followed, save for Brian who hated loud noises and hung back by the escalator. As they got closer the sound became painful; Clara covered her ears as she walked.

*"... I wanna fly HIIIIIGH!
so I can reach the
highest of all the HEAVENS!!!!"*

The destructively powerful sound, Nicholas discovered, was coming from a doorway into a room that seemed to be filled with all kinds of complex junk in various stages of disassembly. A couple of huge speakers were piled on top of what looked like the giant vacuum cars used to clean parking lots. A figure was flitting about head high through the room, dancing and leaping in complete defiance of gravity. Nicholas tried to call to the creature but his voice was completely lost in the over-amplified singing. He turned to Clara and mouthed "WHAT DO WE DO NOW?". Clara pointed with her elbow (which enabled her to leave her fingers jammed in her ears) at a box next to a broken vacuum cleaner by one of the speakers, and mouthed "TURN IT OFF!" Nicholas nodded and scrambled over the junk, nearly losing his

balance but preferring to take a fall rather than remove his ear protection, until he got to the control box. Taking a deep breath, he guessed which knob controlled the volume and took his hand out of his ear to give it a twist (*I hope it's the right way!!*).

"... I will never see the LIIIGHT!!! now's the time to -- to --

Hey! who turned off the music?"

The creature did a loop followed by a flat roll, pulling out as he spotted Nicholas. Now that it was more or less stationary Nicholas could see that the creature was a fox, with brilliant orange fur. The fox was wearing red tennis shoes and white gloves, and was equipped with an invisibly fast whirring tail or tails that appeared to hold him up in the air. "Whoah, who 're you?"

"We're looking for Professor E. Gadd," said Nicholas. "I'm Nicholas and that's Clara and Tennyson and Brian's somewhere and--there he is, and Cane. And you must be Tails, right?" Brian edged around the door carefully, making sure the sound was off.

"Yeah, dat's me." The fox dropped down onto the ground, bouncing lightly on soft shoes and padded paws, and circled around Nicholas sniffing in a disconcerting fashion. Now that they had stopped rotating, Nicholas could see that he had two tails, orange with white tips. "Well, the Professor ain't here. He's off on a super-top-secret mission."

"Where did he go?" said Clara.

"Geez, Clara, if it's super top secret he's not gonna' tell you where the Professor is!" said Cane, entering the room still holding his stomach.

"Aww, he's at Ark. You know, in Sonic's world."

"What's he doing at Ark? I thought that was an abandoned space station taken over by Dr. Noodnik." said Tennyson.

"Robotnik," said Brian.

"Naw, that was just a red herring," replied Tails. "A big coverup. Ark is actually being used for the secret project what I was tellin' ya' about."

"If it's so secret how come you know about it?" asked Brian.

"I know about lots o' things, kid. Truth is, nobody much cares to ask most o' the time. The ghosts don't like the Professor anyway, seein' as he's imprisoned most of 'em. Luigi's too busy tryin' to get famous like his brother to care if Gadd is gadding about. Hey, that's a good one! Gadd gadding about. Get it? Naw, ya' got no sense o' humor. Course some o' my friends would be curious but I ain't seen 'em lately, I been around here helping the Prof out."

While the fox talked he moved incessantly, popping up into the air, dropping back on his head, flipping upside down, rolling around in circles chasing his tails.

“What are you helping him out with?” said Tennyson.

“Oh, ya’ see the portraificationizer whatsis ain’t workin’, it’s the upgrade the Professor ‘been workin’ on wid’ me, it’s got a bunch o’ new features like automated colorizing for colorless ghosts, and grayscaleizing if’n ya’ don’t like the colors, and ya’ can delete a ghost from a portrait without lettin’ the others get out, an’ -- let’s see -- oh, yeah, you can transfer ghosts from one picture to another, ya’ can talk to ‘em, ya’ can even put ‘em together like to do a play or play a game and ‘den send ‘em home! I mean, back to their original portraits, oh an’ you can design a custom picture frame, plus it’s a lot smaller than the old one.”

“That sounds pretty cool. What’s wrong with it?” said Tennyson.

“Aaah, ya’ see it tends to mash up the portraits over where they come out. The ghosts don’ like dat at all, they get snippy. Probably don’t hurt ‘em none, they just don’t like bein’ trapped in the portraits anyway. It’s over here, come on.” He popped into the air and flew over several disorderly piles of stuff, turning somersaults as he went. The kids followed with some difficulty; at one point Cane got his foot caught in what looked for all the world like an enlarged pop-top soda can. When they caught up with Tails, he was prancing around on top of a metallic box, with a silvery frame and white painted side panels, about the size of three or four refrigerators, with a control panel and computer display monitor in one corner. On one side there was a socket of some sort with a complicated set of levers under a big red button. “See how small this one is? We got da homogenizer, da smasher/basher, the da electrifier -- a new model, glow discharge, ultra-high frequency, ya know -- all in ‘dat little box! Really compact ghost plumbing too. We replaced all ‘da gears wid’ continuous drive torque motors, and ‘da controls are simplified too!” He pointed at the socket and levers. “All ya’ have to do is connect up any model of Poltergust or even ‘da cheapo replacements to dis’ here universal ectoplasmic socket, and adjust da’ confinement alignment consignment levers deah until da leakage goes under ‘da red zone -- dat’s 3.3 milliplasmas or less -- and ‘den press ‘da red button.”

