

THE ASTOUNDING WORLD

OF

GILBERT MOON

By

Dennis Ciappara



Welcome to Planet Glorb

Planet Glorb sits cheerfully at the centre of the Glorbiverse, looking rather pleased with itself. With its bubbling seas and floating islands, jangling jungles and roaring rivers, it has every reason to feel quite jolly. Maybe that's why it's pink.

The people who live there are a lot like you and me. They have two eyes and two ears and most of them have two kidneys, but there are many, many things that are very different about them and the way they live. On an island called Gulp lives a boy called Gilbert Moon, who's always having crazy adventures and lots of fun with his friends. But it has to be said, every now and then he does get into a spot of bother.

The Glorbiverse is thousands of miles wide and full of other planets with wonderful names like Gloop, Strombo, Flart and Glerry, which surround Glorb like colourful Christmas baubles hanging in the sky. The yellow planet of Gloop has a hole right through its middle, like a doughnut. It's so close to Glorb that the two planets are connected by The Magnificent Magnatube, which you'll hear more about later. All sorts of unusual tribes and clans of people live on these planets, and most of the time they all get along together fine.

Especially on Tuesdays, just after lunch.

But as you will soon discover, it isn't always like that.

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PART ONE

LIFE ON GLORB

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The Wormhole Academy for Normal Children

It's the first day of term at The Wormhole Academy for Normal Children and as usual, it's complete chaos. Alarms are ringing. Doors are slamming. Cats are barking. New kids wander about lost - some crying, some just dribbling. Some wearing jackets way too big for them, some squeezed into trousers way too tight.

Teachers stride about noisily, clapping their hands and bellowing at the children, or bellowing at each other. The long holidays are over and once again they have the freedom to bellow for no reason at all.

It's just great.

At the start of each and every term, it's a long-held tradition that the whole school descends the magnificent, spiral stairway deep down into the Grand Wormhole - a vast, echoing chamber carved out of the rock beneath the Academy. The scarlet-gowned teachers settle onto their wooden benches, with the children seated before them on the smooth, stone floor, fidgeting and chattering with excitement.

Wally Jangles, the Head of Music, impatiently taps the podium with his baton, and gives the children one of his stares. The chamber falls silent.

Then an ear-piercing screech as the massive Doors of Glorb swing slowly open on their

ancient iron hinges. The stooped figure of the headmaster, Sir Grenville Badguts, shuffles in, limps over to the Master's Seat and settles himself carefully into its depths. He strikes the floor once with his heavy cane and without a single word being spoken, everyone stands. Wally Jangles raises his baton and the children clear their throats. Now is the time for the Academy's hallowed anthem. It's only ever sung in the Grand Wormhole once a term, and it has to be sung properly.

Sir Grenville raises his hand and groans,
'You maaaay begiiiiin.....'
So they begin.

*As certain as the sky is pink and popcorn grows on trees,
And kissing hairy dogs will almost surely give you fleas,
And policeman can arrest you if you're caught without some cheese,
We're the pupils of the Wormhole and quite normal if you please.*

*Yes, the pupils of the Wormhole, we're proud and brave and true,
We'll always stick together like we've swallowed superglue,
If you challenge or annoy us we will paint your kneecaps blue,
Then we'll tie your ears together and pour custard in your shoe.*

*Ooooooh, the pupils of the Wormhole, we're the best upon the planet,
Our brains are made of dynamite,
Our muscles of pure granite,
We dance, we sing, do everything
That can't be too bad, can it?
And our favourite snack
Is Crispy Yak,
Served up with pomegranate!*

*Glob bless our dear Academy,
Our family and our friend,
We'll stand together side by side,
Whilst space and time both bend,
Whilst moons collide and suns implode and meteorites descend,
We'll Wormhole on,
Our fears all gone,
Until the very end!*

The children and teachers erupt into applause and Sir Grenville's old face creases into a broad smile. He jabs his walking cane at the ceiling which explodes and showers the children in confetti and chocolate spaceworms.

Satisfied, Sir Grenville limps out of the chamber, waving his stick triumphantly in the air. The laughing children swarm back up the spiral stairways, cramming spaceworms into their mouths. They hop onto waiting hoverlators, chocolate smeared over their happy faces. Once they reach the right porthole, they slide down a vacutube straight into their classroom, where they bounce off an aircushion and shout their name to the teacher, who ticks them off on the digiboard.

Term has started!

Hello Gilbert

Gilbert Moon sat in his Swotpod.*

Apart from one thing, he was a pretty normal looking boy.

A normal nose, with a couple of nice round nostrils, which didn't get too snotty.

Above that, two blue eyes, which sat right next door to each other.

His teeth weren't all white and shiny, like in adverts, but neither were they brown or wobbly.

He wasn't very tall, or chunky, or short, or skinny. He was just normal size.

But as for his hair. Oh my Glob!

Sat on top of Gilbert's head was a wiry, steel grey thatch that just seemed to grow out and upward. He'd learnt from a young age that combing it or brushing it was pointless, it really just did what it felt like.

He'd never met anyone else on Glorb with such peculiar hair and he often wondered why.

He'd asked his parents many times, but they always tried to change the subject, or just told him that he was special, or pretended to fall asleep.

Eventually, he'd given up asking.

Gilbert lived with his parents at 55A Milky Way, along with his terrible little sister, Nellie, who was always trying to kill him or ruin his day, or both.

He had a Great Glorbian Guzzlemutt called Slobberdog (or Slobs for short), and even though the enormous, hairy beast often ate the schoolboy's clothes and bits of his bedroom, Gilbert loved him dearly.

But more about that lot later.

Gilbert waited in class for his best friend Douglas Plugley to arrive.

Impatiently, he looked to his left and was surprised to see a new girl sitting there. She was moving coloured brainshapes about on her Swotpod screen, using her finger like a wand.

Her dark hair was cut quite short and she had smooth, olive skin. Her eyes were the deepest brown, almost black. She glanced at him briefly, flashed an odd little smile, then went back to her brainshapes.

Gilbert was about to say something, when there was a loud commotion.

Douglas Plugley came crashing down the vacutube, shouting and kicking. He landed heavily on the aircushion, which exploded with a terrific bang.

Miss Trembells, their teacher, was blown across the classroom and out of an open window.

Thank Globness they were on the ground floor

'Sorry Miss,' shouted Douglas, 'I was just finishing a Gobsausage before class and when I jumped off the hoverlator, a fat lump got stuck in my throat and...'

Miss Trembell's head appeared over the window sill, silencing him. She clambered back in through the window and dusted herself down.

'Douglas Plugley,' she said, her voice shaking, 'I might've guessed.'

The boy disentangled himself from the deflated remains of the aircushion. All the children were laughing and hooting.

'Sit down, Douglas!' snapped Miss Trembells sternly.

'Over there. Next to Gilbert.'

Douglas marched over to Gilbert and winked as he climbed into his Swotpod.

'Hi Pluggy,' whispered Gilbert, 'welcome back. Great start.'

'Thank you Moonface,' grinned his friend.

There was nothing much normal about Douglas.

Douglas was quite short and stocky and the youngest of 12 brothers. The whole family lived on Munglemarshe Farm with a wild herd of foul-smelling Gassy Bullpigs, which they used to brew gallons of their famous Bullpig Beer using a secret recipe.

That's why Douglas always whiffed a bit. Mostly of beer and pigs.

But the strangest thing about him was that he he could swivel both eyes about in different directions, like a chameleon. He would do it when he was excited, or happy, or angry. But the best was when teachers were scolding him, when he'd do it on purpose, so they'd become confused and have to sit down and rub their faces.

When the boys had first met, Douglas teased Gilbert about his sticky-out, steel grey hair, walking around bent double and calling him 'Grandpa Moon' in a creaky old voice.

So Gilbert would make grunty, pig-snort noises and call him Douglas Pongley, and they'd always end up fighting and getting in trouble.

This is often how great friendships set sail.

Douglas looked past Gilbert at the new girl sitting in her Swotpod, quietly shifting the brainshapes about.

'Who's she, then?'

Gilbert shrugged his shoulders, 'no idea. New girl.'

The bell rang and Miss Trembells, who had regained her composure, clapped her hands to start the lesson.

***Swotpod** – every student at the Wormhole Academy has their own Swotpod, where they sit and study. It looks like a tiny car without wheels or doors. Instead of a windscreen, it has a transparent touchscreen, so you can work on it and see the teacher at the same time. Each Swotpod is crammed full of information – great ideas, music and film you can bring to life with the touch of a finger. You can change your Swotpod's colour by stroking its walls, and even choose what it smells like. Gilbert's smells of smoky bacon. When they were first invented, Swotpods had whopping great aerials stuck on top and slow, clunky keyboards. They allowed the teacher give the children electric shocks if they had fallen asleep, or were being cheeky, or if teacher was bored and just felt like it. However, teachers weren't allowed to do this any more, which they all agreed was a bit of a shame.

Miss Trembells

Miss Trembells was tall and slender and perched delicate, round spectacles on the end of her nose. Her long red hair was piled on top of her head like spaghetti and kept in place with two chopsticks and a rubber band. She always seemed a bit jumpy, as if constantly expecting to be blown up, or shouted at, or given a nasty electric shock. That's what happens when you're a Science teacher.

'Class 5B, quiet now please...' she cried '...and welcome back. We have some new pupils here this term, perhaps they'd like to introduce themselves?'

She pointed at the new girl next to Gilbert, who stood up straight away.

'My name is Lily Nero,' she said quietly and clearly, her dark eyes shining.

'I love music and painting. I have a stick insect called Piper and live with my Aunt Sangeeta near Black Moss Ponds.'

Then she gazed out of the window, up at the sky, and said a little wistfully,

'I'm from Planet Glerry, near the Spiking Nebula.'

Miss Trembells looked very pleased with her, Planet Glerry was a small, peaceful planet famous for its talented musicians, artists and actors.

'Thank you very much, Lily. Welcome to Class 5B, I'm sure you'll make lots of nice friends.'

Gilbert looked across at her and smiled, taking no notice of Dougy's tittering.

'Hello Lily, my name's Gilbert. Gilbert Moon.'

The girl gave him one of her mysterious smiles again and nodded her head.

'Hello Gilbert,' she mouthed silently.

Miss Trembells then introduced a pair of twins.

The Jolly Boys.

They were square-faced, thick-set, identical twins, named Terry and Barry Jolly. They looked extremely bad-tempered, had very short, ginger hair, and were dressed exactly the same.

'So,' smiled Miss Trembells, 'which is which? Or rather...whom is whom?'

'I'm Barry Jolly,' shouted one of them.

'No, you're not,' yelled the other boy.

'You're Terry Jolly, I'm Barry Jolly!'

'Liar! You are Terry Jolly...'

'You're the liar! I am Barry Jolly!'

'Don't listen to him Miss Trembells, he's lying! I'm Barry Jolly...!'

Miss Trembells threw her hands in the air, panicking.

'Jolly Boys! Do calm down! Now...one of you must be Terry Jolly...which is it?'

The Jolly Boys were having none of it and hurled themselves to the floor, wrestling and shouting.

'You liar...admit it, I am Barry!'

SMACK!

'No way...I'm Barry!' I saw you cheating at SpratHats* last night.

CRACK!

'Jolly Boys! Jolly boys!' shrieked Miss Trembells, running down between the Swotpods.

The Jolly Boys rolled across the floor, punching and kicking each other. They reached the lilac Swotpod of Victoria Sponge, who immediately started screaming.

'Miss Trembles, make them stop!'

Miss Trembells stood helplessly, imploring the Jolly Boys to behave. Finally they tired themselves out, got up, dusted themselves down and went back to their Swotpods, as if

nothing had happened.

‘Well,’ said Miss Trembells, with a huge sigh of relief, ‘I will see you two afterwards.’

***SpratHats** - a very popular game on Glorb. Each player wears a hat entwined with rotten fish-food like maggots and worms, then takes turns plunging their heads into a water barrel full of hungry Sprats. When the player feels a bite, he yanks his head out of the freezing water and flips the fish into his SpratNet. The game is over when either all the Sprats are caught, or if one of the players becomes too exhausted and faints or drowns. It’s quite easy to cheat though, because when your opponent has their head underwater, why not just help yourself to the Sprats in their net.

But no-one likes a cheat.

Do they?

The Displacement Quiz

‘Now then,’ continued Miss Trembells after the commotion, ‘as we have some new faces, I thought it would be fun to do something a bit different and really get to know each other.’

There was a buzz of excitement.

‘So I’m going to split you into teams and we’re going to have one of my special Displacement Quizzes. First prize is a whole box of FloatyGum!’

The children cheered.

FloatyGum was great fun, but a bit naughty. It was quite difficult to find really good FloatyGum, but Miss Trembells could make it in her laboratory, so she had plenty. Chewing it made you weightless, so you could float through the air for hours. It also made your voice go all squeaky, which was hilarious.

‘Gilbert...you can be captain of Team Moon. Would you please team up with Lily...?’

‘Yes, of course Miss,’ said Gilbert gladly, ignoring the slurpy kissing noises coming from Douglas.

‘...and if you don’t mind, can you also take care of Douglas Plugley as well?’

She winked knowingly at Gilbert.

‘No problem, Miss Trembells.’

‘Eric Tricity, Victoria Sponge...can you join Team Moon please.’

Eric Tricity was a very tall boy, over six foot tall, with long, lanky hair, who waved his spindly arms round like a demented windmill when he was excited. He was the son of the famous inventor Professor Felicity Tricity, inventor of the Ultra Stretching Machine, which she’d invented to make giant rubber bands for firing old people into outer space. It was rumoured that Eric had fallen into the machine when he was a baby, or that maybe his mother had sneakily dropped him in there to see if it worked properly, (eventually the Glorbian Guard had stolen it and used it to stretch horses instead, so they could fit more soldiers onto their backs).

‘OK, children. Are we ready?’ cried Miss Trembells, once she had divided them into teams.

‘Yes Miss Trembells,’ they chanted together and waved their Gas-O-Goggles in the air.

‘Then let us begin!’

The really exciting or scary thing about Gas-O-Goggles is that once you've got them on, you can suddenly find yourself absolutely anywhere!

Miss Trembells had built them especially for doing her Displacement Quizzes.

Parents had complained about these quizzes, because their children came home so confused or scared, they'd started to wet their beds at night. But the headmaster Sir Grenville Badguts, just ignored them. He liked Miss Trembells very much, she was one of his best teachers. He also thought that most parents were just busy-body nuisances, who interfered in things they knew nothing about, like teaching or upsetting children properly.

So Gilbert, Douglas, Eric, Victoria and Lily sat in a circle, holding hands, wearing the Gas-O-Goggles, which were made out of a green, rubbery material called Flobbo.

Miss Trembells called out,

'Team Moon! Are you ready?'

'Ready!' they cried, through the Flobbo.

'Eyes closed then,' she said and carefully pumped her specially invented Glorbium gas through a long tube straight into their Gas-O-Goggles.

After 30 seconds exactly, she shouted, 'Team Moon. Go!'

The whole class started to chant... 'Go Moon! Go Moon! Go Moon!'

Gilbert opened his eyes and turned to Douglas just in time to see him jump out of the open door of a hoverjet. He was holding tightly onto Gilbert's hand, so dragged him out the open door after him. Gilbert's other hand was holding onto Victoria's, so she followed him. Eric after her and Lily after him. They screamed in unison as they hurtled towards Glorb at a terrifying speed.

'Waaaagghhhhhh!'

They heard their classmates laughing in the background and Miss Trembell's voice came reassuringly through the Gas-O-Goggles.

'Team Moon, be calm. Try to join into a circle.'

The wind roared in their ears and buffeted them about. Their hair flew wildly around their freezing faces, but they managed to form a circle.

Victoria Sponge was screaming in Gilbert's ear, but Douglas, on his other side, was laughing hysterically.

Gilbert looked across to Lily. She was gazing down with amazement at the vast panorama of Glorb, which lay beneath them like a vast, curved map.

Gilbert recognised the shimmering, blue mass of The Sea of Monstrosity, and right below them glittered the treacherous, ice-capped Slippenshriek Peaks mountain range.

'Now, Team Moon', came Miss Trembells voice, 'I have some questions for you. Once you have answered three correctly, I will pull the escape lever.'

Gilbert looked down.

The jagged, ice-capped Slippenshriek Peaks were quickly getting closer and bigger.

'Eeeeh...help me Gilbert,' screamed Victoria. She was squeezing his hand so hard that it hurt.

'Don't worry Victoria,' he shouted, trying to calm, her, 'it's not really real.'

But the thing was, when you were there, it WAS real. The mountains rushed towards them.

Gilbert could hear Class 5B sniggering in the background. Just wait until it was their turn, he thought.

'Right. Question one,' said Miss Trembells.

'Once you left the plane, you began falling towards Glorb at a speed of 25 metres a second. You were exactly 3 kilometres above the Slippenshriek Peaks. How long will it take you to smash into them?'

'What!' yelled the boys. Victoria whimpered.

‘Two minutes,’ said Lily in her quiet, clear voice.

‘Correct, Lily. Well done!’ cried Miss Trembells, delighted,

The icy, rugged rocks of the Slippenshriek Peaks were getting ever closer.

‘Question two!’ cried Miss Trembells.

‘The nastiest and most ravenous shark in the Sea of Monstrosity, which you may land in... depending on the wind... is the Great Mad Slicer Shark. If the Great Mad Slicer Shark can chew up and swallow 45 kilos of children in 10 seconds, and together you weigh 225 kilos, how long would it take for the Great Mad Slicer Shark to chew up and swallow all five of you?’

‘What!’ yelled the boys again.

‘Fifty seconds,’ said Lily calmly.

‘Excellent, Lily,’ cried Miss Trembells. ‘Fantastic! Come on you others, Team Moon is Team Nero at the moment!’

Gilbert couldn’t have cared less. He was absolutely freezing. His hands were completely numb and he looked across at Eric, whose long hair was frozen into spikes pointing straight up. They fell faster and Gilbert could now see Pyjama Llamas* chasing each other about on the treacherous slopes of the Slippenshriek Peaks.

‘C-c-come on, Miss Trembells,’ he pleaded, ‘hurry up!’

‘Question three,’ announced Miss Trembells, enjoying herself enormously and certainly not wanting to be rushed.

‘If you look to your right, you can see a small, star-shaped island where some well-known birds live. What is this island called?’

Gilbert looked to his right and saw the island. It looked very familiar. He knew this one. It was on the tip of his tongue.

Before he could say anything, Douglas shouted out.

‘It’s Bonkerbird Island! It’s full of Bald-Faced Bonkerbirds!’

Class 5B erupted into laughter.

‘Correct!’ cried Miss Trembells.

Douglas was laughing so hard, he let go of Gilbert’s and Lily’s hands and the circle fell apart. Gilbert flipped over backwards and spun around. The jutting rocks of the Slippenshriek Peaks were now only a few metres away and he shouted ‘YOU IDIOT, PLUGLEY!’