“You mean this one?” said Cane.

“No, don’t press ‘dat button! Oh, well.” With a slluuuuurrrring sound Cane was sucked into the universal ectoplasmic socket. Tails popped up into the air and hovered in front of the computer screen. “Well, might as well see what’s goin’ on.” He punched a key and the screen lit up. The monitor was divided into several areas; at the top were a series of incomprehensible labels with rapidly-varying numbers next to them. On the left side were three virtual dials, red, green, and blue, with fluctuating levels, and a sort of simplified diagram of the machine showing the location of the ghost -- well, the kid in this case -- being processed. On the right was a video tracking Cane’s progress through the machine. At the moment he was in the homogenizer, spinning rapidly around and stretching in what looked like a fashion unpleasant just to watch, to say nothing of to experience. The red dial popped up and down and then the image changed: a very elongated Cane slurped into the bottom of some sort of cylinder, and then a piston started coming down and squashing it into a tiny flattened floppy-kid-disk. It

was probably fortunate that they couldn't hear whatever it was Cane was trying to say. After twenty or thirty smashes the disk was apparently unloaded into a glowing chamber. The blue indicator popped up to the top and the chamber turned alternately yellow and deep orange as the disk flattened out and merged into a background image.

There was a deep rolling and screeching and Tails hopped over to the right side of the equipment and grabbed two levers. "If I can get these adjusted he'll come out wid'out gettin' squashed!" There was a bnnnnzzzzt of electric motors and then a hiss of steam, and out dropped a big picture in a frame. The background appeared to be a stained glass window, perhaps in a church, with the sun gleaming through, and a large group of ornamentally-dressed folks. Leading the procession, holding what was probably a large cross in the air, dressed in gold-lined robes and a tall hat -- yep, it was Cane.

"Can we get him out?" Brian asked Tails.

"Wrong question," said Nicholas. "The right question is: *should* we get him out?" finished Clara.

"Yeah, he looks kindof at home," said Tennyson. "I never thought of him ecclesiastically."

"Ekleezawhat?" said Nicholas.

"Ecclesiastical. It means church things. I learned it in Sunday school."

"You go to school on Sundays? Don't you get enough during the week?"

Tails interrupted: "Hey, what do I do wid' this guy? You want I should get him out?"

"Does it hurt to leave him in?" asked Clara.

"Naw, only the ghosts always get ticked off about it. I guess it's boring!"

"This is the guy who watched the 18 wheeler pro trucker channel all night," said Nicholas. "He can handle it." The Cane in the portrait looked upset but it was hard to say whether it was in reaction to the remarks or the situation. "So let's get back to business here. If the Professor is gone, maybe you can help. We're trying to get back home to the real world. Do you know anyone who can help us?"

"The real world? You mean you're like, people? Not created by Nintendo? or even--" he looked around and lowered his voice: "--Sony?"

"Nope."

Tails' eyes went wide. "You mean you're from Mm -- Mm --" (he was reduced to a hoarse whisper) "Microsoft?"

“No, you don’t understand. Nobody created us,” said Nicholas.

“At least, no game company,” said Tennyson.

“We were born,” said Clara.

“The real world,” repeated Tails, looking more thoughtful than usual. “Now ya’ got me reminded o’ somethin’. What da’ Professor said; dat’s what they’re doin’ at Ark, they’re making a real world. Or a bridge to a real world. Or takin’ a trip there. Or somethin’ like ‘dat.’”

“That’s great!” said Nicholas. “We have to go there! They can help us. How do we get there?”

“Oh, man, now dat I know about. Ain’t no party gettin’ into Ark. Out in space, surrounded by asteroids and guard robots armed with lasers. Guard robots inside too, and aliens, an’ who knows what else.”

“OK, so we need to get a spaceship,” said Nicholas. “Where could we do that?”

“Well, Fox can get you there if anybody can. My bud, Starfox. But he ain’t gonna do it for free! No, no, not Ark. Cost ya’ maybe six thousand, maybe seven thousand, at least! How many of you?”

“Well, five unless we let Cane out,” said Tennyson.

“Allright, ya’ ain’t got da’ guts for ‘dat, six. Six. Hmmm. I betcha’ seventy-five hundred coins at least. Yep. And cheap at the price. And you’ll hafta probably help out, too, need all your gunners to get through ‘dem asteroids.”

“Seven thousand!” exclaimed Nicholas.

“Seventy-five hundred,” said Brian.

“What’s the difference, it’s a lot more than we have,” said Nicholas. “Where are we going to find that much money?”

“Brian could do the quiz show circuit” said Tennyson. “He’s pretty good.”

Brian went pale. “Don’t you remember what happened to Spiky T? No way I am doing another quiz show.”

“Whoah whoah whoah whoah whoah!” said Tails, bouncing inverted in the air with each word. “You guys gotta’ learn to listen a little. I don’t *know* that the Ark project goes to the real world, I just heard somethin’ from the Professor once. Don’t you think you oughta’ like check it out first ‘fore you go runnin’ off to spent seven, eight thousand coins?”

“Gee, I don’t know,” said Nicholas. “Erin’s the one who likes to think a lot. Course that usually means he doesn’t actually do anything.”

“Dudes, like, if I’m gonna’ fix da portrificationizer output drive camshaft connector alignment, I don’t just like rip da whole machine apart! I think it through a little bit, figure out like what tools I’m gonna need, what’s probably wrong, like dat. Maybe I even read the manual, if I’m like, in the mood. But like ya said ya gotta tear into it ‘cause half the time what you think is wrong ain’t the problem anyway. I ain’t tellin’ ya’ what you should go do research for twenny years, I’m saying you should ask around a little bit. Ya might wanna ask Luigi; you know Mario’s pretty famous, he knows a lot about what’s goin’ on, an’ he’s got a big mouth always blabbin’ off, anything he knows Luigi probably knows too.”

“He’s right, we should think this through,” said Clara. “Remember what happened the last time we went off without checking things out. All that work to get to Fourside for nothing.”

“Oh, come on, at least we got a place to sleep,” replied Nicholas. “You even got a shower!”

“I still didn’t get clean clothes, though,” replied Clara.

Nicholas rolled his eyes. “Girls!”

“Why don’t we take Tails’ suggestion and talk to Luigi?” said Tennyson, trying to get the conversation back on track. “Remember that Neville was going to fetch him after his appointment.”

“That’s a good idea,” said Brian. “Maybe he can help us about the money, too. We could do work for him. Maybe he needs help with something.”

“Oh, you could get coins outta Luigi, all right,” said Tails, sniffing the back of Clara’s neck. “But -- maybe you’d be better off working for it.”

“What does that mean?” said Tennyson.

“I don’t think you want to know,” said Brian.

“Smart kid,” said Tails.

“I worked for my father before,” said Clara. “It wasn’t so bad; in fact, it was fun sometimes. Anyway, think about it: we’re going to need coins even if it turns out Ark isn’t the right way to get us home.”

“Aren’t we supposed to be going to school, not working?” said Nicholas. “We’re kids. I don’t want to work for a living. At least not yet. That’s what my dad is for.”

“Moms can work too!” said Clara.

“Well, fine, mine doesn’t,” replied Nicholas.

“Clara is right, we’re going to need some money whatever we end up doing,” said Tennyson.

“You’re always taking her side,” said Nicholas.

“That’s because she’s usually right,” said Tennyson.

“We don’t have to decide this yet,” said Brian. “Let’s go back and see if Neville has found Luigi. We can ask him, like Tails suggested.”

“Smart kid,” said Tails. He was beginning to get bored. “Hey, look, I gotta get back to fixin’ the output drive. You can come with me, I got dis new album from Darjeeling, it’s great, ya wanna’ listen?” Brian started twisting up his tee shirt sleeves to fit into his ears. Nicholas looked uncomfortable: he actually disliked overly loud music but was reluctant to offend the very helpful fox. Fortunately, at that moment, a ghostly shape popped through the wall into the room: Neville.

“Oh, there you are, children. The Master’s had me looking all over for you. You are invited to lunch with Master Luigi in the Grand Ballroom at 11:45 precisely, and as it is now 11:30, we must repair directly to the antechamber.”

Tails smiled in a carnivorous fashion, showing his fangs. “Hey, Neville, can ya’ come down here a sec? I need somebody to test the portrifactionizer on, kids don’t really count, it’s not the same as a ghost. I asked da other ghosts, nobody wanted to do it.”

“I should say not! How ghastly! It’s only through good fortune that I escaped that infernal portrait prison! I shan’t be volunteering to return.”

“Aww come on, I’ll let ya’ out.” Tails was drifting backwards in the air towards a little closet, with several vacuum cleaners piled on top of one another.

“A fox guarding the henhouse, in the literal sense, I should say. No, thank you! Ah, but children, you must come at once. I shall lead you to the ballroom. If you please.”

“Thanks, Tails, we gotta go,” said Nicholas.

“Yeah, we’ll have to check out your music later,” said Tennyson.

Clara cleared her throat. “Aren’t you forgetting something?” she said.

Nicholas looked blank. Tennyson looked guilty. Brian just said, “I thought we should get him out.”

“Oh, all right,” said Nicholas. “Hey, Tails, can you get Cane out of the portrait?”

“Oh, yeah, I gotta work on ‘dat anyway, just a minute.” Tails jumped up over the portrificationizer, reversed his course in midair, and reached backwards over (well, actually, under his head, as he was upside down) to grab the edge of the box and pull himself down. He started digging through a disorderly pile of assorted framed pictures, including several that looked like they had been run over by a truck. “Does anybody remember where I put dat picture?”

“I don’t remember,” said Nicholas. “We were too busy arguing about him to keep track of him.”

“Did you throw him in the pile or into that chute?” said Tennyson.

“Hmmm,” said Tails. “Hope not, that’s the Disposall. ‘Nother one of Prof’s inventions -- turns anything you throw into it directly into ectoplasmic goo and then vaporizes it into water vapor and carbon dioxide, environmentally harmless, and some pooppy stuff you can use as fertilizer. If I threw him in ‘dere we ain’t gettin’ him back.”

“I don’t know if I always liked him, but I didn’t want him turned into fertilizer!” said Tennyson.

“At least he’ll help the flowers grow,” said Clara, but she looked distraught.

“I think you left him right next to the machine,” said Brian. He pointed. “Right there by the levers.” Sure enough, there was Cane’s picture. Nicholas laughed nervously and slapped Brian on the behind; “Sharp eyes, Brian!” Clara sighed and suddenly hugged Brian. He looked distinctly uncomfortable from all the attention: “You just have to watch,” he said.