Miss Trembells pulled the escape lever. With a loud bang, the Gas-O-Goggles exploded into vapour. Team Moon fell onto the floor, coughing and shivering, green soot all over their faces.

Everyone cheered. Miss Trembells ran and helped them up, hugging and rubbing them.

‘Well done, Team Moon, that was fantastic! Lily, you were brilliant! Douglas Plugley, well done!’

Gilbert was so embarrassed.

He couldn’t believe Douglas had beaten him to a question. Douglas Plugley! How awful. And it was Bonkerbird Island! Of course.

‘Well,’ said Miss Trembells, ‘that will take some beating.’

*Pyjama Llamas - these noisy animals roam in jabbering herds across the steep mountainsides of Glorb. They feed on the delicious, brightly-coloured berries of the Breakfast Bushes, which makes their thick, woolly coats grow in all sorts of crazy patterns. Some are spotty, some are stripy, some have wavy lines or zig-zags, so they look like they’re wearing rather fancy pyjamas.

Bumbelball

Each team had their Displacement Quiz. One team even found themselves on a tightrope, strung high above the Grand Custard Falls on Gloop*.

When the quiz was over, Miss Trembells announced the winners.

‘Congratulations Team Moon!’ she cried, handing them a small, blue box of FloatyGum.

‘Now don’t do it all at once,’ she said seriously, ‘it’s quite strong.’

The children grinned at each other and Miss Trembells dismissed the class.

Gilbert wandered out with Douglas, looking around for Lily Nero, but she was nowhere to be seen. He’d never encountered a girl like Lily before. He liked her strange smile and she was obviously really clever. There was just something very different about her.

The boys were confronted by the towering Eric Tricity, who ran up to them, his long arms windmilling.

‘Guys, guys...game of Bumbelball kicking off. Are you in?’

‘Yep, count us in. C’mon Gilbert,’ yelled Douglas, and they ran off after Eric.

Now Bumbelball is a cross between rugby, basketball, boxing and screaming. The Bumbelball itself is a five-pointed object - like two pyramids stuck together, so it bounces about unpredictably in any direction. It’s half-filled with water (or custard if there’s a water shortage, or gravy if there’s a custard shortage) which sloshes around inside. You can use any part of your body (or anyone else’s) to strike the Bumbelball. You can also wear boxing gloves to punch anyone carrying it, especially when they’re not looking. The aim of the game is to get the Bumbelball into the opposition’s Bumbelhole, which is a triangular frame fixed to a ten-foot high pole. Whichever team scores the most Bumbels is quite often the winner. It depends what mood the Bumpire is in.

By the time they got to the pitch, it had started to rain, but they didn’t care. The game had already started, so they just joined straight in, it didn’t matter.

Gilbert’s attention, though, was taken by the small, still figure by the far Bumbelposts. He worked his way up the pitch and was pleased to see it was Lily.

She stood there alone in the rain and gave him a little wave.

He didn’t see Eric racing down the far wing and hurling the Bumbelball straight at him.

Gilbert vaguely heard him yelling, ‘Gilbert! Catch it...you can’t miss!’

He turned around and the heavy Bumbelball smacked him right on the nose.

KER-BLAP!

His world went black...

As he slowly regained consciousness, he heard distant voices echoing inside his throbbing head.

‘Gilbert...Gilbert...please don’t die, your mum would kill me! Then we’d both be dead!’

Then he heard another louder voice.

‘Get up Moonface, you silver-haired softie! The ball hardly touched you for Glob’s sake... c’mon, get up, you lazy slugoid...’

‘Sorry Gilbert, I didn’t mean it...are you OK...please get up’, implored Eric.

Douglas roughly hauled Gilbert to his feet and the kids gathered round slowly came into focus. They all saw Gilbert was still alive, lost interest and drifted off.

Laughing, Douglas whacked him on the back.

‘Right. I’m off to mud-wrestle some Bullpigs with Uncle Mutley. See ya later Moonboy.’

Gilbert nodded his buzzing head as the squat little figure of Douglas sprinted off across the

sodden pitch.

Lily stood silently by the posts. Her hair was plastered to her head and cold rain dripped off her nose. Gilbert walked towards her, feeling slightly embarrassed.

‘Hello,’ he said, ‘what’re you doing out here?’

‘Waiting for you, of course. What do you think I’m doing?’

Gilbert didn’t know what he thought.

‘Are you OK? That ball hit you pretty hard.’

Gilbert felt his nose, which was quite sore.

‘It’s fine,’ he laughed, ‘not broken or anything.’

‘Well, that’s good’ said the girl.

She stared at his hair with curiosity. It was sticking out in wet, silver spikes.

‘I’ve never seen anyone with hair like yours Gilbert. I think it’s quite strange and excellent.’

She reached across and felt it softly between her fingers.

‘Piano wire,’ she said quietly.

Gilbert was so surprised, he just stood there blinking.

There was a long silence whilst he plucked up his courage.

‘You were great in the quiz, Lily. You’re clever at maths and science and stuff, aren’t you.’

The girl looked up at the grey sky and closed her eyes.

‘No... not really,’ she murmured. ‘I’m better at art and music, I just guessed in the quiz.’

Gilbert laughed nervously. He didn’t know whether she was joking or not.

‘I know,’ said Lily suddenly, opening her eyes. ‘Come on, follow me.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘Well...do you like music?’

‘Umm, I think so, yes.’

She tipped her head on one side and looked at him seriously.

‘Well, either you do or you don’t, Gilbert. Which is it?’

‘I do,’ said Gilbert decisively.

‘Well come on then. Let’s go listen to some music.’

She gently took him by the arm.

Gilbert stared at her hand resting on his elbow. This was a new experience.

He looked around, saw the pitch was now deserted and let Lily lead him away.

*Gloop - the closest planet to Glorb, it’s bright yellow with a big hole through its middle. Gloop is where all the custard in the Glorbiverse comes from. The Gloopers pump it out of the deep Custard Holes found on the heavily guarded island of Puddin, and it’s totally forbidden for anyone else in the Glorbiverse to mine custard. If you’re crazy enough to get caught, the penalty is too horrible to mention here, but it involves bending over and very hot custard. For thousands of years, the Glorbian Guard and the Glooper Troopers have fought many wars for all sorts of silly, custardy reasons, like the Really Great Custard Wars, which you’ll learn all about in History.

Lily's Secrets

She took Gilbert to Brandysnap Wood.

A place where he and Douglas had built dens and climbed trees and trapped Spiny Burrowhogs.

They chatted happily as they walked.

'What's Glerry like then, Lily,' said Gilbert enthusiastically, 'I've never been there.'

Lily's smile faded.

'It's very beautiful. You hear music all day long. Everyone is kind and friendly. I miss it.'

Gilbert felt sorry he asked and Lily saw the look on his face.

'Don't worry Gilbert, it's alright. I do like it here. My Aunt Sangeeta is a bit different, but she's lovely, really. One day I'll take you to Quaverstave Cottage and you can meet her.'

Gilbert nodded. He was dying to ask her why she lived with her aunt, but he didn't have to.

'Both my parents...' she hesitated, 'well, they disappeared. That's why I had to come here.'

Gilbert's eyes widened.

'What do you mean? Disappeared. What...into thin air?'

Lily looked at him, curiously.

'No. You are funny Gilbert,' she said, though she wasn't laughing.

'They were amazing musicians. People and creatures came from all over the Glorbiverse to hear their wonderful concerts.'

They walked in silence for a while, before she continued.

'Then, last year, they were invited on a grand tour of the Spiking Nebula by the Majestic Orchestra of Life. They were so thrilled! But they never came back.'

Gilbert was awestruck. He felt terrible for Lily, but it was really rather exciting.

'Some people said their ship had broken down. Or they'd got lost. Or that maybe they'd been sucked into a purple hole. Other people said it was a trap and they'd been kidnapped by Spiking* pirates. But who knows. They never came back, so I was sent here to live with Aunt Sangeeta.'

'I'm really sorry, Lily.'

'It's OK, Gilbert.'

Then she leant closer and whispered in his ear.

'I still see them, you know. They come and talk to me when I'm in the music. I know they're out there somewhere.'

Gilbert was stunned and a little scared.

'When...you're in the music,' he asked, 'what do you mean?'

'Well...' said Lily, looking up at the darkening skies with her strange, little smile, 'you'll see...'

They emerged into a clearing with a small, wooden platform sat in its centre.

Lily beckoned Gilbert over, who sat down in front while she hopped up the steps.

The rain had stopped and patches of watery blue sky were appearing between the scudding grey clouds. Gilbert could see large gulls circling high above them, crying out to each other.

Lily picked up a short, springy branch and stripped all the leaves off it. She bent it this way and that, as if testing it for something.

Gilbert sat on the wet grass in front of the platform, not really knowing what on Glorb was going on. A shaft of sunlight burst through the clouds and lit up Lily's platform like a spotlight.

'Are you ready?' she said quietly, but firmly,

Gilbert nodded.

‘Then we’ll begin.’

Gilbert nodded his head. He wasn’t sure what he was quite ready for.

Lily closed her eyes and started taking in slow, deep breaths, her nostrils flaring. Then she raised both her arms, and held them out towards the towering trees on the other side of the clearing, the stick held firmly in her hand.

Gilbert sat and looked up nervously. The clouds were moving faster and faster. He felt that something unusual was about to happen.

The wind started to howl and flung Lily’s hair about. The stick in her hand began to vibrate and hum. Leaves and grass were thrown into the air and Gilbert felt himself being blown this way and that.

The nearly-smile appeared on Lily’s lips.

The wind dropped suddenly, and Gilbert heard the strangest of sounds, like deep, happy creaking. It was quite soothing, but it still made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. The bizarre sounds began to increase and build, coming from different directions, first quietly, then louder. Soon, he was surrounded by them, until they gradually started to blend together, creating melodies, like an orchestra tuning up.

He looked up at Lily, now standing with her feet set apart. Her eyes were closed tight and she gripped the platform with one hand. The stick in her other hand was shaking, and Gilbert thought he could see dark things flying off it into the trees, as she waved it this way and that, keeping in time to the lovely, creaking melodies.

Gilbert shielded his eyes to see better and realised the beautiful harmonious sounds were coming from the trees themselves. They were changing colour, from yellow to brown to red to green, and were gently swaying in time to the sounds. The trees were rippling as if a giant finger were stroking them. Gilbert suddenly understood what was happening...Lily was playing the trees like instruments.

They were her orchestra!

Gilbert stood up, laughing as he spun around. The trees joined together in harmony and Lily played the most beautiful music he’d ever heard. He was filled with a feeling of complete happiness that he didn’t want to end. Lily had opened her eyes and was smiling down at him.

‘What do you think?’ she shouted over the amazing sound of the creaking, groaning trees.

‘It’s fantastic,’ yelled Gilbert, ‘it’s really fantastic!’

Lily played for nearly an hour, as the evening light faded, then suddenly collapsed, exhausted. Gilbert rushed up onto the platform, and knelt by her side.

‘I’m fine,’ she whispered. Then she opened her eyes and smiled the happiest of smiles. For the first time Gilbert saw her small, even teeth.

‘Did they come? Your Mum and Dad...’ he asked breathlessly.

‘Yes, they came,’ said Lily dreamily, ‘and they thought you were a very nice boy.’

Gilbert was completely tongue-tied, this was all too strange.

They walked back through the wood, Gilbert had so many questions. He’d never seen or heard anything like that before, what an amazing thing Lily had done.

‘It’s called Jivani, Gilbert. On Glerry we’re taught it as soon as we can speak. Some people can do Jivani with fire, some with rivers or streams, some with birds and animals. I was just really good at Jivani with plants and trees.’

‘Jivani,’ exclaimed Gilbert, ‘it’s incredible!’

Finally, they came to Threelanes Bridge.

‘See you tomorrow then, Gilbert,’ said Lily.

She gave him a little wave and without another word, wandered off towards Black Moss Ponds, as if nothing had happened.

‘See you,’ said Gilbert, a little dazed by the whole thing. He headed home. A wave of tiredness crashed over him as he reached his front door. The first two nightmoons had become visible over the roof of 55a Milky Way. Tonight, they were both green, triangular and rotated in opposite directions, like giant cogs in a cosmic machine. Gilbert stared at them for a while, thinking about Lily and her missing parents and her amazing Jivani. Then he opened the front door, and a rocket-propelled, hairy, brown monster hit him in the chest, knocked him to the ground and covered him in slobber.

*Spikings - Plant Spike is a remote, snowbound planet inhabited by a wild race of bearded, fish-munching barbarians called The Spikings. Thousands of years ago, noisy gangs of Spikings invaded Glorb in their Cosmic Longships. They stole all the children’s pets and took them home to Spike, where their Spikelet kids gave them really bad haircuts, overfed them, and then ate them. After a few years, the Spikings got bored of killing each other with axes and making really nice furniture and went charging back to Glorb. This time they stole all the Glorbian recipes for Shaggy Mole Trifle, so no-one on Glorb can make Shaggy Mole Trifle any more. A pity, really.

Meet the Moons

Gilbert’s alarm clock exploded and he fell out of bed. He rolled around on the floor, yelling in panic. He couldn’t see a thing! He staggered to his feet and stumbled around blindly, crashing into shelves, scattering his comics and books everywhere. Slowly, he put his hands up to his eyes. Someone had sticky-taped them shut whilst he slept. And someone had exploded his alarm clock. Oh, how very funny. Very carefully, Gilbert pulled the sticky-tape away, his eyelids stretching out like rubber bands. ‘Ooooooyaaahhh...!’ He blinked in the mirror until his vision cleared. Gilbert rinsed his sore eyes in the sink and gazed at his reflection. As usual his weird, wiry hair stuck out from his head in all directions. He expected it would never get much better. But the really bad news was that most of his eyelashes and eyebrows had disappeared with the sticky tape, and his eyes were puffy and red. ‘Oh no,’ he moaned, ‘I look just like a Bald-Faced Bonkerbird!’ There was only one person who could have done this to him. Nellie. Gilbert dressed quickly, muttering about the terrible things he was going to do to his sister. He stormed out of his bedroom, shouting, ‘Nellie Moon! You’re in for it!’ He didn’t get far though.

The same hairy, brown missile launched itself up the stairs and knocked him flat onto his back. It was Gilbert's faithful, but colossally cuddly and playful companion, Slobberdog, or Slobs for short.

Slobberdog was a Glorbian Gruzzlemutt, who Gilbert had been given as a puppy. And even as a puppy, he'd been bigger than Gilbert, so no-one knew which of them had raised the other.

Gruzzlemutts look a lot like bears, but with a dog's head and enormous, webbed paws. They're great swimmers, can climb trees and love to fetch sticks (actually, fully-grown Gruzzlemutts love to fetch people). They can stand up on their hind legs, in fact with proper training, some of them make very good dancers. But their long, thick beards need to be nicely trimmed or braided, otherwise they trip over them.

He was called Slobberdog because he tended to slobber over everything in sight before eating it. Shoes, mobile phones, cauliflower cheese, bricks, tables, cheesy chips etc. But his favourite snack was old laptops, disappearing into his gaping mouth, crunched into a slobbery mush in his massive jaws.

Slobberdog also loves Gilbert, so he pinned the poor boy to the carpet, drooling all over him, spattering him with globs of warm, white froth.

'Slobs! Get off me,' burred Gilbert, 'get off me NOW!'

He struggled to his feet and calmed the excited beast, stroking its broad head.

'OK boy, it's alright,' he said, as it howled with affection.

Gilbert dried himself off with a towel, grabbed hold of one of Slobberdog's floppy ears and led him downstairs to breakfast.

In the kitchen, Gilbert's dad, Sidney Moon, was stirring a sizzling pan of something very smelly. A pipe was clenched firmly between his teeth and salty tears ran down his cheeks and dripped into the pan.

'Where's Nellie, Dad?' said Gilbert, 'look what she's done!'

'Morning Gilbert,' sang Sidney cheerfully. He blew his nose on his food-stained vest.

Gilbert looked at his dad with disgust and then pointed at his own face.

'Look Dad. Nellie taped my eyes shut. See what she's done to my eyebrows!'

Sidney Moon looked at his son's puffy eyes.

'Oooh!' he chuckled, 'ooh hoo hoo!' he chuckled some more.

'What on Glorb has happened to your face, boy? You look like a Baldfaced Bonkerbird!'

Aha ha hah!' he laughed loudly as more tears rolled down his cheeks.

'Very funny dad. And she exploded my alarm clock.'

To prove it, he pulled a tiny, silver spring out of his nostril and showed his dad.

'Goodness,' croaked Sidney.

'Or badness, rather,' Gilbert corrected him.

He gazed with distaste into the spitting pan.

'For Glorb's sake, Dad. Not Spicy Spaceworms again. They stink.'

'They're delicious,' said Sidney, offended.

He wiped his runny nose on his vest again and then dropped another fistful of Spaceworms into the pan. With a hiss, a black cloud of foul-smelling smoke billowed out.

Sidney scooped a forkful of the hot, whiffy stuff out of the pan.

'Here boy, try some? Delish! Aha ha haaa...'

Gilbert recoiled, waving his arms about.

'Suit yourself,' said Sidney, jabbing his son playfully in the ear with the hot, sticky fork.

The kitchen door flew open and there stood Nellie.

Three foot tall.

Wild eyes and tightly clenched fists.

Tangled ringlets of golden hair crammed beneath a horned helmet, she swung a toy axe threateningly at Gilbert.

‘Surrender, you Glorbrats!’ she shrieked.

Sidney beamed proudly and patted her on the helmet.

‘Nellie’s going to school dressed as a Spiking Warrior. There’s a prize for the best costume.’

‘So what!’ cried Gilbert, lunging at his sister, ‘what about my eyes, you little...’

‘Now now Gilbert,’ laughed Sidney, stepping between them.

‘She’s only small. Leave her alone.’

Nellie snarled and swung the axe from behind her dad’s legs. Gilbert backed off.

In Nellie’s hands, even a plastic axe could be extremely dangerous.

He would get her later.

Gilbert was spreading Glorberry Jam onto his toast when his mother, Pinky Moon, bustled into the kitchen.

She was a large lady and loved to wear pink.

Big pink hair, sitting on her head like a birthday cake.

Pink sunglasses and bright pink lipstick.

Pink, fluffy boots on her feet and a huge, furry, pink dressing gown wrapped tightly around her plump body.

Pinky told everyone she was from Gloop, but everyone suspected she was really from Spike.

She ate raw fish, a well-known Spiking tradition. She talked funny. Neighbours reported they’d even seen her rolling around in the snow in the middle of the night.

Completely naked!

‘Goot morning Sidney, my darlink!’ she bellowed lovingly.

‘Morning darling!’ cooed Sidney.

Pinky grabbed her husband’s cheeks in her strong hands, knocking his pipe flying across the kitchen floor. She kissed him hard on the nose, making noisy sucking sounds and leaving a big glob of pink lipstick on it.

‘Yaaargghhh,’ gurgled Sidney, smiling strangely.