Tails picked up the portrait and typed some commands into the computer, pressed a couple of buttons, and then turned a lever. The machine hummed and then suddenly stopped. Tails whacked it sharply with his elbow, eliciting a BRRZZZT-- WHZZZZ and then a return to the steady humming. “Are you *sure* this thing is safe?” said Clara.

“Kinda’ don’t matter, it’s the only way to get anybody out of a portrait, gotta go,” said Tails, and without further discussion he popped the portrait into a slot just under the computer monitor. A different display, containing a number of pointers and a black window, appeared on the screen, with “SCANNING” at the top in block letters. The black window resolved from the top into a reasonable simalcrum of the painting; as the image was completed the title changed to “REBUILDING” and then “COMPILING”. There was a sound like a balloon blowing up, and Cane was -- the only way to describe it is *extruded* -- from the slot.

Clara had a moment of fear that he would come out dressed as a cardinal, or (worse still) naked, but Cane was wearing his tee shirt and jeans, just as he had been when he pressed the button. He swayed for a moment or two, and then sat down heavily on his butt. “Ow,” he said.

“You all right, Cane?” said Tennyson.

“Now you’re concerned. You guys practically left me in there! What kind of friends are you, anyway?”

“Hey, what was it like being a cardinal?” asked Brian. “Did you talk to the other people in the picture?”

“People? People! They were all ghosts! All they did was complain about how boring it was, and how lucky I was that I was going to get out, which was not so obvious to me. I still can’t believe you left me in there.”

“Cane, we did not press the red button, you did,” said Clara.

“You sound like my mom,” said Cane.

“Well, somebody has to,” replied Clara. “Don’t blame us for what you did. Come on, you’re out now, let’s go get some lunch.”

“Yow! Lunch! That’s a great idea. Where do we go?”

“Just follow me, please, children,” said Neville, turning around and walking directly into the wall.

“Neville!” called Nicholas. “Neville, we can’t walk through the walls.”

“His brain probably worked better when he was alive,” said Tails. “See ya’ ‘round. Come by if ya’ wanna hear some hot tunes. I got lots.” He flew a sort of helical path back over the portrificationizer.

“Let’s get up the escalator before he turns the music back on!” said Nicholas, causing Brian to head for the landing at full speed. “Didn’t know he could run that fast,” Nicholas added, thoughtfully.

Neville reappeared from the wall: “So sorry, I’ve been dead so long I quite forget myself. This way, please, children. We shan’t keep the Master waiting, you know.”

“What about Erin?” asked Nicholas as they rode back to ground level.

“Why, Master Nicholas, of course I’ve seen to such details. I’ve already spoken to Erin and arranged for him and his friend, Mr. Saturn, to meet us at the ballroom directly they are finished with their perusal of the books. I do so love reading in the study, you know. Quite the best way to pass the time. Do you like to read, Master Cane?”

“Well, not as much as I like to eat. Or watch TV. Or play video games. Or mess up Tennyson’s room. Or skip doing my homework. Or hide my sister’s toys. Or dig up Mom’s plants.”

“We got the point,” said Clara.

“Oh, you did? What was it?” responded Cane.

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Erin and Mr. Saturn were waiting outside the ball room. They were engrossed in an word game when the rest of the kids came up.

Your topic is...homework.” said Mr. Saturn. “Ready...set...go!”

“Homework is the sort of thing that most kids don’t like even to think about but I kind of swim in it, because I got lost once on my way home from school and ended up in homework valley, where all the kids live inside houses built from homework and do -- uh --”

“You blew it! You said ‘Uh’. I win!”

“Oh, man. How could I blow such an easy one. All right, all right, your topic is: parrots. Ready ... set ... go!”

“Parrots are members of the order *psittiformes*, sub-orders *cactuidae* and *psittacidae*, containing a number of genuses of geniuses, at least of the bird world. They are typically multicolored birds living in deep forests, and are characterized by remarkable intelligence and astonishingly accurate memories, as well as the affection they often bear their human masters when living in captivity. Parrots are frequently displayed in zoos and shopping malls, where their able imitations of the actual gibberish that passes for speech amongst human beings earns them the moniker of the most intelligent of avians.”

“Thirty seconds! You win again. Geez, how do you know so much about real stuff? There aren’t any games about parrots, are there?”

“What are you guys doing?” asked Nicholas.

“Improvising,” answered Erin. “Talking thirty seconds on any subject without hesitation.”

“Just talking?” exclaimed Cane. “That’s easy! I could do that.”

“Okay,” said Mr. Saturn. “Your topic is rice. Ready - set - go!”

“Well, rice is -- uh -- you know, it’s really boring to eat and -- um --”

“You lost three times already,” said Erin.

“Well, I’m too hungry to talk,” said Cane.

“You children do go on,” interrupted Neville. “Master Luigi *is* waiting for us. Please.”

“Lead on, MacDuff, and cursed be he who first cries ‘hold! enough!’” said Mr. Saturn. Nicholas just opened the door.

The Ballroom was huge. A long dining table was set between two circular tiled dance floors, each beneath a glistening crystal chandelier. Portraits and cushioned chairs were set into curtained alcoves around the perimeter of the room. Bonapa T. and a ghost they hadn’t seen before were bustling around the table pushing a pair of carts laden with plates of something that smelled delectable. At the head of the table was a short man in a green hat and blue vest with yellow buttons: Luigi.