Pinky grabbed Gilbert and started kissing him on the cheeks, twisting her fingers painfully in his thatch of silver hair, smearing both Glorberry Jam and lipstick over his face and into his hair.

‘Goot morning, my little Skrögling!’

‘GET OFF, Mum!’ he yelled.

Then Pinky caught sight of Nellie.

‘Und Nellie! Nellie my darlink! You are dressed as der vunderful Spiking Warrior!’

She dropped Gilbert and lunged for her daughter, but Nellie was much too fast and scampered under the table.

Gilbert realised he was going to be late and crammed the toast into his mouth. He dashed out of the kitchen, leaving his weird father to his smelly Spaceworms and his horrible sister to his scary mother.

A Magnificent Announcement

Gilbert met Douglas on the way into school.

‘Where on Glorb were you last night, eh?’ started Douglas, ‘thought you was coming to tea? Mum made your favourite, specially.’

‘Oh no. Not Gobsausages in Green Gravy!’ Gilbert was genuinely disappointed.

‘Yep,’ chuckled Douglas, ‘eighteen big ones. Had to eat them all myself, felt really sick, but just couldn’t let them be.’

He stroked his tummy with pride.

‘Then Dad gave me a whole bottle of Bullpig Beer to wash it all down with...’

‘Oh my Glob, a whole bottle!’

‘Yeeahh,’ winked Douglas, ‘it was great...shame you missed out, Moonface.’

Gilbert scowled.

He’d often asked his friend how the Plugleys made their famous beer out of the Gassy Bullpigs, but Douglas’s answer was always the same.

‘Sorry Moonoid, it’s a total secret. If people ever found out, they’d never touch a drop again...’

Gilbert really wanted to tell Douglas about what had happened in Brandysnap Wood with Lily, but he thought his friend simply wouldn’t believe him.

They shoved their way onto a packed hoverlator and Gilbert saw Lily up ahead, reading a book. She spotted Gilbert and gave him a little wave, which Douglas saw.

‘OOOoooOOOoooHHHH!’ he howled, ‘Moonface made a little friend! Bet that’s where you were yesterday, eh, you sneakster.’

Gilbert felt himself blushing as Douglas started making slurpy kissing noises again.

‘Shut up, Pluglas!’ was all he could think of saying as Douglas slapped him on the back and the hooter went for class.

Gilbert gratefully leapt into the vacutube.

Class 5B sat in their Swotpods, yabbering away.

Sir Grenville Badguts, entered the classroom, walking stiffly with a stick.

Their headmaster was a war hero who’d lost his leg fighting the deadly Spoonhead Army in the Really Great Custard Wars. (Douglas’s dad, Dudley Plugley, had served in Commander Badgut’s battalion and whenever he drank Bullpig Beer he told the children his war stories... ‘We called him Battlin’ Badguts! The bravest soldier of us all...’ he would tell them, his voice shaking with emotion, ‘...the best days of me life, kids...best days of me life...’)

Sir Grenville seated himself slowly behind his desk and noisily cracked his knobbly knuckles. He drawled in his deep voice... ‘Claaaasssss five beeeeeeee.....’

The children stopped their chattering and fell silent.

‘Thankyou children,’ said Sir Grenville, as his eyebrows twitched uncontrollably. They were so wild and bushy they looked like nervous Caterpiggles trying to escape from his face.

‘I am delighted to announce that tomorrow, the whole fifth year will be boarding The Magnificent Magnatube for a day trip to Gloop!’

A school trip on the Magnatube! To Gloop! Fantastic!

Glorb and Gloop were so close to each other that they were connected by an amazing feat of engineering and invention called The Magnificent Magnatube. At nearly 1000 miles long, it allowed hundreds of people to travel easily between the two planets every day. It didn’t use petrol, electricity, gas or coal, so there was no pollution. It just worked on magnet power!

Along its entire length, millions of tiny magnets could be turned on and off in a fraction of a second. The Magnashuttle, which travelled back and forth inside the Magnatube, had an immense yellow magnet at one end, and another red one at the other, so it looked like a gigantic headache pill.

If passengers were late, the Controller simply turned the giant magnets on full blast, and the mighty shuttle, travelling at over 500 miles per hour, zoomed along inside the Magnatube and completed the journey in less than 2 hours.

A small problem though, was when people got off, their hair would be sticking out straight from their heads and attracted to anything metallic, because it would be quite magnetised by the journey. They looked a bit like sea anemones, with their hair waving about like tentacles in the ocean currents. And sometimes, even the fillings in their teeth would first start to wobble, then vibrate, then suddenly zang out of their mouths, fly through the air and stick to lamp-posts or post boxes or passing cars.

But people got used to this after a while.

So that's why there was such excitement in Class 5B. For the rest of the lesson, the only thing the children could think about was the Magnificent Magnatube trip, nobody could concentrate. Most of them had never even seen it, let alone been on it, as it had only been built a few years earlier. Sir Grenville told them they'd all have to bring packed lunches the following day, and everyone had to be on their best behaviour. When the lesson had ended, Gilbert thought it was a good time to introduce Lily to each other Douglas properly.

At first, Lily seemed rather distant and not very interested and Douglas just nodded his head, looking rather suspicious. Then Gilbert started telling them all he knew about the Magnificent Magnatube, which was quite a lot.

'We must try and slip away and have a good look around,' he said, 'the Viewing Deck is meant to be incredible. It's made of solid Megaglass, and has these Cosmoscopes, so you can see right into outer space. For hundreds and hundreds of miles!'

He suddenly had Lily's attention.

'You never know what you might see, Lily,' he added.

'Fascinating,' said Lily thoughtfully, as Gilbert carried on...

'...and you absolutely, abso-positively mustn't take any magnets, no matter how small, near to the Magnashuttle. Or you'll end up flying through the air and smashing into it like a fly on a windscreen! SPLAT!!'

'My Glob!' gawped Douglas, his eyes swivelling with anticipation, 'is that true?'

'I've seen pictures, Dougy. Horrible!'

The three of them went outside, sat in the shade of the Umbelliferous Tree and excitedly made their plans for the next day.

The Fartleblaster

When Gilbert got home, he told his parents about the school trip. Straight away, Pinky threw her hands into the air.

‘Ooooh beloved Skrögling...Gloop! You will be taking care!’

Sidney Moon marched across the kitchen and jabbed the end of his pipe into Gilbert’s neck.

‘You better watch out for those Gloopers, boy! Nothing but trouble. We want this! We want that! Those Glorbians can pay for it...same old story.’

Gilbert finished his supper and went to bed early.

The following morning, he tried to eat his breakfast while his mother fussed around him, clucking like a hen.

‘Oooh my little Herring, have you brush your teeth?’

‘Yes mum.’

‘Are underwear clean?’

‘Yes, of course!’

‘Stay close to teacher now, don’t getting lost.’

‘No mum.’

She wrapped her powerful, fluffy arms around him and squeezed him in a suffocating embrace.

‘Mmmpphhh...mum...let go!’

She kissed the top of his head, smothering his hair in lipstick, definitely not letting go.

Nellie lurked under the breakfast table, unseen.

She was carefully fixing a Fartleblaster to the seat of Gilbert’s trousers, whilst he was in his mother’s clutches. It was the size of a small coin, Nellie knew he’d never notice it. She set it to go off in 4 hours, when she reckoned it would cause the most embarrassment.

‘Now what will you be bringing back for your little sister, Gilbert?’ asked his dad.

‘Some Spacepoison,’ suggested Gilbert, ‘or maybe a Giant Deathwasp.’

‘Ah ha hah haahh,’ roared Sidney, picking his nose, ‘Spacepoison, yes...a Deathwasp...aha hah...very good...’

Nellie slid out from under the table, her job done.

‘And stay away from those Custard Holes boy,’ continued Sidney with pipejabs.

‘Remember what happened to Mutley Plugley, that cosmic oaf! They had to send down Deep Custard Divers to pull him out. He came back with Custard Fever, his skin went all yellow and crusty. Then it fell off! Aha ha ha haaahh!’

Pinky flung out her arm and knocked her husband’s pipe across the kitchen.

‘Shut up Sidney! Stop now! Gilbert not getting Custard Fever.’

Gilbert wriggled out of her embrace.

‘I’ve got to go now. I’ll miss the hoverbus.’

Pinky handed him his packed lunch, ‘I make special for you, my Skrögling.’

Gilbert took it reluctantly, he had a pretty good idea what was in there.

He could smell the familiar odour of the pickled fish that she always packed for him. No chance of a tasty bag of Goey Gumblobs, or a great, fat chunky bar of Zappo’s ThunderFudge!

Pinky squeezed him murderously again and Sidney, who’d carefully retrieved his pipe from Guzzler’s slobbering mouth, jabbed a final warning with it.

‘Watch yourself, boy. Never trust a Glooper! Remember the old rhyme...’

*There was a young fellow from Gloop,
Who tried to invent chocolate soup,
He mixed something smelly,
With sticky, brown jelly,
Which ended up tasting like poop!*

‘Aha haah haaaaahh!’ roared Sidney.
‘Yes dad, I’ll watch out’ said Gilbert, rolling his eyes.
He quickly kissed his mother and, with some relief, headed off to school.

The Magnificent Magnatube

The children disembarked from the triple decker school hoverbus, shoving and yelling. There was a atmosphere of excitement and anticipation.

Miss Trembells led Class 5B into Magnaport Central.

Today, she was wearing the shiny, silver raincoat and bright orange crash-helmet she always wore on class outings. Ever since a Puffy-Eyed Bonkerbird* egg had landed on her head on a Biology trip and almost killed her.

After that, her hair had never been the same colour (or smell) again, so she’d taken to wearing this crash helmet. Not just for protection, but in the hope it might make her more visible from above. Class 5B milled around her as she tried to do a head count.

‘Stand still. STAND STILL!’ she cried.

Warning signs were everywhere... ‘REMOVE ALL JEWELLERY’ ...and ‘ALL GLORBOTS REPORT TO PORT AUTHORITY’.

And even bigger red signs said ‘ABSOLUTELY NO MAGNETS!’

As Miss Trembells counted heads, an ear-shattering horn split the air... PAAAAAAAAR-RRRRRMMMMMMM .

Everyone jumped.

But Miss Trembells jumped the highest. She jumped so high that the top of her head hit a big metal sign on a pole which said...

**CAUTION!
VERY LOUD HORN!
DO NOT BE ALARMED**

Thank globness she was wearing her helmet.

A booming voice followed the incredibly loud horn...

‘SHUTTLEDOCK...3 MINUTES... SHUTTLEDOCK ...3 MINUTES...SECURE ALL METAL THINGUMMYBOBS!!

Everyone checked their pockets and bags for any loose pins, tuning forks, golf clubs or cutlery. The air around them got fuzzier and heavier. A deep humming sound grew louder. Miss Trembells tightened her helmet strap and herded the children away from the Docking Zone.

The warning horn blasted out again PAAAAAAAARRRRRRMMMMMMMM and once again Miss Trembells leapt into the air, this time bashing her head on another metal sign which said...

CAUTION! VERY LOUD HORN MAY SOUND TWICE

She crumpled into a heap on the ground.

Gilbert and Douglas ran over and helped her up, dusting down her silver raincoat.

'Thank-you boys,' she said, her voice shaking, 'I really hate that horn.'

The children stood behind stripy barriers, quite close to the opening of the Magnatube. Hot air rushed out of it, making their hair fly about. Except Gilberts of course.

'SHUTTLEDOCK ...30 SECONDS... SHUTTLEDOCK ...30 SECONDS,' boomed the voice.

Douglas nudged Gilbert and whispered, 'look what I've got.'

He slid an old sweet tin from inside his jacket pocket and carefully unscrewed the lid.

Gilbert peered inside and saw a tiny magnet, barely the size of a pea, spinning round wildly.

'Oh my Glob Dougy, we're not supposed to have anything magnetic. It's dangerous!'

Douglas giggled uncontrollably and his eyes swivelled about with excitement.

He reached into the tin and grasped the magnet with difficulty.

The Jolly Boys stood in front of them, arguing as usual. Their loose hoodies hung down behind their gingery, stubbled heads. With a swift movement, Douglas dropped the magnet into Terry's hoodie, which immediately started waving about behind his head, as if it had a life of its own.

'SHUTTLEDOCK ...5 SECONDS... SHUTTLEDOCK ...5 SECONDS,' boomed the voice.

The great, blue dome of the Magnashuttle appeared at the opening of the MagnaDock, like a fat plum. The waiting crowd of passengers burst into applause and cheered.

Suddenly, Terry Jolly's hoodie swung right round his head, picked him up off his feet and dragged him along the concrete ramp towards the MagnaDock.

'Heyyyyy!' he screamed, crashing through the stripy barriers, splinters of wood flying everywhere, 'what's happening?' he yelled in panic.

'Oh my hairy curtains!' giggled Douglas, a bit nervously.

'Oh my Globules!' gasped Gilbert, 'look at him go.'

The closer Terry got to the Maganashuttle, the faster he went. His limbs flailed about and his hood strained ahead, dragging him along like a dog on a lead.

Then he took off!

'Oh my hairy, hairy curtains!' whispered Douglas seriously, his eyes now swivelling in alarm.

'Pluggy,' hissed Gilbert, 'what on Glorb have you done?'

Terry flew through the air, his hoodie leading the way.

You could barely hear his screams above the rumble of the docking Magnashuttle. Miss Trembell's mouth was shaped like an O, but no sound came out.

The flying Terry was just about to smash into the gigantic, blue nose of the Magnashuttle, just like a fly on a windscreen, when suddenly he slowed down and stopped in mid-air, bouncing to and fro, swaying gently right in front of the Magnashuttle as it came to a halt. Sirens screamed and a squad of blue-uniformed Magnaguards shoved their way through the mesmerised crowd. They shouted and pointed up at the large boy suspended above them.

'CLEAR THE AREA,' they yelled, 'CLEAR THE GLORBING AREA!'

'Thank Glob for the MagnaNet,' said one.

'Yeah. Without it, that kid would've been Glorberry Jam,' said another.

'Too right,' said his mate.

'SPLANGO! All over the front of our lovely clean shuttle. Guess who'd have to clear up that 'orrible mess...that little Gutfrog!'

'Yeah,' said their Captain, 'don't mind if it happens on Gloop. But weeeee got the MagnaNet!'

Terry Jolly was slowly lowered from the almost invisible MagnaNet that surrounded the dock and the little magnet removed from his hoodie.

'What you think you're doing with this then?' yelled the captain, jabbing the terrified boy in his chest. He held the magnet aloft, so the crowd could see it.

'I don't know,' said Terry, tears running down his dusty cheeks.

'I'll bet it was my brother, sir. Him!'

He pointed at Barry, standing innocently in the crowd, next to a sweaty, guilty looking Douglas Plugley.

'RIGHT!' screamed the captain, and marched over to Barry Jolly.

'Have you ever seen this magnet before, boy?' He shoved the small magnet right into his face.

'No sir, never. I did have a magnet once. In the shape of an octopus,' said Barry.

'OCTOPUS!' screamed the Captain again. 'RIGHT! You're under arrest for confusing us.'

They led Barry Jolly off.

He was going to miss the class trip.

* Puffy-Eyed Bonkerbird - a close relative of the Bald-Faced Bonkerbird, but much bigger and with red, puffy eyes. These ridiculous birds live on the island of Bong in the Sea of Monstrosity. They're so relaxed that they often forget where they are and lay their eggs in mid-air when they're flying about having a good time or a gib-gabble with an old chum. Occasionally, the eggs might land safely in a haystack, or on a pile of cushions, but most often they will land in the sea, or on the rocks, or on Miss Trembell's head. This is the reason Puffy-Eyed Bonkerbirds are so rare.

Destination Gloop!

The children followed Miss Trembells across the skybridge that connected Magnaport Central to the airdock in the side of the Magnatube.

Printed along the walls of the skybridge were signs that said 'DON'T LOOK DOWN!'

Of course, Gilbert did exactly the opposite and looked down through the glass floor.

His stomach flipped like a pancake.

'Whoaaaaaahh, Pluglas,' he said, grabbing the handrail to steady himself, 'have you looked down?'

Douglas looked down and grabbed the handrail himself.

They were a very, very long way up. Hundreds of feet above where Douglas had slipped his magnet into Terry Jolly's hoodie.

It looked like the people down there were crawling about like lazy ants.

'Whoooooaaahh,' moaned Douglas, 'my knees have gone funny. I want the toilet!'

Then the signs changed to 'DON'T LOOK UP!'

So Gilbert looked up and said 'Whoooooaaahh!' again.

His stomach flipped in the opposite direction.

The great, shimmering Magnatube twisted away from Glorb and into the dark blue depths of space. Flickering lights ran along its length in waves and it moved slowly in rhythmical pulses, like a fat, white snake swallowing eggs, as if it was really alive.

Gilbert felt quite queasy.

‘Hey Pluglas. Whatever you do, don’t look up.’

Douglas looked up.

‘Oh Glorbing Heck,’ he exclaimed loudly, as he watched the ghostly Magnatube gulping its way into the endless nothingness of the Glorbiverse.

‘Douglas Plugley,’ scolded Miss Trembells, ‘mind your language.’

Miss Trembells had wrapped a scarf around Victoria Sponge’s head so she couldn’t see anything at all. She was leading her by the hand across the Skybridge, humming a little tune to keep the girl calm. She’d already had enough pandemonium for one day and didn’t want a hysterical Sponge on her hands as well.

Miss Trembells was beginning to regret volunteering to take 5B on this trip.

She thought about that rather nice waiter from the Iso Bar on Nebula Street, who’d asked her out on a date tomorrow.

He’d sent her a beautiful bunch of flowers and a lovely box of Uranium gobstoppers. But she knew she’d be stuck at school instead, filling out forms explaining why Barry Jolly was stuck in a Magnacell.

The fifth year had now boarded the Magnificent Magnatube and taken their seats. The two other teachers, Mrs. Manglebag and old Casey Collywobble, joined Miss Trembells and the three of them had a good moan about everything.

The inside of the Magnatube was vast, with row upon row of comfy seats, like a luxury cinema. Gilbert, Douglas and Lily took their seats next to each other. A smiling steward in a custard-coloured uniform handed them each a free Magnapack. Lily studied the contents of hers with interest.

‘Look,’ she chuckled, ‘the instructions say hairnets should be worn at all times. They stop your hair from standing on end during the trip.’

She put hers on.

Gilbert tried to stuff his wiry thatch into his, but gave up and threw the hairnet onto the floor, it was impossible. Lily and Douglas hooted with laughter.

In the Magnapack, they also found Holophones, which looked just like normal headphones. Except they had tiny lasers set in the frames, which projected 3D images right in front of your nose. You could watch whatever video or real time film you wanted, or even chat to your parents at home.

There were other things, like travel sickness pills and games like Digidice, but the most interesting thing was a small card with ‘MUCTAC’ printed on the front.

It looked just like a normal playing card, but Douglas unfolded it again and again, until it was the size of a tablecloth. He spread it over their laps. It was covered in tiny writing. Across the top it said...