Luigi bounced out of his chair as soon as he saw them, and came jogging over to the door. “Welcome, it’s so good to see you again, children! Neville told me how you have a not so good a time at thata Eagleland placea, I never liked it much, you know. Sitta down, you musta be hungry as a Tubba Blubba, of course you are so much a prettier than Tubba Blubba, I mean a Clara, of course.”

“Thank you,” said Clara, though she wasn’t sure how much of a compliment she had received.

“He’s the champion,” said Mr. Saturn.

“Yep, talk about nothing for hours without hesitation,” said Erin. “Let’s learn from the master.”

“You musta sitta down here, Clara, righta next to me, anda Nicholas, over there, anda-
_”

The ghost interrupted Luigi: “Now, now, ain’t fittin’ for the Master to be gettin’ the guests on their butts, you let me do that. Y’ain’t scared o’ ghosts, is ya?” (The latter remark, of course, was directed to the children.) “Sit down, lessee’ ya’s goin’ over there, whasyer name? Oh, yeah, Neville dun tole’ me, lessee, Erin and the little weirdo” (indicating Mr. Saturn) “at the end, Brian’s dere, Tennybun -- say, you youngun’s don’t smoke, do ya?”

Tennyson laughed. “We’re too young for that.” Then he looked around -- “We are too young for that, right?”

“Geez, Tennyson,” replied Nicholas. “We’ve been hanging around with each other since second grade, you’d know if any of us smoked.”

“That’s good, I’m right frightened of that fire stuff,” said the ghost. “Scare’s me half to death! I mean, half to life. I mean -- well, real scary, that’s what it is.”

“Dat’sa some ghost, dat’ is, it’sa Shivers, I shoulda introduced him, I’ma sorry. But it’sa time to eat, you’ve a met Bonapa T, yes? He’sa gotta lunch, whatta cook, I’ma so happy he’s a workin’ here, eat! eat!”

Each place was set with a glistening China plate, decorated with a smiling portrait of Luigi outlined with gold filigree, and surrounded by so many utensils that they reminded Clara of a dentist’s office. Two tall fluted glasses of a slightly blue tint were placed next to the plate, and a cloth napkin embroidered with the initials LM resting in an engraved wooden ring completed the arrangement. Three large golden platters were already resting in the center of the table, piled high with (respectively) steaming fresh rolls, something that looked like potatoes but smelled of mustard, and brown strips of a sort of bacon. Ignoring the finery, Cane reached out to grab a slab of bacon. Shivers passed right through the table to whack Cane’s outstretched hand with a serving spoon. “Ain’tcha got no manners, ya’ young whipper-snapper? Wait’ll the Master is seated a’fore ya’ c’n eat!”

“You can dress him up but you can’t take him out,” said Mr. Saturn. The kids sat down, and Clara and Brian knew enough to place the napkins on their laps; the other kids (except Cane) picked up on the trick and within a moment all were in a state resembling decorousness. Luigi nodded and took his seat. “Eat! eat! you look thin anda tired.”

Nicholas snagged the roll he’ had his eyes on and traded the platter to Brian in exchange for some potatoes. Through a mouth partly full of bread he addressed Luigi: “Gee, Mr. Luigi, this is really nice of you (munch chew). These are (bite) great! And breakfast too. You guys sure are a lot nicer (swallow) than the Starmen.” Shivers stood next to Nicholas, cleaning up the crumbs that fell on the tablecloth with a little brush, making Nicholas feel like a slob.

“Itsa my pleasure, itsa lonely at the mansion sommatimes, itsa so nice to have visitors. Lemme tell ya’ somethin’, you know you’re a little bit desperate whena you talk to the ghosts likea they were your friends.” Shivers glared at Luigi but continued helping Bonapa T. to serve out a sort of vegetable in a mushroom sauce with thin slices of brownish meat on the top. “You stay as long as you want, my house is your house a!”

“Are there still ghosts here?” said Brian dubiously. “I mean the other ghosts, not Neville.” Shivers turned to start lecturing him but Brian beat him to the punch: “Or Shivers.”

“Still’a ghosts? Still’a ghosts! Lemme tell ya’ I got da’ ghosts, too many ghosts, its’a crazy, no? I had all the ghosts stuck away ina da portraits, like the Professor wanted, hada my nicea new mansion just the way I like it, even a better than Mario’s house if you aska me, she’s a beautiful, no? But then thosea crazy Nascar guys, they livea down the block, they’sa racin and a speedin, they’sa crashed right into the pole, the power she’s a goin’ out, ana the ghosts they got outta the portraits, at least the ones that were awake, you know.”

“You’ve got NASCAR driver neighbors?” exclaimed Cane, who had gone through a phase of intense interest in racing games the previous year. “Cool! Who is it? Richard Petty? Dale Earnhardt?”

“Ya got me, I don’t talk to thema mucha, only when they a crash into my fence because of the curve in the road just up the slope from my nice a mansion.”

“Why don’t you just vacuum up the ghosts?” asked Brian.

“Justa vacuum, eh? It’sa hard work, vacuuming up the ghosts, it’sa no Mario Party! Oh besides, it’sa true, some ‘a the ghosts, their nicea ghosts, like Shivers here or Neville, who would want to capture them again anyway? And then there’sa van Gore, he’sa makes such a beautiful pictures, he painted my treasure chest a so good you could take coins outta da picture. Who’sa gonna vacuum up sucha ghost?”