Magnacorp Universal Conglomerate Terms And Conditions (MUCTAC).

Douglas read it with fascination and said, ‘Glorbing Heck! Listen to this.’

Lily and Gilbert moved closer as Douglas read out loud.

Condition One. In the event of flux malfunction or polar reversal, all passengers must report to the PanicPort for evacuation. In the event of injury or death of passengers resulting from such evacuation, The Magnacorp Universal Conglomerate (MUC) offers its sincerest condolences, really sorry, but will accept no responsibility. No refunds.

Condition Two. Under no circumstances must passengers operate the Emergency Escape Jets (EEJs). These are for crew and MUC employees only. MUC quite happily washes its hands of and bears no responsibility for passengers who try to operate any EEJs and as a result suffer loss of life or limb or lunch. In fact, it would serve you right.

‘That doesn’t sound very fair,’ said Gilbert. ‘Hope nothing goes wrong.’
They all laughed nervously.
Douglas continued...

Condition Three. Under any of the following circumstances, all passengers must fasten their bodybelts, put on their hairnets and place their heads between their knees, or if they feel like it, the knees of the person next to them.

- Collision of the Magnashuttle with any comet, meteorite, satellite system, Giant Stellar Bonkerbird, or unlicensed vehicle.
- Attack or irritation by the dreaded Taxicab Terroristas.
- Catastrophic disintegration of the entire Magnatube system and the immediate jellification of all passengers.

No refunds.

The list of Terms & Conditions went on and on across the tablecloth, hundreds of them. Right at the end, in bold red writing, was a final statement...

Damage done to MUC equipment as a result of vapourisation, jellification, or smashification of any passenger not observing the Terms and Conditions laid out by MUC above, will have to be paid for by their surviving families. If they have no surviving families, whatever is left of the vapourised, jellified, or smashificated passenger will become the property of Glorbalcorp Unistruction Megalimited (GUM) and used as insulation material in their new, fabtastic housing development for underprivileged aliens on Planet Cramp. HAVE A GREAT TRIP NOW!

‘Well, that’s nice,’ said Lily.

***Taxicab Terroristas** - years before the Magnatube was built, there were hundreds of taxis transporting people between Gloop and Glorb and the drivers knew every short cut, speed trap and one-way wormhole between them. They also had an encyclopaedic knowledge of just about everything in the Glorbiverse and were experts on sport, music, swearing, books, custard, hairdressing, brain surgery, shouting and cheese sculpture. But when the Magnitude was built, they suddenly found themselves out of a job. Desperate for revenge, they converted their taxicabs into a terrifying squadron of unlicensed heavily-armed Attacksy-Cabs. So they became known as the Taxicab Terroristas and like to really annoy travellers between the two planets to this very day.

TAKE OFF!

‘One minute to launch,’ announced the Captain through everyone’s Holophones.

‘Fasten bodybelts, hairnets on please.’

After much effort, Gilbert finally managed to stuff his silver thatch into a hairnet. He felt his hair bristling as the great magnets at either end of the Magnashuttle powered up.

It was like having an angry, metal hedgehog on his head.

The ship began to shudder and Gilbert looked across at Lily. Her eyes were squeezed shut and her lips moved silently.

Douglas, on Gilbert’s other side, was moving his head violently from side to side.

A Blogroid Gunship hovered inches from the end of his nose and was firing glowing, nuclear pulses at his head. One of them hit him on the ear and exploded in a shower of sparks.

‘Oooyah!’ shouted Douglas, then burst out laughing. He nodded and grinned madly at Gilbert, his eyes swivelling in opposite directions.

The Magnashuttle picked up speed, lights flashing past in the portholes.

The Captain’s smooth voice came reassuringly through their Holophones.

‘Welcome aboard Star Shuttle Ping Pong everyone. I’m Captain Jellybean Norkles and I will be taking you to Gloop this morning.’

At the sound of his voice, Miss Trembell’s face went a pale shade of green.

Douglas was standing up. The Blogroid Gunship had gone and now he was boxing with a life-size projection of Bonkers ‘The Brainmangler’ Buttercup, a former All Glorbiverse champion at three different weights - HeavyWeight, SuperHeavyweight and GrosslyOverweight.

Douglas was ducking and weaving vigorously in his seat as Bonkers Buttercup rained down meaty blows about his head. He turned to Gilbert and shouted ‘brilliant!’ just as Bonkers caught him square on the jaw. Douglas went out like a light, slumping forward.

Lily nudged Gilbert.

‘Would you like a game of Digidice, then?’

‘OK’ said Gilbert ‘that would be fun.’

Lily switched them on and threw them in the air where they hung, slowly rotating, blinking their neon combinations.

‘We will be travelling at an approximate speed of 500 miles an hour,’ continued Captain Jellybean Norkles, ‘and I believe we have some very important passengers on board. The fifth year from...The Wormhole Academy for Normal Children...!’

At this, all the kids whooped and cheered, except for Douglas of course, who was still unconscious .

Captain Norkles came back on the Holophone, his friendly voice oozing into their earpieces. 'Hi there Fifth Year, this is just for you guys. How you doin'?'

The children were delighted. They sang out politely, 'Good morning, Captain Norkles.'

'Ha hah! Yo Kids! Now, how's my old girlfriend Chazzer Trembells doing? I think she's with you this morning?'

There was a stunned silence as the entire class craned their necks forward and looked down the long row of seats to where Miss Trembells was sitting.

Her thin face was a mask of horror.

'Hey Chazzer!' came the Captain's voice through the children's earpieces, 'long time no see! Why don't you come up to the bridge and let's have a gabbleddy-goo. You know I've still got some of your Naughty Neutrinos in the fridge at home.'

Miss Trembells face was now chalky white. The captain continued...

'Bring some of the kids along, why doncha? Hey! They can drive the ship while we catch up on stuff and things,' he chuckled.

Eric Tricity had stood up and his long arms were windmilling.

'Please Miss, pick me...can I drive the ship?'

Rodney Spong had also stood up.

Rodney Spong hardly ever said a word to anyone.

'Miss Trembells,' he said quietly and gravely, 'I must drive the ship. Please choose me.'

Douglas had regained consciousness and slurred, 'what's going on?'

'The captain of this Magnashuttle is Miss Trembell's ex-boyfriend,' said Lily, '...and he's really embarrassing poor Miss Trembells in front of us all. She looks like she's going to die.' They looked down to where Miss Trembells sat and she really did look as if she was about to die.

'Brilliant!' said Douglas, fully revived.

Miss Trembells released her bodybelt and stood up tall and straight, looking determined.

'Right,' she shrieked, beckoning Rodney Spong and Eric Tricity.

'You two. Come with me.'

The boys threw off their bodybelts and ran after Miss Trembells, who had stormed off down the aisle. Her long, silver coat flapped behind her like a sail and her red hair bobbed angrily above her head, like a stack of candy floss.

The Viewing Deck

Gilbert turned to his friends.

'Whoa, did you see Miss Trembell's face?'

'I've never heard her called Chazzer before,' said Douglas.

'It must be short for Charlotte, or Charlene, or maybe even Charlie,' said Lily.

'Or Charcoal,' said Douglas sniggering.

'Or Chargrilled,' added Gilbert, joining in.

'Or Charmless,' continued Douglas.

Lily raised her eyebrows and looked at the giggling boys, shaking her head.

Gilbert saw her face and felt his cheeks reddening. He was glad when Douglas carried on.

'Anyway, now that 'Chazzer' has gone to see her ex-boyfriend, let's do some exploring.'

Their eyes lit up.

‘Look’ said Lily, pointing down the aisle.

‘Mrs. Manglebag’s asleep and old Collywobble’s watching Premiership Bumbelball on his Holophone. Let’s go.’

They quietly slipped off the end of their aisle, hopped into a passing hoverlater and were swiftly sucked up onto a vacutube overhead. Sssh-ploop!

Lily insisted they follow the signs to the Viewing Deck.

‘Can’t wait to see what’s out there,’ she said.

‘The best view in the Glorbiverse,’ said Gilbert.

‘But what about the Magnetic Disco?’ pleaded Douglas.

‘We’re going to the Viewing Deck, Pluglas,’ stated Gilbert firmly, ‘follow us.’

He dragged a scowling Douglas with him.

Up on the bridge, the tall, handsome Magnashuttle Captain cowered under Miss Trembell’s scolding. She jabbed her finger in his chest as she told him exactly what she thought of him. Finally, after several minutes, she calmed herself down and said, ‘right, I think it’s time for the boys to fly the ship now.’

Eric Tricity could barely contain his excitement. He hopped from foot to foot and his arms had started to windmill.

Captain Norkles looked doubtful, ‘I’m not sure this is such a good idea...’ he started, but Miss Trembells grabbed him by his lapels. She shoved him hard against the control panel and thrust her face an inch from the terrified man’s nose. She whispered threateningly.

‘Jellyboo, sweetheart. You promised the boys.’

The crew on the bridge tried not to laugh as they looked at their trembling Captain with expectation. From now on, he would always be called Captain Jellyboo Snorkles.

By now, the children had reached the Viewing Deck, which they had all to themselves.

The view really was incredible.

‘Goodness me,’ said Gilbert.

‘Extraordinary,’ said Lily.

‘Glorbing heck,’ said Douglas, who’d forgotten all about the Magnetic Disco.

The Deck was right at the top of the Maganashuttle and made entirely of Ultraglass, so you could see all sorts of space junk drifting by. Battle-scarred gunships chained to rusting Spacebuoys, dead rockets spinning round and round aimlessly, lost drones, spacetrees, even shopping trolleys...

‘Some of this stuff must’ve been floating about for thousands of years,’ murmured Lily.

Gilbert watched as she pressed her face against the cold glass, her dark eyes wandering. He knew what she was thinking.

‘I’m sure your parents are out there somewhere, Lily,’ he whispered, ‘when we’re a bit older, we could go and look for them.’

She turned and gazed at him seriously.

‘Is that a promise? Will you come with me?’

‘Ummm. Absolutely. I promise,’ stammered Gilbert, amazed that she’d taken him seriously.

‘OK Gilbert,’ she said firmly, ‘that’s what we’ll do then.’

Before Gilbert could say anything else, Douglas was howling.

‘Wooo-hoooo! Look over there!’

They looked over to where Douglas was pointing.

A GloopZoop jet soared past the Ultraglass window, towing behind it a long, tubular banana. Sat astride it were a dozen children in space suits, waving and pulling silly faces as they overtook the Magnashuttle.

‘For Glob’s sake’ exclaimed Gilbert, ‘that looks soooooo much fun!’

‘Totally brilliant,’ was all that Douglas could say.
Lily waved and the lucky children on the Space Banana waved back as it headed towards Gloop leaving a yellow vapour-trail behind it.
‘Dougy. We absolutely HAVE TO get onto one of those. Dougy?’
But there was no answer from Dougy.
Dougy was no longer there.
He was on the far side of the Viewing Deck opening a door.
A big sign said:

**ABSOLUTELY NO ENTRY
MUC CREW ONLY**

Lily and Gilbert watched in resignation their friend disappeared inside.
They heard an exclamation from inside.
‘Oh. My. Glob!’
They ran over to the door and slipped into the dimly lit room. Douglas was prancing around like an excited monkey.
‘Look over here...’ he babbled, ‘look at this!’
Something glinted in the corner of the small room.
Gilbert and Lily crept towards it and their eyes widened.
‘Is that what I think it is?’ said Gilbert.
‘I think it’s what you think it is,’ chuckled Douglas.
He ran his hands all over the shiny machine, which was covered in yellow warning signs.
KEEP OFF. CREW ONLY.
‘I think it’s exactly what you both think it is,’ said Lily apprehensively.
‘Douglas...I’d be very careful if I were you,’ she warned.
She turned to Gilbert and whispered.
‘We ought to get back, Gilbert. Miss Trembells will probably be on her way by now.’
Douglas was fiddling with the cockpit release catch of the Emergency Escape Jet.
Because that’s exactly what it was.
Gilbert was torn between the two of them. He knew Lily was probably right and he didn’t want to get into trouble. But it was so exciting.
An actual Emergency Escape Jet! Imagine sitting in it!
His thoughts were interrupted by a loud POP as the cockpit flew open and a robotic voice blared out, ‘Emergency. Emergency. Climb aboard. Climb aboard.’
Gilbert felt Lily’s hand tighten on his arm as Douglas climbed in.

Back on the Magnashuttle flight deck, Eric Tricity was now seated in Captain Norkle’s Command Pod. Rodney Spong was sulking, it wasn’t fair that Eric got to go first. Captain Norkles hovered nervously behind his Command Pod. He’d never expected his old girlfriend to actually come up to the bridge, let alone bring some of her horrible children with her.
‘Don’t touch that,’ he ordered, knocking Eric’s hand away from a red lever at the side of the Command Pod.
Miss Trembells flashed angry eyes at the Captain and he backed off.
‘That’s an Emergency Stop lever, if the boy...errrr...’
‘His name is Eric Tricity,’ said Miss Trembells frostily.
‘OK, well...errrr...Mister...Tricity, please don’t touch that red lever...errrr...or else...’
He wasn’t very good at talking to children.

Eric just smiled.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said, ‘I just want to drive for a bit. How do I make it go faster?’

The Captain wiped the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. He pointed to another small lever on the other side of his command pod.

‘There, boy...that blue lever there...just very slowly move it forward.’

He took Eric’s hand, carefully placed it on top of the blue lever and gently moved it forward.

The hum of the Magnadrivers got louder and the Magnashuttle accelerated.

‘Whooaahhhhhh,’ yelled Eric, ‘fantastic!’

Rodney Spong was desperate to have his turn.

‘Miss...’ he tugged his teacher’s coat, ‘Miss...isn’t it my go...Miss?’

‘Just wait a bit Rodney,’ said Miss Trembells kindly, ‘you’ll be next. Just let Eric have a few minutes.’

On the Viewing Deck, Douglas had strapped himself into the Emergency Escape Jet and ran his hands gleefully over the control panel.

‘This is sooo brilliant,’ he groaned, ‘come on you two, get in.’

Lily held Gilbert back. ‘I really think we should go. Remember what the MUCTAC table cloth said. Douglas is going to get us all into real big trouble.’

‘Oh come on, Lileeeee...’ jeered Douglas, ‘have some fun, girl, it’s an Emergency Escape Jet for Glob’s sake. When are you ever likely to get into one of these again?’

‘Never, I guess,’ agreed Gilbert.

He stuck his head into the capsule to have a better look.

Rodney Spong was going mad with impatience. He so wanted to be in the Command Pod instead of Eric, who was now moving the shuttle around the inside of the enormous Magnatube. It was too much for Rodney to bear. Unknown to everyone, his one secret wish had always been to become a Starfleet MagnaShuttle captain. Heroically transporting people safely between Glorb and Gloop, fighting off Taxicab Terroristas and never arriving a second late - the best Starfleet captain in the history of Glorb!

But Eric Tricity was having all the fun. It wasn’t fair.

‘Miss...’ he tugged again at Miss Trembell’s coat.

‘Oh, I’m so sorry Rodney,’ she said, ‘I forgot you were there. You’re just so quiet and well-behaved.’

She turned to Eric.

‘Come on Eric, you’ve had a good go. It’s Rodney’s turn now.’

Eric clutched onto the steering column tightly.

‘Come on Eric,’ she insisted.

Reluctantly, he slid slowly out of the Command Pod.

Rodney Spong was so excited that he thought his head might just explode as the captain strapped him in.

‘Right...boy....’

‘My name is Rodney Spong.’

‘OK...Rodney...Spong...were you watching the other boy?’

‘YES. SIR!’ shouted Rodney Spong, as if he was on a parade ground.

Miss Trembells looked startled.

She’d never heard Rodney raise his voice above a whisper before.

‘Good man,’ said the captain, impressed by the small boy’s military attitude.

This lad was made of the right stuff.

‘Well then....’ he went on, a glint in his eye, ‘...Captain Spong.’

When he heard this, Rodney's head very nearly did explode.
The Captain of the Starfleet Magashuttle, Captain Jellybean Norkles himself, had just called him Captain Spong!
It sounded so good.
'YES. SIR!' he yelled again, even louder.
'Captain Spong,' repeated the captain, 'take command of the SS Ping Pong!'
Bursting with excitement, his mind spinning, Rodney grasped the steering column in one hand and thrust the Accelerator lever forward with his other.
Except it wasn't the blue Accelerator lever.
It was the red Emergency Stop lever.
Captain Norkles leapt forward, shouting 'Nooooooooooooo.....'
There was complete chaos as the Magnashuttle ground to a sudden halt.
Everybody and everything went flying everywhere at 500 miles an hour.

The K-1r:5TY Unit

Gilbert and Lily were hurled into the cockpit of the Escape Jet and landed on top of Douglas. The lid slammed shut and immediately the control panel sprung into life, flashing and beeping.
Loud alarms deafened them.
'What on Glorb was that!' yelled Gilbert above the din.
Lily untangled herself from between the boys.
Her nose was bleeding and she was furious.
'This is going to be big trouble, Douglas,' she yelled, 'I told you.'
The alarms and flashing lights stopped abruptly and a friendly girl's voice came from the control panel.
'Halooo there kiddies. Welcome aboard this K-1r:5TY unit. Blast off in precisely 10 seconds.'
She started a countdown.
The children stared blankly at each other, their faces white.
TEN
NINE
EIGHT
'What's happening,' said Douglas nervously, his eyes swivelling wildly.
SEVEN
SIX
FIVE
'What on Glorb do you think, Plugley,' shouted Lily, 'you complete idiot!'
She scrambled into the seat next to Douglas and frantically started to clip herself into the bodybelt.
'Gilbert,' she shouted, 'get in that seat. NOW!'
Gilbert scabbled into the rear seat, confused.
FOUR
THREE

‘Get your bodybelt on, Gilbert! DO IT NOW!’

Gilbert did what he was told.

TWO

ONE

There was a loud hiss of gas.

Their eardrums went pop and the cockpit went dark.

A single dim red light blinked on the control panel.

Silence.

Nobody said a word.

A sound like a door being slammed beneath them.

Then they were falling, falling, falling. Their stomachs were left hundreds of feet above them as the Escape Jet hurtled down through the entire ship.

‘Wooooooaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh.....’ they cried together.

The Jet shot like a bullet out of a port beneath the Magnashuttle and punched a hole straight through the wall of the Magnatube. They felt the heat of an explosion of energy behind them as the Jet’s twin engines erupted into life.

The twinkling stars they could see through the cockpit suddenly rushed towards them at unimaginable speed. They were travelling so fast, the skin on their faces slid about like jelly. They could hardly breathe, let alone scream.

The girl’s calm voice was saying, ‘Hold tight now, kids. Hold tight....’

Their heads pressed back hard on their seats as the Escape Jet accelerated faster and faster away from the Magnatube.

Gradually, they slowed down and the girl’s voice said.

‘Emergency Escape sequence completed. Escape successful. Relax.’

Their bodybelts automatically released themselves.

The friendly voice said, ‘Welcome aboard kiddies!’