“Yeah, I guess Neville was pretty nice,” said Brian. “Maybe some of the ghosts are ok.”

“Come on, Brian,” said Cane, “ghosts can’t do anything to you anyway. What’re you afraid of?”

“Leave him alone, Cane,” said Tennyson. “You’re scared of grasshoppers.”

“What’ya have to go telling everybody for? That was a secret. Besides you’re scared of dogs.”

“Well, I’m getting over it,” said Tennyson defensively. “I talked to Tails without running away.”

“That doesn’t count,” said Cane. “He was a fox.”

“Well they look just like dogs, pretty much. At least back home they do.”

Clara took advantage of the pause while Cane tried to invent a rejoinder to get the conversation back to something more productive. “Mr. Luigi, it’s really nice of you to help us out like this instead of getting killed by the Starmen,” said Clara. “But we really do need to get home. Mr. Tails told us that maybe the space station at Ark had some sort of a secret project that could help us. Is that something you know about?”

“Of coursea!” replied Luigi. “I know all about it, my brother Mario told a me everything. Let’s see, how did it go?” He thought for a moment.

“The space station Ark is the home of a top secreta project,” he began, while:

“The space station Ark is the home of a top secret project,” said Erin at exactly the same time. Luigi looked puzzled but continued.

“It’sa top secret so nobody is supposed to know what it’sa for,” said Luigi.

“It’s a top secret so nobody is supposed to know what it’s for,” said Erin.

“But I can tell you the project is to create a model of the real world,” said Luigi.

“But I can tell you the project is to create a model of the real world,” said Erin.

“All righta, all righta, what’s a goin’ on here?” said Luigi.

“Well, it’s in Mario’s book. Volume seventeen, chapter -- hmm --” said Erin.

“Twenty-three,” said Mr. Saturn.

“You reada my brother’s book!”

“Well, we skimmed it,” said Erin. “It’s a long book.”

“Right,” said Mr. Saturn. “So we just picked out some interesting spots. Like the part about Ark.”

“Didja read about when I saved a Mario from the haunted mansion?”

“Oh, we already knew that story, we didn’t bother to read it again,” said Erin.

Luigi looked disappointed. “How about when I saved Mario froma being arrested for his parking tickets?”

“No, I don’t remember seeing that anywhere. When was that?”

“Oh, Mario usedta like to park his kart ina the loading zone, or sometimes even ina the handicapped spaces, he got so many parkinga tickets they made a summons for him! They were gonna throw him ina da jail and he didn’t havea no money because he spent all the money working on the party games, he wasa flat broke! But I paida the parking tickets so he wouldn’t have to go. He didn’t a write about that time?”

“Not a word. Did you see anything, Mr. Saturn?”

“Fat chance, Erin. I don’t recall seeing anything that didn’t glorify Mario at everyone else’s expense.”

“Yeah, he’s a like that. Not that I don’t a love my brother, you understand, but he’s a so good, and he never getsa tired about a tellin’ you about it.”

“Twenty-nine volumes so far,” said Mr. Saturn.

“So do you know anything else about Ark, Mr. Luigi?” asked Nicholas.

“Oh, it’s a big huge spacea station witha lotsa computer stuff, you know.”

“No, I mean about the project.”

“Well, I don’t remember mucha dat. When wasa that, oh when my brodda comea to borrow some money after they get the Princess back downa so he can get a new suspenders for the party, and he saysa to me, ‘Luigi, what you got so many rooms in your house an’ no gamesa to play’, and I saysa ‘Mario, we livea ina the best game ina da world, dat’sa my mansion, of course, whaddya’ need a game to play?’ and he saysa to me ‘Luigi, somea day we gonna makea da games to live in, not just livea in da games likea they thinka we shoulda be’, an’ I says to him ‘Mario, whattya crazy? Whaddya gonna do datsa better? Maybe you getta ridda ‘dat racer guy upa da street what drives likea Conker on megavitaminsa, what else ya need?’ and he saysa to me, ‘Luigi, ya gotta no imagination, itsa that vision thing, ya gotta see likea ina da light from a star’ or somethinga like that, an’ he saysa to me, ‘You talka to de Professor sometime, whena he’sa back from Ark, you learna something’, but you know I talkeda to the Professor an’ he looka over his shoulder and say ‘Luigi, whatta you asking about stuffa lika dat, you ain’t a supposeda to know abouta this, you coulda be in bigga trouble you go talking likea dat’.”

“The light from a star? What does that mean?” said Brian.

“Brian, Luigi is the champion talker but not necessarily the champion communicator,” said Mr. Saturn.

Erin looked a bit miffed that Mr. Saturn had volunteered assistance to someone else, as he had come to look on the little guy as his private companion. “What he means is that Luigi is making this all up,” said Erin.

Luigi was not pleased. “I’m not makin’ it up, I’m ma tellin ya’ just almost like it happened!”

“I’m sure he didn’t mean that,” said Tennyson. “Anyway, sounds to me like Ark really is tied up somehow with the real world. We haven’t heard of anything else. Maybe if we go there we’ll at least learn what the next step is.”

“You heard Tails!” said Nicholas. “We’re going to need six thousand, maybe seven thousand coins to hire Fox! Where are we going to get so much money?”

“Datsa great idea to hirea StarFox!” said Luigi. “He’s the best flyer there isa, excepta for Samus Aran but you can’t hire Samus unless you want maybe to have her shoot you if she’sa ina bad mood, da Fox a he could get you to Ark if anybody could, but Tails is righta, he ain’t a gonna worka for no cheapskate.”

“Do you know of anywhere we could go to work to earn some money?” asked Clara.

“Oh, you don’t needa to go, I tellyou what, you cleana upa my mansion, the ghosts they don’t do so gooda, they try but there’sa not too many anda Neville he keepsa forgetting, he

reads when he's a supposta be workin! I pay you to clean up, whattya say I pay you, oh, a hundred coins a rooma, theresa lotsa rooms dat needa cleaning, maybe twenny, maybe thirty."

"A hundred coins a room!" said Clara. "That's great! We could make a bunch of money."

"You're a too nicea, it's just a little bit, maybe I'm not payin' enough, I tellya what, you find anything in the roomsa, some extra coins or jewels or like that I forgot to put away, you can keep em."

"Thank you, Mr. Luigi!" said Clara.

"Let's see, you said thirty rooms?" asked Nicholas. Luigi nodded while he chewed on a strip of bacon. "I think we'd better split up for this. With three teams that would be ten rooms per team. Brian, you work with Cane, Tennyson with Clara, and Erin and me. Two of us could probably clean up a room in an hour or two; if we start after lunch we could probably finish by tomorrow evening or the next day."

"Work after lunch?" said Cane. "I'm eating!"

"When you've finished eating," said Nicholas.

"Then I'll be sleepy! Come on, we hardly ever do anything at school after lunch."

"You mean you don't pay attention after lunch," said Tennyson.

"Hey, if we're going to need to work tomorrow, where are we going to stay?" said Brian. "I'm not going back to Fourside!"

"No way!" said Nicholas.

"Gee, the TV there was pretty good," said Cane.

"Get a clue, Cane; that TV is dust buried in rubble," said Clara.

"Watta you saying you needa placea to stay?" exclaimed Luigi. "Whattya think a mansion isa for, you havea guests anda throwa them out? I got a lotsa rooms, you can eacha have your owna rooma, I insist! Shivers, which roomsa we gonna give our guests?"

"Danged if I know, Master Luigi, what with Neville always muckin' 'round with the cleanin' lists and that danged Inky hanging 'round wherever he durn well pleases, why he's made the pool room a goldurned catastrophe! I guess we could put some'of em in Nana's room, it aint' got much 'ceptin dirt 'n dust, 'n then there's the conserv'ry, git some nice music fur to sleep by."

"Isn't there an artist's studio on the third floor?" asked Mr. Saturn.

“Tarnation, ya’ bin up to the third floor already?” replied Shivers.

“Hardly, but perhaps you could arrange for Erin and me to lodge there? I’d like to see what’s been added since you’ve bought the new place.”

“O’ coursa, itsa beautiful the paintings ona da walls!” The tall grandfather clock against the wall chimed once and Luigi jumped out of his chair. “Mama mia! One’a o’clock, I gotta go! The audition for my new gamea, I don’ wanna be latea. Shivers, you take ‘em to Neville to figure outa what’sa gonna get cleaned up, I’ll be back later!” and with that Luigi ran out of the room.

“Finally git some peace ‘n quiet around here fur a while!” said Shivers. “Take yer time, the master never gits back from them auditions ‘til late, if’n he don’t git drunk and git stuck there ‘til tamarrer.”

“Mon Dieu, it is rare indeed for me to agree with Monsieur Shivers, but he is right,” said Bonapa T. “Zut alors! c’est finalement plus tranquille -- so sorry, it is more quiet with ze Master out of ze house! Mes amis, how did you find ze pate de Shroom et aiguilles?”

“You mean that gray stuff?” said Cane. “Tasted kinda like Cup o’ Noodles that you forget about and let it sit on the shelf all day.”

“Cane! You ate three plates of it, I watched you!” said Tennyson.

“Yeah, of course. I like Cup o’ Noodles after I forget about it.”

“Geeze, you probably eat frozen waffles too,” said Clara.

“Yeah, they’re really great when they’re not just a little thawed on the edges!”

“Ze frozen waffle! Freeze ze crepes? Oh, mon Dieu, even to think of such a thing, you should be forced to spend ze day listening to Bowser talk about himself!”

“Come on, we need to get to work if we’re ever going to get that money,” said Nicholas. “Forget about the frozen waffles. Let’s find Neville, he’s the one with the schedule.” Nicholas stopped and thought for a moment, and then remembered: “Oh yeah, thanks, Bonapa T.! That was great! Do you need us to help you clean up?”

“You are too kind, mon ami, it is our pleasure. Shivers and I will take care of everything, no?” Shivers the ghost appeared to have been old when he died; he was curled up on a chair in the corner, fast asleep. “Ça ne fait rien! Go on, children, allez! I will take care of it.”

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Neville was in the study again, immersed in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. “I do so love the death day party! It’s very nostalgic. But all these other characters are always getting in the way of the ghosts, don’t you know?”

“Uh, Neville, we like Harry Potter--” began Nicholas.

“Oh, do you know him? Could you have him include more ghosts in the next book?”

“Neville, Harry Potter is a fictional creation,” said Nicholas. “Made up. Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz.”

“Kansas is imaginary?” said Cane, shocked.