The children looked at each other, mystified.

‘Who are you?’ asked Lily.

‘I’m a K-1r:5TY unit. Everyone calls me Kirsty though. In fact, they call me Thirsty Kirsty, because I use up so much fuel. But I am a Starfleet Escape Jet, so what do you expect? It’s not like I’m a dafty Glorbot, is it? Or a wee toaster. I just burned up five million Glorbites of pure Octofuel in 10 seconds. How about that?’

‘Amazing,’ said Gilbert.

‘Where are we going, Kirsty?’ asked Lily.

‘Och, a wee place called Pretzel Bay. It’s bonnie. Just off Grimble Island on Gloop.’

‘What’s that?’ asked Gilbert.

‘Just a Secure Station. You’ll be safe and sound there. I’ll be refuelled and reprogrammed. You wee kiddies will be...errrr....interviewed and processed.’

‘Interviewed?’ said Lily, apprehensively.

‘Processed,’ asked Gilbert, ‘what’s that?’

‘Och, c’mon. Jess the usual stuff,’ chuckled Kirsty.

‘What’s the usual stuff,’ said Douglas.

‘C’mon now, kids. Be fair. You’ve illegally operated MUC equipment. That’s me! You’ve destroyed part of the Magnatube wall. Burned up five million Glorbites of Octofuel. There’s obviously gaunnae be some questions. Did you not read the MUCTAC card? But nae bother, it’s jess the system.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Douglas.

‘Yes. Oh dear,’ hissed Lily, jabbing Douglas in the chest again.

‘This is your Glorbing fault, Plugley.’

Both boys stared at her.
They'd never heard her swear before.
They'd never even heard a girl swear before.
Things were getting serious.

OH NO! It's The Taxicab Terroristas

Thirsty Kirsty soared round in a wide arc, turning back towards Gloop. It hung before them like a dirty, yellow doughnut.

'Kirsty,' piped up Douglas. 'When we get to Gloop, can we fly through the hole in the middle? That would be brilliant.'

Kirsty giggled.

'Fraid not, ma wee friend. I'm programmed tae take you directly to Pretzel Bay. It's illegal anyways.'

Lily rolled her eyes.

'You're incredible Douglas. You open a door which says ABSOLUTELY NO ENTRY. You fiddle with a machine that says KEEP OFF and get us shot out into space. Now we're in lots of trouble and all you can think of is flying through the hole in the middle of Gloop!'

Douglas looked wounded.

'Well...' he mumbled, 'it wasn't all my fault...something happened to the ship.'

'Gahhhhh,' exclaimed Lily.

Once again Gilbert felt like piggy in the middle. He supposed Lily was right, but something strange had definitely happened up there. It was as if the shuttle had hit something and they'd all gone flying.

Quite suddenly, Kirsty shouted, 'Red Alert! Bodybelts on. NOW.'

But before Gilbert could get his belt clips secured, a loud bang shook the Escape Jet.

He tumbled onto the floor.

'Get your belts on NOW,' insisted Kirsty, 'we're under attack!'

An even louder bang spun the whole Jet round and round. Gilbert lay on the floor, terrified.

'Ouch,' moaned Kirsty, 'that hurt.'

Her console lights blinked and wisps of grey smoke seeped out of it. She spun slowly to a halt.

'What's going on?' yelled Gilbert, 'who's attacking us?'

His question was answered when a man's voice filled the cockpit.

'Glorblimey,' it sneered, 'wot we got 'ere then, ay?'

'Oh no,' moaned Kirsty, 'ah shoulda guessed.'

'What is it?' said Lily, fear in her voice.

'It's the Taxicab Terroristas. Say nothing.'

They looked out of the cockpit. To their amazement, they saw a group of battered old taxicabs had surrounded them. An assortment of armoured panels, old satellite dishes and various bits of space-junk were welded all over them, and a few had rusty old plasma cannons mounted on their roofs. Rough looking, unshaven men were grinning at them through their dirty, cracked windscreens.

The same man's gravelly voice came through the speakers again.

'Well, strike a light, wot's wiv you lot then ay? Summink gone wrong wiv the

Magnytoob, ‘as it? Is we all trying to escape then?’
They could hear all the other cabbies cackling unpleasantly like wicked crows.
‘Leave us alone,’ shouted Lily sternly.
‘OOooooOOOOooooohhhh,’ laughed the man, mimicking Lily’s high-pitched voice,
‘leave us alone, Lah di dah!’
‘Yes, leave us alone, you nasty men’ cried Gilbert, ‘we’re just schoolchildren. We’re from the
Wormhole Academy for Normal Children on Glorb.’
‘Yeah,’ shouted Douglas, ‘and our headmaster is Sir Grenville Badguts. He was a hero in the
Really Great Custard Wars, so you better watch out. Because if anything happens to us...’
‘Dinnae talk to them,’ urged Kirsty.
‘Shut up, you ruddy MUC computer,’ shouted the man angrily.
Then his tone of voice changed.
‘Wot you doin wiv these schoolkids, eh? Where you takin ‘em?’
‘She’s called Kirsty and she’s taking us to Pretzel Bay, so we can be interviewed and go
home,’ shouted Douglas.
There was a pause as the cabbies talked amongst themselves. The man came back on the
radio.
‘Pretzel Bay on Grimble Island? You sure?’
His voice was quite different now, it had lost its nastiness. He sounded almost concerned.
‘Coz you don’t wanter be going there kids, it’s a ruddy great clink!’
‘A clink?’ said Gilbert. ‘What’s a clink?’
‘A clink, my son. A PRISON, for Glawb’s sake! High-security one at that.’
A different voice came on the radio.
‘Oy kids, why do you fink vey call it Pretzel Bay, ay? Cos vey like ter twist yer brain aroun’
and turn yer ‘ed inside art. Vat’s why.’
The other cabbies joined in.
‘No-one evva comes out of Pretzel Bay Prison, kids.’
‘Honestly. Pretzel Bay is an awful place, you really don’t wanna go there at all.’
‘I don’t like the sound of this one bit,’ said Gilbert.
‘Kirsty,’ demanded Lily, ‘is this true?’
‘Welllll.....’ said Kirsty, sounding shifty, ‘ah s’pose there is a wee prison there. But ah have
to take anyone who escapes in me to Pretzel Bay. Ah canny change ma programme.’
The children heard the cabbies talking, with a lot of ‘Glorblimeys’ and rude-sounding words.
The man came back on the radio.
‘Now lissen to me kids,’ he said firmly.
‘My name’s Ronnie Bottles. An I’m in charge of this troop an we’re the Taxicab
Terroristas.’
‘Dinnae listen tae them, children,’ said Kirsty.
‘Shut your circuits up, you ‘pooter! Or we’ll bash you into the next system...’ shouted
Ronnie.
Kirsty fell silent.
‘Now lissen up, kids,’ continued Ronnie calmy, ‘vis is wot we’ll do.’

Ronnie Bottles

The children had never floated in space before, but it was great fun, like a Floaty Gum trip. Ronnie Bottles and his squadron of Terroristas encircled Kirsty until she'd agreed to kit out the children with spacesuits and allowed them to leave.

Ronnie fired a cable straight into the side of the Escape Jet and the children pulled themselves along it. They clambered into the port in the boot of Ronnie's cab and squeezed through the hatch. They took off their helmets.

'Oh my Glob,' said Lily, 'what's that smell?'

'Wot smell,' said Ronnie.

Ronnie was a tall man with a big, round tummy.

His head prickled with grey stubble and he wore a dirty eyepatch over his left eye. His enormous belly was wedged beneath the steering wheel with a half-eaten pork pie balanced on it.

'Allo kids, welcome 'board,' he greeted them, as he chewed a mouthful of pie. Then he coughed, spraying soggy, brown pastry over the inside of his windscreen.

He cleared his throat.

'Scuse me, kids. Well. I fink you 'ad a lucky escape there.'

The cabs left in convoy, beeping their horns and flashing their lights. Ronnie took the lead position, pumping out a trail of dirty, grey smoke behind him.

'Thank you so much for taking us onboard, Mr.Bottles,' said Gilbert politely.

'Aaaaahhhh ha ha haaaaahhhh,' exploded the cab driver. More wet pastry sprayed the inside of the cab. The children ducked.

'Oh...Mister Bottles!' cackled Ronnie. 'I love it. You kids are great. Just call me Ronnie, alright.'

Despite the funny smell, the children were relieved they were on board Ronnie's battered old taxicab as it chugged along, and not on their way to Pretzel Bay. In fact, to their delight, Ronnie promised to take them all the way home to Gulp.

'Did you know', he chattered away, 'once I 'ad that Buttercup Whatisname in the back of my cab...y'know...the champion boxer...'

'You mean Bonkers 'The Brainmangler' Buttercup?' said Douglas breathlessly.

'Vats the geezer! A real gennelman.'

'I just had a fight with him,' said Douglas proudly. 'He knocked my head off!'

'Are you avin a bath?!' said Ronnie astonished.

'A bath?'

'Yeah. A bath. I mean a laugh. Are you 'avin a laugh? You 'ad a fight with Bonkers Buttercup?'

Douglas nodded vigorously.

'Well I nevva...' chortled Ronnie finishing off his pie and taking a long slurp from a mug of milky tea which had appeared from nowhere. He burped loudly and said, 'I am so sorry. What am I finking. How rude. I ain't introduced you to the troops, 'ave I?'

A chorus of 'yeahs' and 'Ronnie you chump' and 'no Glorbin manners' crackled from the radio.

'Awright, keep yer ruddy tops on,' said Ronnie. 'An mind yer Ps an Qs you lot, they's only kids remember. An we got a young laydeee on board an all...'

Lily looked very pleased at being called a young lady.
'Now there's me cousin Reg Belly. Then there's Phil Knickers and Lee Nobbler. And of course me old mate Carl 'Double' Parker.'
'Allo kids' and 'pleased to meet yer' and 'awright' came from the radio.
Then Ronnie said 'come on boys, ow abaat a proper Taxicab welcome for the dustbin lids, ay!'
And the smelly cab was filled with a song across the spacewaves...

OOOOOOOHHHHHHH.....

*Apples an' Pears,
Dog an' Bone,
I'll fall down the stairs,
An' answer the phone,
Trouble an' strife,
Rub a dub dub,
Let's tickle the wife,
An' scoff all the grub.
We're Terroristas,
On the run,
We won't take lip
From anyone,
Know all the short cuts, secret routes,
Never shave, an' don't wear suits.
We roam the skies,
Eatin pies,
A mug of tea sat on our thighs.
We'll pick you up,
We'll set you down
From A to B,
From village to town.*

OOOOOOOHHHHHHH.....

*North and South,
Pen and Ink,
Shut your mouth,
It don't 'arf stink.
Mud in yer eye,
Rub a dub dub,
Finish that pie,
Then down the pub!*

Mad cackling filled the cab and the kids fell about laughing on the back seat.
Then Ronnie told them about himself.
'We weren't always like this, y'know,' he started, 'used to be decent geezers. Nevva went round bashin' into strangers. I was in the army y'know. Sergeant Mayja Bottles! Fought in the Really Great Custard Wars*.'
AAAH-TEN SHUN,' he suddenly shouted, making the kids jump.
'Is that how you lost your eye, Ronnie? Fighting the Deadly Spoonheads in the Really Great Custard Wars?'

‘Douglas,’ hissed Lily, jabbing him in the ribs, ‘don’t be so rude.’

‘Thass awright,’ said Ronnie chuckling, ‘yes, young man, that’s exactly what happened. Flying spoon got me right in the eye. Took it for me Commander, he woz a very brave man, very brave man. Losin’ me eye to protect ‘im woz a privledge! We all woulda died for ‘im.’

‘So What happened after you left the army, Ronnie,’ asked Gilbert.

The big man slammed his fist down on the dashboard, making the kids jump again.

‘I’ll tell you what ‘appened, young man,’ bellowed Ronnie, ‘the Glorbing – ‘scuse my language – the Magnacorp Universal Conglomerate ‘appened, that’s what.’

‘The people that built the Maganatube,’ said Lily.

‘Spot on, me dear,’ he calmed down and winked at Lily with his one good eye in the rear-view mirror.

‘Now I’m sure you an yer teachers and everyone you know all fink the Magnytoob’s a great idea...’

‘Well, it is pretty awesome,’ exclaimed Douglas.

‘That may be so, young feller,’ barked Ronnie, getting cross again, ‘but it put people like me and me mates out of a job!’

Douglas bit his lip and apologised.

‘Not yer fault, not yer fault,’ said Ronnie, ashamed that he’d snapped at the boy.

‘Anyway...me an all the lads used to make a tidy livin’ runnin’ cabs between the planets. It were a great life, meeting all sorts of innerestin folk, feelin you was being useful.’

The children were quiet.

‘Them...people...at MUC, they didn’t offer us jobs or nuffink. So me an the lads thought awright, you’ve ruined our lives, we’ll make fings difficult fer you. We became the Taxicab Terroristas and we terrorise any MUC transit we find. Very sorry you happened to be in that Excape Jet. Nuffink against you kids right, you unnerstan’ that don’t cha?’

‘Yes, we understand,’ they nodded their heads.

‘Anyways, nuff bout me. Wot’s your story, kids, how comes you woz in that Excape Jet?’

‘Hmmm...’ Lily got in first before either of the boys, ‘we weren’t escaping from anything. Clever Douglas here,’ and she shoved Douglas on the shoulder, ‘got us trapped, and it just took off with us inside it. It smashed straight through the side of the MagnaTube!’

‘Aaarghhh haaaaahh haarghhh!’ erupted Ronnie, delighted.

‘Well done kids. You done so much damage already, you should join the Terroristas. I extend an official invitation.’

Voices crackled through the radio ‘welcome to the team’ and ‘good on yer kids.’

The boys looked absolutely thrilled.

Lily rolled her eyes. She didn’t seem so keen.

***The Really Great Custard Wars** – Following a very silly argument between the Commanders of the Gloopers Troopers and the dreaded Spoonhead Army from Planet Flart, over who had the smartest uniform, the Gloopers announced they would no longer supply custard to Flart. The Flartians were furious, as custard was a really important ingredient in their national dish, Flarty Tart. In fact it was the only ingredient. Flarty Tart is just a frozen custard base, with hot custard poured into it, served with a glass of lumpy, cold custard. In revenge, the Spoonhead Army sent a highly-trained squad of elite soldiers, the famous SPS (Special Puddin Service) who secretly landed on Puddin and blew up all the supply pipes from the Custard Holes. So no-one in the entire Glorbiverse could get any custard at all!

Outraged, both the Glorbians and the Gloopers declared war on Flart. The Really Great Custard Wars went on for many years until the dreaded Spoonhead Army was finally defeated and the survivors forced into slavery on the Potato Cliffs of Planet Smash.

Dora's Greasy Spoon

Ronnie checked his controls and turned to the kids.

'Nearly there kids, time fer some nosebag. Look at vat!'

Through the cracked, pie-spattered windscreen, they saw a rather unusual object getting larger and larger. If Gilbert had to guess what it was, he would've said it was a giant cup and saucer, floating in space.

By the time they had pulled up outside, he realised that that was exactly what it was.

A giant cup and saucer, floating in space.

The huge, white cup rotated slowly on its saucer. A flickering, old neon sign ran around the rim of the cup.

It said 'DORA'S GREASY SPOON.'

Row upon row of shining portholes dotted the cup. All manner of space-transits were arriving or leaving, beeping their horns and flashing their lights at each other.

'Goodness me, it looks busy,' said Gilbert.

'Oh yas,' said Ronnie. 'Dora's is always busy. Best caff this side of the Glorbiverse. Wait till you taste the chips, kids. Juss wait! I'd sell my mum for a plateful of Dora's hot, salty chips.'

'Really,' exclaimed Douglas. 'Would you really?'

Ronnie turned his great, thick neck and looked round at Douglas, frowning.

'Course not, you mug,' he growled menacingly, before breaking into a scary smile featuring a big, gold tooth and several gaping holes.

The cabs lined up behind Ronnie.

One by one, they drove in through an airdock on the edge of the saucer, straight into a chaotic car park.

Ronnie parked expertly, reversing without even looking, and the kids piled out of the cab.

They stripped off their spacesuits and it felt great to be able to walk around in their normal clothes again. They'd got used to the smell in Ronnie's cab, but now they were out, they realised how bad it had been.

All the other Terroristas were ambling over to them now.

They were stretching their arms above their heads, scratching their armpits and slapping each other on the back. They were all unshaven and had bulging tummies and smiling faces.

'Allo kids,' shouted a bald man with a gut almost as big as Ronnie's.

With a grunt, he knelt down on one knee and shook their hands in turn.

'I'm Reg Belly, 'ow do you do?'

'Very pleased to meet you, Mr. Belly,' said Gilbert.

All the others cabbies fell about laughing, clutching their stomachs.

'Wot polite kids you got, Mr. Bottles,' said another man in a cowboy hat and leather waistcoat, 'ave you been teachin' vem proper manners?'

The fat men all fell about again. They really were a jolly bunch of terrorists.

'Don't you take no notice of these rude cabbies, kids,' chuckled Ronnie, 'come over 'ere and get a load of this.'

He beckoned them over to a pair of old, steel doors set in the wall. He pressed a button and the children watched mystified as a coloured light descended down a line of buttons.

Then PING and the door slid open.

Amazing!

It was a real, old fashioned, antique lift. Gilbert had seen pictures of them on his Swotpod History screen. Inside the sliding doors there was a pair of metal gates, which opened like a concertina. Ronnie pulled them back with a clatter.

‘Bet you’ve nevva been in one of vese before, ave yer?’

‘No, sir,’ they all said and jumped in, making the lift bounce up and down unsteadily.

They felt butterflies in their stomachs as Ronnie slammed the rattling gates shut. The outer doors closed with another PING and the old lift whisked them smoothly up to the canteen at the top of the cup. The doors slid open and they stepped into Dora’s Greasy Spoon.

A tiny woman with curly white hair, wearing thick glasses, a stained apron and greasy slippers, came charging over to them, screaming, her skinny arms aloft. She kissed all the men and gave Ronnie a powerful hug.

‘Allo Ronnie, my sweetart! Reg Belly, look at you, well I nevva did. Lee, wot you been up to then you scallywag...? Phil an Carl, give me a cuddle, get the weight off yer plates me darlins. I ‘aint seen you in donkeys!’

Then she looked the children up and down with horror.

‘Wot ave you done to these kids?’ she shrieked. ‘Vey look like skelingtons!’

The men all laughed and nodded their heads, ‘yeah, skin an’ bone, Dora.’

‘Come over here, you lot,’ she cawed, ‘park yer bums an I’ll get yer some proper grub.’

‘Now yer talkin,’ said Ronnie.

The woman herded the children to a sticky, plastic table and sat them down.

‘Right me darlins. My name is Dora Nibbles and I run this place. Now what can I get you, ‘ow about some luvly hot chips?’

‘Ooohh, yes please, Mrs. Nibbles’ said Douglas eagerly.