“Geez, you are a dufus!” said Clara. “Kansas is not imaginary, your brain is imaginary.”

“Come on, gu-- people!” said Nicholas. “Neville, Luigi said he would pay us some coins that we could use to hire Fox if we helped clean up the mansion, and that you were the one who knew what needed to be done. Can you help us?”

“Of course, children! Just let me mark my place -- Bloody good show, that Baron! Now, let me see, where did I put that list?”

“Perhaps this one?” said Erin, pointing at a manila folder labeled “Schedule of Rooms to be Cleaned” sitting on the writing table.

“Oh, quite, quite, thank you!” Neville opened the folder and unfolded a huge thick paper, with a set of diagrams on the left and a table crowded with miniscule handwriting on the right. “You see, here are the diagrams of the mansion showing each room in its proper relative location, and here on the right a depiction of the status of each room.”

Nicholas leaned over the table to get a closer look, bumping heads with Clara in the process. The table looked like this:

ROOM	CONDITION	WHITE GLOVE TEST	CLEANING TOOLS
Twin’s Room	clean but untidy train crash	passes	Poltergust 2000+ map of assigned toy locations
Nursery	sheets on floor	fails	dust mop wash rags linen bag
Cellar	huge dust piles	buries white glove and tester	huge trash cans Poltergust 3500 Turbo cheap labor

and so on down the whole very tall page. It was a bit disheartening.

“That’s a bit disheartening,” said Erin. “There are a lot of rooms to clean.”

“There aren’t so many,” replied Neville. “Keep a stiff upper lip and all that, you know.”

“Is the table current?” asked Clara.

“Oh, yes, I check every day,” said Neville.

“Do you ever clean any of the rooms up?” asked Nicholas.

“No, of course not! I’m supervising.”

“Oh,” said Erin. “That explains why the records are neat and the rooms aren’t.”

“Enough complaining!” said Nicholas. “We’ve got coins to earn. Would you rather be in school? Let’s see... is the list in any special order, Neville?”

“It is in exactly the order it should be in.”

“But not in order of size or dirt or anything like that, right?” The ghost did a sort of ectoplasmic nod. “OK, then, we’ll just divide the list up in three sections...” Nicholas folded the paper carefully and tore it along the creases. “Clara, here’s your section. Brian, you and Cane take these, and Erin and I will get what’s left. Now let’s see -- oh, the table lists cleaning supplies; where can we get those, Neville?”

“What a tomnoddy I am! Come, let’s to the store room!” He walked off through the book shelves and the wall.

“Yo, Neville!” said Tennyson. “You forgot again. We can’t walk through the walls. Wait up!”

“How could I be so thoughtless? I attend you in the hallway, children.”

The kids made their way down the hall and down a flight of stairs into a wood-paneled, dimly-lit room packed with junk. Piled on the top of some old mattresses were several buckets, some brooms, assorted rags (not too clean to begin with), and three distinctly different but obviously very special vacuum cleaners.

“Now, children, these are Poltergust-class ectoplasmic inhalation capture packs, not toys!” said Neville. “They are to be used with care and attention. May I have a volunteer?”

The other kids stepped backwards, leaving Cane in front. “Thank you. Place the Poltergust on your back using the shoulder straps, so! The adaptor can function as vacuum or exhaust, controlled by this switch here. The vacuum function is indispensable for cleaning dust from the floor, upholstery, and other places it collects. The lower class have also been known to vacuum up ghosts, though of course a gentleman would never think of behaving in such a fashion. This red button allows you to enable the flame thrower function, and the blue oblong button engages the water spray. Press the white lever to activate the freezing function.”

Cane pointed the brush-tipped adaptor at Brian and said “Like this?” Fortunately, he pressed the vacuum button: Brian’s cheek was sucked instantly onto the brush.

“Turnnn itt orrrfff! tuurnnn itt orrrfff!” Brian tried to say through his distorted lips.

Unfortunately, Cane pressed the mode switch instead of the off switch, reversing the flow and injecting a blast of very old dust into Brian’s mouth.

“Geez! (cough cough spit spit) What was that for? (hack cough)”

“Uh. Oh. Sorry,” said Cane.

“At least he didn’t hit the flame thrower button,” said Tennyson.

“Children, how you do run on! Let me once again emphasize that these are tools for the professional, not toys! Please attend to the control functions in the future.”

Nicholas grabbed the second vacuum cleaner -- a Turbo 3600 with integral ghost compressor, according to the name plate. Clara picked up the last, a Ghastly 28Z with tip illumination. Tennyson grabbed a bucket and some rags and distributed them; he was in a low-tech mood after what had happened to Brian.

“Okay, we’ve got our stuff,” said Nicholas. “Let’s meet back in the study at --- when is dinner here, Neville?”

“Dinner will be at five thirty precisely, unless of course it isn’t. Naturally you’re all invited to join the Master. Bonapa T. is preparing a wonderful dish of ghosted roast -- or roasted ghost -- or some such French nonsense.”

“OK, everybody meet back here at four thirty and we’ll see how far we’ve gotten. Let’s get to work!” Nicholas rolled up his slice of paper, grabbed Erin by the sleeve, and headed out the door.

“Sounds like I’m not part of the cleaning crew,” said Mr. Saturn. “The disappointment will doubtless stunt my growth. Hey, Neville, what else you got to read around here?”