‘Me too, please Mrs. Nibbles,’ Gilbert grinned.

Lily nodded her head and smiled.

‘Oooh. Wot nice, proper kids,’ said Dora approvingly.

‘Wot you doing wiv these smelly old cabbies?’

She shuffled off between the plastic tables, towards an open hatch, from which clouds of steam and smoke billowed.

‘EIGHT PORTIONS CHIPS AN EXTRA CHIPS, TABLE SIX,’ she screamed through the hatch.

Dora’s canteen was full of all kinds of travellers from across the Glorbiverse.

Talking and eating.

Arguing and joking.

Drinking steaming mugs of tea.

Laughing, smoking, coughing.

Some messaging on their handscreens. Others reading off theirs.

Some combing their hair, some picking their noses.

Some just watching everyone else, thinking to themselves.

Some fast asleep on their folded arms.

The smell of hot fat and fried food poured out of the hatch, along with the occasional flare of orange flame and cry of pain. On the wall next to the hatch was a blackboard with the menu scrawled on it in chalk:

Chips
 Egg an chips
 Sausage an chips
 Bacon an chips
 Spaceworms an chips
 Custard an chips
 Chips an chips
 Egg, sausage, bacon, spaceworms, baked beans, custard an chips
 Egg, sausage, bacon, spaceworms, baked beans, custard an chips, smothered in
 Wavy-gravy

The children looked about them in amazement.

A wonky, plastic fan rotated above their heads, like a squeaky propellor. Faded, black and white pictures of Glorb hung on the stained, greasy walls.

They showed old, tarmac motorways with dotted lines on them, funny looking transports with actual round wheels, strange concrete buildings with corners and square windows, ancient rockets standing up straight, things the kids had never seen before. In the middle of their table were several plastic bottles, each full of differently coloured liquids. Douglas picked one up, looked down the end and squeezed it. Thick, red sauce squirted out into his face.

‘Mmmmm...’ he said wiping the sauce off his face and licking his hand... ‘ooh yummy... what is that?’

‘Wot’s vat?’ said Ronnie incredulously, ‘wot’s vat? Aint you nevva tasted ketchup before, Dougy Boy?’

‘Ketchup?’ the children said, shaking their heads.

‘What on Glorb is that?’ said Gilbert.

‘Glorblimey,’ said Reg. ‘These poor kids. I s’pose next you’ll tell us yer nevva tasted Brown Sauce neither.’

The children looked at Reg blankly.

‘What’s Brown Sauce,’ said Douglas.

Lee’s jaw fell open like trap door. Carl’s elbow slipped off the table and he banged his head on the edge of it.

‘Oh my Glawb,’ exclaimed Reg horrified. He clutched his chest in pain and yelled across the café, ‘Dora. Bring the Brown Sauce...quick. I’m ‘avin an ‘art attack...’

Once again, the cabbies collapsed into laughter.

Before long, mountainous plates of hot, salty ‘Chips an Extra Chips’ arrived at the table, the kids couldn’t believe their eyes.

‘Wot did I tell yer,’ crowed Ronnie, waving his long arms about.

They quickly got stuck in, relishing for the first time the tangy taste of both Tomato Ketchup and Brown Sauce. Douglas had mixed his together into a thick, dark slurry and smothered his chips with it.

Then he quickly set about cramming as many of the hot, saucy chips into his mouth as was possible. His bulging eyes filled up with tears that ran down his bulging, chip-filled cheeks. He could hardly breathe and his complexion went first red, then ghostly white.

‘Steady on, Dougy,’ said Gilbert in alarm, ‘you’ll make yourself ill.’

But Douglas just couldn’t help himself. Straining hard, he made strange grunting noises until, with a massive effort, he finally managed to swallow the whole lot down in one go.

‘Aaarghhh,’ he exclaimed with some relief, burping noisily, ‘that was unbelievable,’ and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Then he licked his hand, wiped his hand on his sleeve, then licked his sleeve.

Lily watched him with horror, shaking her head.

‘Barely human,’ she murmured.

‘Righty ho, sprogllets,’ said Ronnie.

‘I said I’d take you ‘ome, so let’s get rollin. But lissen...’ and he put his long arms around them and gathered them close around the sauce-spattered table.

‘No mistake now. It’s gonna be a bumpy ride, OK. You’re not on a great big MUC jalopy now, kids. You’re in my old cab, an we gotta get through Glorb’s atmersphere thingy, so it will get a bit warm, an a bit bumpy. But we’ll be awright. Awright!’

The children nodded.

Ronnie clapped his hands together. ‘Good stuff. Let’s go!’

They all thanked Dora and said goodbye to the Terroristas and made their way back to Ronnie’s cab.

There were cries off ‘Be lucky,’ ‘Ta-ra kids,’ and ‘Don’t do nuffink I wouldn’t do.’

Ronnie made them put their shiny MUC space suits back on ‘juss in case,’ he said, laughing. He fired up the engine and a great plume of black smoke shot out of the exhaust pipe as it backfired noisily.

‘Does it always do that,’ asked Gilbert anxiously.

‘Yeah, don’t worry,’ said Ronnie. ‘Juss some dodgy fuel we nicked off of a MUC tourist transit...’

Nervous and excited, the kids settled onto the back seat amongst the clutter.

For the last time, Ronnie and his battered old cab took to the star-spangled skies.

Homeward Bound

The familiar shape of their home planet grew bigger in the windscreen.

‘Ere we go. Belts tight kids,’ said Ronnie, a little tensely.

The cab entered the turbulence of Glorb’s atmosphere and immediately started to shake and rattle, backfiring violently and sending out another dense cloud of black smoke. It was starting to get hot. The engine got louder and louder, until it was a high-pitched scream.

‘Hold tight,’ shouted Ronnie, ‘we’ll be back on Glorb before you know it...’

Then there was a very loud BANG. Smoke poured out from under the bonnet.

‘Oh my Glob,’ said Ronnie quietly.

The engine had exploded and they were free-falling through the blackness.

The cab’s bonnet started to glow a dull red. Lily buried her face into Gilbert’s shoulder and flung her arms around his neck, almost strangling him. Gilbert couldn’t imagine how things could possibly get worse.

But they did.

Nellie’s Fartleblaster detonated on the seat of his trousers. A loud, bubbling, farting noise rasped from beneath him, and the inside of the cab quickly filled with the most appalling stench.

‘For Glob’s sake,’ gasped Douglas, his eyes watering and swivelling around in disgust, ‘control yourself, Moonface!’

Lily let go of Gilbert immediately and pinched her nose. She looked at him, appalled.

‘Oh...Gilbert!’ she gasped, wafting away the hot, foul air with her hands.

‘Glorblimey, boy,’ yelled Ronnie from the front, ‘wot you been eatin...Wavy Gravy? Orrible!’

‘It’s not me! It’s not me!’ screamed Gilbert, horrified, as the Fartleblaster began to fizzle out and sing in a silly voice...

*Farts for me, farts for you,
Fartleblaster smells like poo!*

Gilbert found the tiny button-sized prank and ripped it off his trousers.

‘There. Look,’ he yelled, desperately showing it to the others, then hurled it onto the floor and stamped on it in fury. He’d never been so embarrassed.

‘I’m going to kill you, Nellie Moon!’ he bellowed,

But his cry was drowned out by a tremendous clap of thunder as the cab flew straight into a violent storm. Pitch black clouds crowded around them, torn apart by jagged forks of dazzling lightning.

‘OK kids, hold tight now, here we go...’

Thick smoke and the smell of burning fuel now filled the cab.

Everyone was coughing, tears streaming down their faces.

The cab juddered violently.

It was becoming hard to breathe.

Gilbert was losing consciousness.

Suddenly, Ronnie was shouting and pumping a lever on his door.

Freezing cold, fresh, sweet air filled their mouths and their lungs and Ronnie yelled,

‘WE’RE IN KIDS, WE’RE IN! WELCOME HOME!’

The hurtling, stricken cab emerged from the thunderous storm into a clear sky.

And there she was.

Glorb.

Big, pink, lovely.

Laid out beneath them like a beautiful picnic.

But it was no time to celebrate. The cab was now a useless chunk of dead, hot metal plummeting out of the sky. Ronnie was pulling various levers on his dashboard and punching buttons. There was a horrible, tearing, metallic screech and the cab’s roof peeled back like the lid of a can of beans. It spun off wildly into the sky.

The kids were thrown about by the turbulence and the noise was deafening.

Ronnie managed to turn to them, as the cab plunged towards the water below.

‘Goodbye kids,’ he shouted, giving them a thumbs up.

‘Really sorry. Stinkleweed Sea down there. You’ll be OK, I promise.’

He flicked up a small panel on his dashboard and hit the red button inside.

There was an explosion and the children were fired up, up and away from the cab.

The back seat splintered beneath them and their parachutes blossomed into bright yellow flowers above them. They watched in horror as Ronnie and the remains of his old cab burst into flames and plunged into the calm, brown surface of the Stinkleweed Sea.

∞

PART TWO

THE ISLAND OF THE PUFFAROONS

∞

The Stinkleweed Sea

The Stinkleweed Sea stank.

There was no getting away from that.

It stank of rotten eggs and blocked toilets.

Worse still, tangled in his parachute, Gilbert fell straight in, head first.

He surfaced, coughing and spluttering, struggling to release himself.

He tore off his spacesuit, shoes and trousers and looked around for the others, shouting their names.

There was no reply.

The water looked like cold tea and had suspicious looking brown lumps floating in it. The first sun was setting and the light was fading fast. Gilbert could feel something nibbling on his legs.

He kicked down and the nibbling stopped.

Fat, silver bubbles wobbled up his body, tickling him in all sorts of places and erupted around his shoulders with popping noises.

To his horror, someone tapped him on the shoulder.

He looked around in panic, but there was no-one there.

More fat bubbles oobled up his body, between his legs, under his arms.

‘Who’s there, stop mucking around!’ he shrieked.

The bubbles stopped and once again it was silent.

Gilbert was so scared.

‘Would you like some popcorn?’ whispered a gruff voice in his ear.

If he could have, Gilbert would have leapt out of the water completely.

‘Help!’ he screamed, ‘who’s there? Stoppit!’

It went quiet again.

All Gilbert could hear was the thudding of his own heart, which felt like it was in his mouth.

‘Would you like some marshmallows?’ said the voice again, a whispery grunt in his other ear.

Gilbert thrashed about in the smelly water, terrified.

A hissing voice came from above his head, ‘would you like some chocolate peanuts, Gilbert?’

It knew his name!

Slowly, he looked up and came face to face with two round, glistening eyes, and a wide mouth full of spiky teeth with a long, pointed tongue hanging out.

‘Waaaaagggghhhhh!’ cried Gilbert.

He felt himself being sucked down into the murky waters of the Stinkleweed Sea...and the last thing he heard was the beating of wings...

Lord Zanzibar Karrot the Thirty Third

Gilbert woke up in a large hammock made out of woven palm leaves, swaying gently in the warm breeze.

He opened his eyes.

The biggest, ugliest bird he'd ever seen was perched on the end, close to his feet.

It stared down at him, whistling loudly.

On the end of its scaly legs there were vicious, hooked talons which it flexed in an alarming way, one after the other. Its plumage and great wings were a bright orange colour. It looked a little like a parrot, except it had a long, black hairless neck, like a vultures, on the end of which bobbed a skull-like head. Its bulging yellow eyes rotated slowly, and it opened its curved beak, revealing a twisted black worm of a tongue. Quite horrible.

Gilbert stared at the bizarre bird in fascination and revulsion.

It stopped whistling and swung its bony head from side to side.

'Morning Gilbert,' it croaked in a conversational voice.

'Would you like a Sherbert Fountain? Ak ak aaak...'

Gilbert was too shocked to answer and slowly sat up. How did everybody here know his name?

The bird squawked in alarm.

'Silly boy. Lie down. Silly boy.'

Gilbert ignored it and started to climb over the side of the swaying hammock. Then he looked down and shrieked.

The hideous bird flapped its wings and screeched.

'Told you so. Told you so.'

It took off, still squawking, leaving Gilbert suspended hundreds of feet above the ground. The hammock was strung between the very tops of two palm trees.

He lay very still until the hammock stopped swaying, then peeped over the side.

And came face to face with the same glistening eyes and mouth full of spiky teeth he'd encountered out at sea. With a shriek, Gilbert leapt clean out of the hammock, and with his arms flapping wildly, he plummeted to the ground.

The horrible orange bird flew alongside him.

'Grab hold of my neck,' it snapped.

He did so immediately, clutching on tightly. The bird swooped close to the ground before landing on an old log. It turned to face the terrified boy and croaked.

'You can let go now boy...I can't breathe....'

Very slowly, Gilbert opened his eyes, released his grip and fell into the sand.

The bird shook its head and beat its huge, orange wings, once, twice and then burped.

'UURRRPPP! That's better.'

It hopped into the sand next to Gilbert, did a poo and then started talking.

'My name is Lord Zanzibar Karrot the Thirty Third, but my friends just call me Lord Karrot. And so can you! I'm a Bald-Faced Bonkerbird. What do you think of that?'

Gilbert said nothing.

It was not his favourite type of bird.

'Are you sure you don't want that Sherbert Fountain now, Gilbert? They're nice and fresh and fizzalicious...' the bird gabbled on, '...and what happened to your hair? It's all grey! Did you see a ghost? Did you fall in a pot of paint? Or are you an old man dressed up as a stupid little boy? Aaak ak ak aaaak!'

Gilbert was astonished. He knew that some birds could talk, but this one wouldn't shut up. And so rude!

He pushed himself up off the sand.

'How do you know my name, Mister...errrr... Bonkerbird?'

The bird swung its black neck and pushed his sharp beak close to Gilbert's face.

'I told you that my name...' he cawed loudly, 'is LORD ZANZIBAR KARROT THE THIRTY THIIIIIRRRDDDD! I don't know any Mr. Bonkerbirds,' he continued angrily, 'and if I did...HE'D BE CLEANING UP MY POO AND BE JOLLY GRATEFUL TOO...'

Gilbert recoiled in fright. Glops of spit flew out of the angry bird's beak, and he could smell its fishy breath.

'...so address me by my PROPER NAME, you stupid boy. And be grateful I didn't let you bounce a few times before rescuing you. Or the Crunchy Crabs would've had you for their supper tonight!'

The bird burped rudely, flapped his wings and headed out to sea.

Gilbert was left alone on the beach, quite relieved, but lonely.

What to do now? Where on Glorb were Douglas and Lily.

He didn't like the sound of the Crunchy Crabs and certainly had no intention of providing them with their supper.

Pulling himself together, Gilbert started to collect the black rocks that lay scattered across the beach.

Team Moon!

Lily and Douglas trudged through the hot sand.

They were not talking.

When Ronnie had fired them out of the cab, they'd watched in dismay as Gilbert's parachute drifted out to sea. The wind had blown them straight into a towering, sand dune, where they'd had a very uncomfortable landing.

They slid to the bottom of the dune, rolling over and over.

They tore off their scorched spacesuits and sat in the shade of a palm tree, whilst Lily silently made sunhats out of its leaves.

After a while, Douglas spoke cautiously.

'Lily. Did you see Gilbert?'

He knew she was really mad with him.

'Yes,' she said quietly, 'he was blown out to sea.'

'Hope he's alright,' Douglas ventured.

Yes,' Lily snapped, 'so do I Douglas. Because if he isn't, we all know whose fault it would be, don't we?'

After that, Douglas shut up.

The children walked towards the rotten egg smell and soon came to the sea.

'Phew, it pong doesn't it,' said Douglas, walking down to its edge, 'it doesn't look very nice either.'

'No, it doesn't,' said Lily, scanning the sea for any sign of Gilbert.

They paced up and down the beach, calling his name.

Finally Douglas pulled himself together and faced Lily.

‘Look Lily, I’m really sorry. This is all my fault and I should’ve listened to you up there. I admit it. But if we’re going to find Gilbert and get back to Gulp, we’ve got a better chance if we work together. OK?’

Lily tilted her head to one side and eyed him coolly.

‘Ok Douglas,’ she sighed, ‘for once you’re right.’

Douglas grinned.

‘One thing though, Dougy.’

‘What’s that, Lily?’

She stepped forward and punched him hard on the nose.

Douglas fell over backwards into the sand.

He was so startled.

‘OK?’ said Lily, rubbing her knuckles.

‘Yep...that’s fine’ said Douglas, rubbing his nose, ‘feel better now?’ he asked.

‘Yes Douglas. Much better, thank you.’

‘Good,’ he chuckled, climbing to his feet.

He offered her his hand and she took it.

‘Team Moon,’ said Lily seriously. ‘We’ll find Gilbert together.’

‘Team Moon,’ said Douglas.

They were solemnly shaking hands when a glob of greeny-white poo landed KERSPLAT on Douglas’s head.

‘Uuurghhh,’ he said, wiping it off and smelling it.

They looked up and saw a large, orange bird circling not far above them, chattering away to itself.

‘I’m sure I’ve seen one of those before,’ said Douglas, frowning.

He focused on the bird, his eyes narrowed in concentration, before widening in surprise.

‘What is it?’ said Lily

‘I swear that bird just said Gilbert’s name!’ said Douglas.

The Puffaroons

Gilbert walked for hours and hours.

He was hungry and thirsty, and sat himself down on a boulder.

He put his wet shoes and socks beside him to dry out.

‘Ak aka ak...’ he thought he heard from above his head and looked up. But with the sun glaring straight down, he could see nothing.

He turned to pick his shoes up, but they were gone. He looked around the rock and noticed that his socks, too, had disappeared.

What on Glorb was going on here?

Something greeny-white spattered onto his rock and he looked up again.

The Bald-Faced Bonkerbird was circling above him. Gilbert could hear him chattering away, a constant, croaking babble. Not wanting to lose sight of the creature, he hopped off the rock while he was still looking up.

But his right foot had somehow got trapped.

Still looking up, he pulled a bit harder, but his foot wouldn't budge. As the bird descended towards him, he finally looked down to see what was going on.

He couldn't believe his eyes.

His foot was actually inside the rock!

Panicking, Gilbert grabbed his trapped leg and pulled hard, but it was stuck fast inside the boulder.

'Oh my Glob,' he muttered, horrified. 'What's going on...where's my foot gone?'

Crazy, cackling laughter came from above him and something warm and wet landed SPLOT on his head. Warm, fishy air beat down on his face and Lord Zanzibar Karrot the Thirty Third was suddenly standing next to him.

'Hello Gilbert,' he cawed smugly, 'having a spot of bother? Ak! Ak! Ak!'

Gilbert was enraged.

'Did you just poo on my head?'

Lord Karrot leaned in close to Gilbert's face and quietly croaked...

'Now Gilbert...would you like a Jelly Baby?'

'NO!' Gilbert exploded.

'I would NOT like a Jelly Baby. Or some popcorn, or a sherbert fountain, or anything. Look at my foot!'

Lord Karrot hopped a few steps away from the furious, thrashing boy, who was trying to grab hold of the bird's horrid, black neck.

The ugly creature scratched under his wing rapidly with his beak, burped, and then croaked matter-of-factly.

'Gilbert old chap. I really think you ought to calm down, y'know.'

'Are you crazy,' screamed the boy in frustration, 'look at my foot...it's trapped in this rock!'

The Bonkerbird hopped over and studied the glowing rock with interest.

'Ark', he croaked and swivelled his head round to face Gilbert.

'Did you like that foot, then?'

Gilbert breathed deeply and spoke quietly, realising this hideous bird was the only one who might be able to help him and tried to calm himself.

'Yes,' he said, controlling his rage. 'I liked that foot. I LIKE that foot. I LIKE both my feet....'

'HMMMMM...' said Lord Karrot. 'Pity...big pity...'

Gilbert moved so quickly he managed to grab the bird's leg and roughly pulled the surprised creature close to his chest.

'RIGHT! You nasty, bad-tempered, fishy-breathed, ugly thing...now I want some answers from you, you....'

But Gilbert hadn't expected a sharp peck in the eye.

Or to be bitten on his small, sunburned nose.

Very hard.

'Oooyaahhhh,' he cried, clutching his face.

The laughing bird hopped back, cackling 'Ak! Ak! Ak!'

He was not a nice bird.

'Right!' he squawked triumphantly. 'You stupid, moany, no foot, grey-haired....'

But he saw that Gilbert had started to cry.

Fat tears rolled down the boy's dirty cheeks, leaving clean, wet tracks behind them.

Neither of them said anything.

Poor Gilbert lay in the hot sand.
His eye stung, his nose bled, his foot was stuck in a rock and he felt very sorry for himself.
He wished Douglas and Lily were with him, it surely wouldn't be so bad.
Lord Zanzibar Karrot stood by him, maybe feeling a little ashamed of his unkindness, and broke the silence.
'Gilbert. I'm going to be honest with you. Your foot isn't trapped in a rock.'
Gilbert was exhausted and just wanted something to eat or drink.
'Alright Lord Karrot...what is it then?'
The bird whispered in his ear.
'It's a Puffaroon.'
'A Puffaroon!' cried Gilbert, 'they're not really real. They're only in stupid stories. Like wizards and ghosts.'
Lord Karrot hopped around the oddly glowing, orange rock and hissed.
'Shhhh. Idiot boy. Keep it down, you'll annoy it. Of course they're real. You're stuck in one. How much more real do you want it to be?'
'But I thought they were made up...'
'Of course not. This is their island, this is where they live. That's why it's called The Island of the Puffaroons. You thickie.'
Something strange began to happen.
There was a humming sound and the Puffaroon began to change colour.
Very slowly, like a glow lamp. It got oranger and oranger, then redder and redder. Then it faded to a rather pretty yellow, before going khaki, leopardskin, spaghetti bolognese, and finally a revolting lime colour.
'Now you've done it,' said Lord Karrot.
'You're going to have to get your foot out of there quite soon.'
'Oh, do you think so,' said Gilbert sarcastically.
'Yes, I do, stupid little boy. I do.'
'Well, thank you for your advice, you SMELLY BONKERBIRD. What would I do without you?' shouted Gilbert.
The bird looked down on the boy, burped loudly and started to slowly flap his great, orange wings.
'Well...we shall see, shall we?'
'Ok ok.....' said Gilbert apologetically, trapped on the ground, waving his arms helplessly.
'I'm sorry,' he moaned through gritted teeth.
The bird cocked his head up to the sky and said in a very irritating voice,
'So you said you were.....?'
'I said I'm very, very sorry Lord Zanzibar Karrot...please don't go...can you help me, please...'
'OK. Apology accepted you stupid little boy. You are very stupid aren't you?'
Gilbert bowed his head, his foot felt most peculiar and quite achey.
'Yes, I am very stupid' he mumbled under his breath.
'Sorry I didn't quite catch that!'
'Yes, I'm very stupid' shouted Gilbert.
'And smelly?'
'Yes, I smell awful.'
'Like poo?'
'Yes, just like poo,' said Gilbert tiredly.
'Worse than your stinky friend, Bullpig Plugley?'
Gilbert shook his head in surprise, and then said, 'yes, worse than...Bullpig Plugley.'

‘And you’ve got silly grey hair as well, yes?’
‘Yes, my hair is grey and silly.’
‘Good,’ said the bird, looking very pleased with himself.
‘Now boy. Here’s what you’re going to have to do...’

Lullaby

Gilbert couldn’t believe what the bird had told him to do.
‘Sing to it! What are you talking about?’
Lord Karrot burped and continued.
‘If you want your foot back...you’re going to have to sing it out.’
‘Sing it out? What do you mean?’
‘Exactly what I say. You. Will. Have. To...’
‘Ok, ok. What do I have to sing, I’m not a very good singer.’
‘Welllll...’ said the bird, ‘...just do your best. Make up a nice song, asking for your foot back. The Puffaroon thinks it’s a warm little friend you see, like a hot water bottle. It’s just having a cuddle. If you sing to it, it will probably fall back to sleep and let your foot go.’
‘What sort of song should I sing?’
‘Well, how about a lullaby? You must know a nice lullaby.’
Gilbert had to think. It had been a long time since his mother had sung him any lullabies. In fact, when he thought about it, they had always been in a strange language he couldn’t understand, like ‘Drunkning i Fjord’, which she sang quite often. She sang it beautifully, although there was quite a bit of shouting and screaming in parts of it. When he asked her sleepily what it was about, she told him it was about naughty children drowning horribly in a freezing river covered in ice.
So he slept really well after that.
Then he remembered some lullabies that his dad had sung to him.
‘How about ‘Rock-a-Bye Baby’?’ he suggested.
‘Sounds good to me’, said Lord Karrot.
‘Alright,’ said Gilbert. ‘I hope it works, I really need the toilet...’
‘Well, better get on with it then, boy,’ squawked the bird, ‘before you wet your pants!’
Gilbert started humming and then singing to the tune of ‘Rock-a-bye Baby’ in a shaky voice...

*Strange desert island, covered in rocks,
Gobbled my shoes, and then ate my socks.
Next went my foot, which feels kind of numb,
Please give it back now...dum da dee dum...*

Gilbert looked expectantly at his foot and then at the bird.
The Puffaroon had started to change colour rapidly. Lord Karrot burped in disgust.
‘Awful boy, that’s not going to work. Try something else.’
‘What’s that noise?’ said Gilbert. He could hear a faint chuckling.
‘That’s the Puffaroon, it’s laughing at you. Frankly, I’m not surprised.’
‘Puffaroon’s can laugh?’

‘Of course they can. And they cry and sneeze and fart. Why not? Now get on with it boy, or you’ll be stuck there forever. In your wet pants. Ak ak ak!’

Gilbert thought hard.

‘OK, how about ‘Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star’?’

‘Can’t be any worse than that last one.’

‘Give me a chance...here we go...’

*Twinkle, twinkle, Puffaroon,
Can I have my foot back soon,
How I love your colours so,
Shifting, changing all aglow,
Twinkle, twinkle, Puffaroon,
Can I have my foot back soon!*

Gilbert felt something changing around his foot, a pleasant, tickling sensation.

‘I think it’s working!’ he whispered excitedly.

‘Carry on!’ croaked the bird urgently, ‘that’s it.’

Gilbert sang...

*Twinkle, twinkle, Puffaroon,
Can I have my foot back soon!
We crash landed in the sea,
Now I’m bursting for a pee,
Twinkle, twinkle, Puffaroon,
Can I have my foot back soon!*

With a lovely, fluid sensation like warm honey and a sound like a hundred bees buzzing, Gilbert’s foot slid out of the Puffaroon and he rolled away in relief.

‘Hurahh!’ he cried.

‘Huzoooh!’ cawed Lord Karrot.

Then they both fell silent and stared at Gilbert’s foot.

‘Yip’ burped the bird, ‘well...that happens sometimes.’

‘Oh no,’ moaned Gilbert.

Dougys’s Pockets

Lily and Douglas had given up calling Gilbert’s name.

They sat in the sand, disconsolate.

‘If he landed close to the shore...’ Lily started, but a dull weight had settled in her chest and she couldn’t finish her sentence.

They walked inland, feeling quite miserable. Douglas thrust his hands into his wet pockets in despair.

‘Hang on...’ he said, ‘what’s this?’

He pulled out a soggy, blue square of paper and held it up in the light.

‘What’s that Douglas,’ said Lily unimpressed, ‘chewing gum?’

'Oh no,' said Douglas, carefully unwrapping the thing.

'It's better than chewing gum.'

He showed her.

The nearly-smile appeared on Lily's face, the first time Douglas had seen it since they'd been on the Viewing Deck.

It was so good to see.

'FloatyGum,' she whispered.

'Yep. Forgot I'd left it in these trousers.'

He carefully unwrapped the packet to reveal two pink pellets of the magical gum.

Lily stretched out her hand.

'We'll be able to see for miles.'

'Tracks in the sand, anything.'

They each popped a pellet into their mouths. After a few minutes, the tingling started in their feet, then their knees and stomachs. Before long they were floating a few inches off the ground.

'Give me your hand', said Lily.

Soon they were aloft, climbing into the sky. The warm breeze blew them gently along and they kept a firm hold of each other. Below them the whole island slowly unfolded.

'Look,' said Lily sadly, pointing out to sea.

A shimmering, oily stain marked the spot where Ronnie's cab had hit the water.

Douglas's eyes swivelled this way and that, scrutinising the beach beneath them, looking for any sign or clue that would lead them to their friend.

Then he shouted in excitement.

'Look! Right over there. Lily, look!'

Tiny black rocks were set in the sand, spelling out...

GILBERT MOON CALLING
HELP ME!

Footprints lead away from the rocks, towards the jungle.

'I can see. Well done Dougy, well done,' said Lily calmly and squeezed his hand in gratitude. Relief flooded through them both.

Gilbert had made it.

Big Blue Lizard

Gilbert sat in the sand, staring at his foot.

It was slowly changing colour, just like the Puffaroon, which was now gently snoring.

'How long does this last?' he muttered.

'No idea boy...maybe for ever...ak aka ak!'

Gilbert rolled his eyes, moved quietly away from the Puffaroon, and peed gratefully against a palm tree.

The Bonkerbird clucked disapprovingly.

'This is a nice island y'know boy. Not a public toilet.'

That was rich coming from him, Gilbert thought, he just poos everywhere, so he ignored him and said.

‘Lord Karrot? What was that thing underneath the hammock. With the big eyes, and the mouth full of spiky teeth?’

The bird ducked his head from side to side, scratched himself under the wing with his beak and did a terrible fishy burp.

‘What thing?’

‘You know who I mean, that...thing. It found me out at sea and offered me popcorn and marshmallows and things.’

‘Oh, herrrrrrrr,’ said the bird.

‘Yes,’ said Gilbert, ‘herrrrrr,’ mimicking the bird.

Lord Karrot glared at the boy.

‘That’s just Sister Skulldust the Boymuncher,’ he said matter-of-factly.

‘Don’t worry about her boy...she’s always looking for something to eat. Bit like you.’

‘Sister. Skulldust. The Boymuncher,’ he repeated slowly, ‘that’s an interesting name.’

‘Not really,’ disagreed the bird, ‘not as interesting as mine.’

Gilbert gave up, he was starving.

‘Look Lord Karrot, where can I get proper things to eat and drink. Not Sherbert Fountains, or marshmallows or stuff like that...though they’re very nice and I’m really grateful...’ he added quickly, he didn’t want to upset the bird again.

‘Hmmm,’ said the bird, ‘no sweets, eh! You’re an odd little boy, so what do you want then?’

‘Oh,’ said Gilbert, brightening, ‘a nice sandwich would be...nice’.

‘A sandwich,’ said the bird, ‘no problem!’

He flapped his great wings and was gone.

Gilbert lay half asleep, dozing in the hot sand, when the sound of clinking bottles clinking stirred him.

‘Thank Glob for that...’ he moaned sleepily.

Something was crashing noisily through the trees. The Puffaroons lying about in changed colour and buzzed loudly.

Gilbert got a bit scared.

What if it was Nurse Boycruncher Skullface, or whatever her name was!

But it wasn’t her.

It was only a ten foot tall, blue lizard.

In ski boots.

Wearing dark sunglasses and smoking a stinky, black cigar.

He was pushing a drinks trolley and singing along to whatever was playing on his headphones. Lazily swinging his big, blue lizardy head from side to side, moaning...

‘Buffalo soooljah...Dreadlock Rasta...’

The lizard nodded his pointy, blue head at Gilbert as he continued singing, ‘Buffalo soooljah...in da heart of Americah!’

He reached the boy, pulled his headphones off and smiled broadly.

Gilbert drew his legs up to his chest and clasped his arms around them.

The lizard slowly raised one massive, scaly arm and pointed at Gilbert’s foot.

‘Gilbit. Ah see ya already met da Poffaroonnsss! Ah hoo hoo ahoooo!’

As he laughed, blue smoke wafted off his head and Gilbert smelt an odd smell.

‘Hello, big blue lizard,’ he said dreamily.

He felt so tired, he didn’t care that he was talking to an enormous, blue lizard.

‘Can I have something from your trolley, please?’ he mumbled.

The lizard’s yellow, slitted eyes blinked from the bottom upwards, once, twice.

He knelt down next to Gilbert and gently lifted his sandy, nodding head in his great claw. He pulled out a small bottle of pink water from his trolley and put it in Gilbert's mouth, like feeding a baby. Gilbert gratefully sucked on the bottle, curling up in the lizard's arms. The water was delicious, a bit sweet, a bit lemony, and so cool. It was perfect, it was dreamwater.

He drank and drank.

Then he slept.

Rumble in the Jungle

Douglas and Lily drifted to the ground as the FloatyGum wore off. Both suns had set and with dusk approaching, time was running out. They soon picked up Gilbert's trail of footprints along a sandy path, heading towards the volcano in the middle of the island. Passing a tree stump, they were stopped in their tracks by a croaky voice.

'Didn't know stupid kids could fly. Ak.'

The children slowly turned to face Lord Zanzibar Karrot the Thirty Third, magnificently orange, preening himself on the stump.

'Hello Douglas,' he squawked, 'fancy a tasty, fat Gobsauage in green gravy?'

Douglas shook his head in surprise.

'Hello Lily, what's 13 x 67?'

They eyed the bird suspiciously.

'How do you know our names,' asked Lily, then, 'you've seen Gilbert haven't you?'

'Two questions, Lily!' exclaimed the bird, 'you're only allowed one.'

'Where's our friend Gilbert,' shouted Douglas, 'I heard you talking about him!'

He lunged at the bird, which flapped its wings and moved from claw to claw. Orange feathers flew as he flexed his sharp talons at Douglas.

'Don't shout at me, you rude boy,' screeched the bird, 'you won't make friends like that.'

With that he hopped into the air and flew off.

As he went, he turned his head and squawked, 'stay on the path and carry on going. You'll know what to do, girl...ak ak.'

With that strange parting message, he disappeared into the treetops.

'He knows where Gilbert is, I'm sure of it,' said Douglas, 'and that was a Bald-Faced Bonkerbird. I remember now. Horrible.'

Lily knew he was right about Gilbert, so they did as the bird had said.

As they climbed the hill, the palms disappeared and the jungle closed around them. Towering trees blocked out the light. Creepers hung down like climbing ropes. Tall stands of bamboo caged them in. Scary noises came at them from all sides - high pitched screams and angry jabbering.

'I don't like this one bit,' groaned Douglas.

'Stay on the path and carry on going,' repeated Lily with determination.

Finally, the jungle thinned out and they came to a circular clearing. It was an oasis of calm away from the reach of the things in the jungle. The children walked to its centre and Lily looked up to the sky, frowning.

'Oh. I understand now. Clever bird.'

‘What,’ said Douglas, mystified, ‘what do you understand? Why have we come here? Who’s clever?’

Lily was searching the ground, looking for something.

‘Have you dropped something, Lily. What is it?’

‘Look for a stick Douglas, about so long,’ she showed him with her hands.

Douglas gave up asking questions, shrugged, and just did what he was told.

‘What about this,’ he said, waving a length of fresh bamboo at her.

Lily took it and bent it this way and that, a look of concentration on her face.

‘Hmmm,’ she said. ‘I think so, I could give it a go.’

‘What?’ he insisted, ‘give what a go?’

‘I’m going to try something Dougy. I’m not sure what’s going to happen, but I’m going to try to get Gilbert’s attention. Bring him to us, instead of us trying to find him.’

‘Good idea,’ said Douglas, ‘what you going to do, start a fire?’

‘No. Something else. I’m going to need your help.’

‘No problem. What should I do?’

Lily pointed at the ground.

‘Get on all fours. Right here.’

‘What! You want me to get on all fours. In the dirt.’

‘Yes Dougy. Then I’m going to stand on your back.’

‘You’re going to stand on my back.’

‘Correct. I don’t weigh very much. Now come on. Team Moon! We’re running out of time. Trust me.’

Douglas looked completely puzzled.

‘Team Moon!’ he mumbled, falling to his hands and knees in the dirt.

Lily climbed onto his back, steadied herself and started to breathe deeply through her nose.

‘You got asthma or something?’

‘Douglas,’ said Lily patiently, ‘please shut up now. I have to concentrate. Just stay upright, OK. When the noises start, keep your head down and close your eyes. It may get windy.’

Douglas shook his head in disbelief. He had absolutely no idea what was going on. Perhaps Lily had gone bonkers.

She started her breathing again and her feet vibrated on his back. Her breath came rapidly and Douglas felt her whole body trembling.

She held the bamboo out towards the jungle on the far side of the clearing.

It started to hum quietly.

A wind picked up quite suddenly and was soon racing around the inside of the clearing. Leaves, dust and sand were thrown up into the air. Douglas squeezed his eyes shut as dirt flew up his nose.

Deep, groaning noises rolled across the clearing towards them. Lazy, green sighs of relief, the sounds of old roots stretching, vines twisting, mighty leaves filling with sap and unfurling.

Just as suddenly, the wind dropped and all that was left were the strange noises.

Despite what Lily had said, Douglas looked up.

He couldn’t believe what he saw.

The jungle had come alive.

It was moving all together, not like it was swaying in the wind, but like it was performing an elaborate dance. The noises coming out of it were like nothing he’d ever heard before. A high-pitched singing from the tops of the trees and a satisfied groaning from their roots. All slowly coming together like an orchestra tuning up.

Lily was really shaking now and Douglas worried she might fall.

The noises got louder as more and more of the trees joined in.

A steady beat began and some of the trees cracked their trunks together, like giant rhythm sticks. Flying lianas cracked like whips. Leaves the size of cars slapped against each other like monstrous, green hands.

Soon, they were completely surrounded by this unbelievable, thumping symphony of sound and motion. The animals in the trees joined in, hooting and screeching in time.

Douglas turned his head to see Lily rigid on his back, her hair standing on end. Her eyes were squeezed shut and her mouth was open, as if she was singing one long, note. Her dancing arms were just a blur.

Above the turbulent clearing, a huge wheel of seabirds had gathered as one, crying and screaming as they slowly circled. The sound was deafening. And it was getting louder and louder. Douglas thought the jungle might explode.

Then Lily collapsed, as if her power cord had suddenly been cut. She fell to the ground by Douglas's side, the bamboo spinning away from her.

The jungle music stopped almost immediately, plunging the clearing into an eerie silence. Huge leaves drifted gracefully to the ground, the dust settled as the now soundless birds continued to wheel above them.

Douglas crawled over to where Lily lay and cradled her head in his arms. He brushed the damp hair back from her pale forehead.

'Come on Lily, come on. Be alright. Please...'

Her eyes darted about beneath her dark lids. Her lips barely moved, but Douglas leant close and heard her say,

'Okay, don't worry, we will. See you soon...Gilbert promised we'll come and find you...one day...'

Douglas was so confused, who was she talking to, what had Gilbert promised?

Lily's dark eyelids slowly flickered open.

She shook her head, waking from her dream.

'That was interesting,' she announced to Douglas, smiling radiantly.

Douglas's jaw hung open.

'What!' he yelled. 'Interesting! You made the jungle go mad. I thought we were going to die!'

Lily sat up and looked around them.

'Wow,' she said, sounding pleased with herself, 'I've never played a jungle before. So powerful. Really intense.'

Douglas sat in the dirt, dazed. He didn't know what to say any more.

But someone else did.

'Is she alright?' came a squeaky voice.

'Did she just do that music?' came an even squeakier voice.

'You better come and meet our dad,' came the squeakiest of the three voices.

The children looked up and saw three small, blue lizards, holding hands.

'I'm Tiggy,'

'I'm Jiggy.'

'I'm Wiggy.'

They trotted forward and studied the two children with curiosity.

'Hello Tiggy, Jiggy and Wiggy,' said Lily gently, 'did you enjoy the concert?'

'It was fantastic,' said Tiggy.

'You woke us up,' said Jiggy.

'I want my dad,' said Wiggy.

Douglas and Lily stood. The lizards only came up to their knees, but Tiggy held out her small claw.

'Come with us, you'll be safe.'

Douglas finally managed to find his voice.

‘Wh...where did you come from? One minute there was no-one here, next minute, there you are.’

The lizards broke into a chorus of high-pitched giggles.

Jiggy lifted a flat rock, revealing a gaping hole.

‘Tunnels’ she cried triumphantly.

‘Let’s go,’ said Tiggy, pulling Lily along by the hand.

Douglas stood firm.

‘Hang on Lily, what about Gilbert?’

‘It’s OK Dougy. My parents just told me we should go with the little lizards.’

Douglas’s eyes rotated in opposite directions.

‘Your parents! And where are they? Hiding under a rock somewhere?’

‘I’ll explain later, Douglas. Let’s go shall we...’

Douglas just shook his head and shrugged.

‘Whatever, Lily. Whatever...’

They followed the lizards into the ground.

The March of the Crunchy Crabs

It was dark when Gilbert woke up. He sat up and rubbed his eyes.

What a vivid dream, it had felt so real.

He’d heard Lily’s amazing Jivani so clearly, but it had been very different. Incredibly strong and wild and green, not like before.

Gilbert had seen her standing rigid, hair flying, mouth open, eyes clenched shut. Huge leaves were flying through the air and she looked a bit scary.

He also thought he’d dreamt about a giant, blue lizard, but then a giant, blue lizard leant over him.

‘You a good sleeper, Gilbit,’ he said in his deep, dreamy voice.

‘Thank you. What’s your name, Mr. Lizard?’

‘Ziggy,’ said the lizard, ‘Ziggy Bonedance.’

‘Have you got a sandwich, Ziggy?’

‘I have lots of sandwiches, Gilbit.’

‘May I have one, please?’

‘Most certainly. You have as many as you want, ma boy.’

Ziggy passed Gilbert a sandwich and the boy hungrily stuffed it into his mouth.

Almost immediately, he spat it out coughing and spitting...

‘Ugh! Ogh...what is that?’ he cried.

Ziggy looked confused and concerned.

‘Iss a sandwich, Gilbit, what you ask for.’

‘What was in it? It’s horrible!’

‘Well...sand.’

‘What!’

Well...sand. Iss a sandwich. What you expeck?’

‘Sand! You gave me a sandwich full of sand! Do you think that’s funny?’

Gilbert grabbed a bottle labelled lemonade off Ziggy's drink's trolley and quickly glugged a mouthful to rinse the sand out. He immediately spat that out too, coughing and screwing his face up.

'Arghhhh! That's terrible,' he spluttered. 'What the Glob is that?'

Ziggy looked even more confused.

'Well, iss lemonade, boy. Made out of lemon juice.'

Gilbert was scratching his tongue, trying to get the taste out.

'I sorry Gilbert, you don't like sand or lemon juice?'

'Not to eat or drink. No!'

The lizard looked so crestfallen that Gilbert felt ashamed he'd made such a fuss.

'It's alright Ziggy, don't worry. It's not your fault...'

Ziggy felt dreadful. He went over to his drinks trolley and picked up something else.

'Gilbert, would you like some Marzipan Sloskake? Juss made it this morning.'

Gilbert looked at it suspiciously, but he was absolutely ravenous. He stuffed the yellow gunge into his mouth and instantly felt better.

Ziggy fed him fat, melty Gobcheese and Orange Sprizzle Cake, Bubblegum Pudding with Hot Mudcustard, Treacle Spongeballs followed by Deepfried Gruffins smothered in Spicecream.

Gilbert lay in the sand, watching the shooting stars. He was so full he could barely move.

Finally, he rolled on his side and let out a long, satisfied burp.

'Excuse me,' he said politely.

'You excused, Gilbit. I glad you feelin' better', said Ziggy sincerely.

'Ziggy. I have two friends here somewhere. I really need to find them. We all...fell out of the sky...well...space. We have to get back to Gulp.'

'Hmm,' mused Ziggy. 'Gulp an awful long way. What you friends look like?'

'Well...a boy and a girl, both about my age. Douglas is short and squat and has strange swivelly eyes and he smells a bit, and Lily... is...errr...quite pretty, I suppose.'

To his surprise, he felt himself blushing.

'Well tell me Gilbit,' said Ziggy, stroking his snout, 'do they make lots of noise?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean lots of noise! There was one heck of a racket coming out of the jungle earlier on, when you sleepin. Someone was stirrin up the jungle big time.'

'Stirring it up?'

'Yeah. Singin and dancin! Havin a party...enjoyin itself!'

Gilbert sat there puzzled. How could a jungle sing, or dance, or enjoy itself?

Then his eyes widened.

'Oh my Glob,' he cried. 'That's her. That's them. I know that's them.'

'Well doan you worry Gilbit. My little girls find them. You can't make a kermotion like that roun' here without my girls investigatin. They find you friends.'

'OK,' said Gilbert, feeling happier, even though his stomach was beginning to ache and bubble. But something else was bothering him, so he ignored his tummy ache and spoke up.

'Ziggy...do you know...errr...Sister Skulldust the Boymuncher?'

'Hmmm...' said Ziggy, looking thoughtful. Blue smoke wafted from his head.

'Doan worry about her,' he said unconcerned, 'she always hungry. Next time you see her, all you need to do is...'

Ziggy suddenly stopped speaking and lifted his snout, moving it from side to side, sensing something in the night air. Gilbert wished he hadn't stuffed himself so full of treats. He felt very plump and tasty. Probably irresistible to a creature with the word Boymuncher in her name who was always hungry.

‘Is it her...Sister Skulldust?’

‘No, boy, don’ think so,’ said Ziggy.

Gilbert thought he could hear something too. A distant clapping sound, getting steadily louder.

‘Gilbit, my boy,’ said Ziggy, ‘we need to make a move.’

Gilbert didn’t feel like moving anywhere. He felt heavy, like a sack of wet rice.

‘What is it?’

‘Well, it’s that time of the year, my boy...dem crabbies on the march...look,’ he said, pointing at the horizon.

Three full moons hung low in the sky like a matching set of golden saucers.

The rhythmic sound, like the snapping of hundreds of dry sticks, was getting closer. The sand beneath Gilbert’s feet softly thumped in time to it.

‘Come on Gilbert, we gotta move boy,’ said Ziggy urgently.

Gilbert tried to push himself off the ground, but couldn’t do it.

‘Oh Gilbert!’ exclaimed Ziggy, looking at the struggling boy with dismay.

‘Oh maaaaaan...you ett too much! You got SUPERGRAVITITIS, son!’

‘I’ve got what?’ cried Gilbert.

‘Oh my Saint Bob...iss my fault,’ moaned Ziggy in despair.

‘I let ya eat too much...much too much too much...’

He shook his smoky head from side to side.

‘Now you got Supergravitis and the Crunchy Crabs are on de march.’

‘The Crunchy Crabs!’ wailed Gilbert, ‘Supergravitis! What on Glorb is that? I can’t get up Ziggy. You have to help me...’

Panic rose in his voice.

‘Hold still,’ said Ziggy, trying to calm him. He bent his scaly, blue back and slid his claws underneath Gilbert, lifting him with difficulty.

‘Ooooooh man, you heavy,’ he groaned, ‘you sho’ got a severe case of Supergravitis.’

Ziggy laid him carefully onto his trolley, which creaked loudly in protest.

The sound of the Crunchy Crab’s approach was getting louder.

‘CRACK! SNAP! CRACK! SNAP!’

The ground shook to the beat of their thunderous approach. Coconuts fell from the palms like bombs. One of them bounced off Ziggy’s snout and landed in Gilbert’s lap.

Ziggy drove the trolley forward with his powerful legs, the wheels squealing. Gilbert sank deeper into it, the metal buckling beneath his enormous weight. Terrified, he looked back over the lizard’s shoulder and saw the crabs coming, hundreds of them. A boiling river of huge, purple-shelled crabs, a mass of waving spines and eyes and knobbly legs, with one mighty claw held high - SNAP! SNIP! SNAP!

They snipped the branches off trees and even bits off each other as they surged forward in a wave of crabby crunchiness....

Ziggy ploughed his sinking trolley through the sand, until its front wheels hit a buried log and Gilbert was launched forward, flying through the air and landing heavily on his back, winding him. He looked around for Ziggy in desperation, but he was nowhere to be seen. The big lizard had just vanished. Gasping for breath, he stared in terror as the Crunchy Crabs charged towards him in a snapping, snipping frenzy, their massive, jagged claws making a terrible racket... SNAP! SNIP! SNAP!

In seconds, they had surrounded him.

Gilbert crouched there helpless, all alone. He felt their hot, crabby seabreath on his face. He closed his eyes and thought of Lily, how sad she would be when she heard what a horrible end Gilbert Moon had met.

It had gone completely quiet.
He cautiously opened one of his eyes.
Then the other.
He watched, petrified, as one of the crabs approached him.
It stopped right in front of him and prodded his shoulder with a long, purple claw.
Gilbert was surprised to see it was wearing a little waistcoat and a monocle.
'Hello Gilbert, old bean,' it said in a very posh accent.
'My name's Stanley. Would you like a Crunchie?'
Gilbert fainted.

A Crab Chorus

Gilbert woke, bouncing along in a seaweed throne, tied to the back of a massive, black crab.
He was surrounded by all the other Crunchy Crabs, marching along merrily in the bright moonlight. They waved their great, snippy claws in the air and sang a jolly, crabby song, like this....

*Weeeee are the Crunchy Crabs,
CRUNCHY CRABS! CRUNCHY CRABS!
Weeeee are the Crunchy Crabs,
And we like to pop balloons!*

*Weeeee love our leader Stan,
HE'S THE MAN, CLEVER STAN!
Heeeee's got a cunning plan,
And he likes to watch cartoons!*

*Weeeee like to scare young boys,
SCARE YOUNG BOYS! SILLY BOYS!
Weeeee like to chase them cross,
The moonlit, sandy dunes.*

*Weeeee like to snip and snap,
SNIP AND SNAP, SNIP AND SNAP!
Giiiiilbert's a lovely chap,
The best of all the Moons!*

*Weeeee have a secret club,
SECRET CLUB, UNDERGROUND!
Heeeeere on the island of
The HUFFA PUFFA ROONS!*

Gilbert slid around in his smelly seaweed throne. It popped and squelched beneath him. ‘Excuse me, Mister Crab,’ Gilbert yelled at the crab carrying him, ‘can you tell me where you’re taking me, please?’ But his voice was drowned out by the crabtastic chorus, as they started a new song...

*Oooooooooohhhhh.....
We smell like brine,
And we drink fish wine,
Our shells are tough,
Our voices gruff,
Our purple claws can slice through doors,
So just watch out,
When you hear us shout,
“Clear off, get stuffed,
Your popcorn’s puffed,
Don’t look so chuffed,
We’ve had enough,
Our claws are huge and grabulous,
They’ll squeeze your spots,
Oh no! Green pus!
We’ll poke your eyes,
We’re JABULOUS!
We’re ABSOLUTELY CRABULOUS!”*

Gilbert wasn’t at all pleased with this song.
It sounded horrible.

The Crunchy Crabs now fell absolutely silent, swarming across the dark dunes. Gilbert hung onto his seaweed throne as best he could. An urgency had come over the crabs and he felt nervous. Before them loomed a towering cliff-face and the crabs surged headlong towards it, as if they were going to crash straight into it, when it opened before them with a deep, rumble. They poured into a tunnel and Gilbert heard the secret door rumble close behind them, plunging them into darkness. He clung on to his slippery throne for dear life, as they travelled down the gloomy tunnel. With relief, he realised it was gradually getting lighter. The crabs slowed down and then finally stopped. The light was coming from a flashing neon sign, which hung over a pair of solid rock doors. The flashing sign said CLUB CRABULOUS. Through the heavy doors, Gilbert heard the thump of loud music. Two enormous Megalobsters in black suits and sunglasses stood outside the doors. One of them was wearing an earpiece and holding a clipboard in his claw. Between them hung a thick, red velvet rope. Stanley strutted up to the Megalobsters and did an elegant little dance. The rope was immediately whisked aside and the doors swung open. A hot gust of smoky air and throbbing music came rushing out. The Crunchy Crabs, carrying Gilbert aloft, swept inside. Gilbert couldn’t believe his eyes.

CLUB CRABULOUS!

Multicoloured disco lights spun and a machine pumped out green, seaweedy smelling smoke. The music was fast and loud.

The dancefloor was packed with every kind of crustacean imaginable, their eyestalks and antennae and claws waving madly in the stuffy air.

A huge band of Fiddler Crabs was on the stage, frantically playing their fiddles.

Behind them was a choir of Fat-Handed Shrimps, singing in harmony, swaying and clapping their fat hands.

Bouncing Barnacles used a kettle drum as a trampoline, keeping up a rapid beat. A mighty Rock Lobster conducted them all, slapping his red tail on the stage. Flames leapt up on either side of the stage, purple smoke rings floated above it.

Stanley scuttled over to where Gilbert sat in his seaweed throne. He held out his claw and Gilbert gratefully clambered down. His legs were so wobbly from the bumpy ride, he could barely walk.

The crabs were ushered towards an area with a big sign hanging over it saying VIC's LOUNGE and they seated themselves at the tables.

Stanley led Gilbert to a gilded table on a raised platform.

'Take a pew old chap, take a pew!' he said jovially, 'top table.'

Gilbert noticed with alarm that all the tables had a Puffaroon sitting on it, glowing with cosy, shifting colours. His foot became warm and itchy and he shook it with irritation.

The band finished and Gilbert asked, 'who's VIC?'

'Hah! Who's VIC!' Stanley bellowed with laughter.

'It stands for Very Important Crabs, dear boy, you're the guest of a Very Important Crab.'

'Goodness me,' said Gilbert.

'And I'm in charge,' shrieked Stanley suddenly, jabbing Gilbert in the chest with his claw.

'Ouch!'

'Now,' said Stanley, all charm again, 'how about a little drink, Gilbert. You must be a thirsty young fellow!'

'Yes, a drink would be nice. That was quite a journey,' agreed Gilbert, rubbing his chest.

'Good good! How about a cocktail, old chap. They make killer cocktails here!'

'Oh,' said Gilbert, unsure, 'I've never had a cocktail before.'

'Never had a cocktail! Well paint my pincers pink!'

Stanley waved at a waiter.

'Stefan! Over here.'

A smart, blue crab in a waistcoat scurried through the drifting, seaweed smoke, his shiny, black shoes clattering on the polished floor.

'This is a Beancounter Crab, Gilbert. From the depths of the Maltarian Trench. They make fantastic waiters, amazing heads for numbers. And they can remember any order, however tricky. Bit rude though.'

The Beancounter Crab tossed a menu at Gilbert whilst shouting angrily into his headset.

'Ha ha ha! See,' cried Stanley, 'now Gilbert, old chap, what's your poison?'

'Hmm. Don't really know. Can you suggest anything?'

'Of course, dear boy! Of course! How about you try a Smelly Shell Shocker?'

Gilbert screwed up his face and shook his head.

'...or a Sneaky Pincer Movement?'

'Umm...no thanks.'

'Well, how about a Big Blue Bottom Feeder!'

'I'm not sure about that one.'
'You're certainly picky for someone who's never had a cocktail before!'
'Sorry Stanley, but they all sound awful.'
'Honestly.' Stanley rolled his eyestalks at Stefan, who sniffed, said 'Twak' and started tapping his drinks tray impatiently.
'OK Gilbert. How about a Seasquirt Surprise?'
'What's that made of then?'
'Gahhh!' exclaimed Stanley, with exasperation, 'it's a SURPRISE, isn't it.'
Gilbert felt he didn't have much choice.
'Alright. I'll try a Seasquirt Surprise.'
Stanley clapped his claws in triumph and Stefan clattered away to fetch it.

The Seasquirt Surprise

Before long, the irritable waiter came darting back between the tables, his tray held high. A big vase sat upon it, with sparklers stuck in it and rockets shooting out, leaving smoky trails behind them. The Crunchy Crabs burst into applause, clacking their claws and whooping.

Stefan placed the Seasquirt Surprise in front of Gilbert.

'Taraaaak!' he cried, bowing deeply, 'Seesschwat Supraash!'

Gilbert thought it looked dangerous. The sparklers spat hot sparks onto the tablecloth, where they burned tiny, black holes.

'Splendid! Down the hatch, old boy!' yelled Stanley.

Gilbert was doubtful. He couldn't tell what was in it, apart from lots of coloured stuff. He also thought he could see things moving around in there, but he couldn't be sure.

He was about to try it, when a huge cheer and the snapping of hundreds of claws stopped him. He looked up to the stage.

Coloured spotlights swung about wildly. A large creature bounded onto the stage, wearing dark glasses, a mop of tangled hair and a long, shaggy beard. His dusty coat reached down to his ankles and a fat, black cigar glowed in the corner of his mouth.

'Come on Gilbert, drink up!' urged Stanley, an evil glint in his eye.

The creature on the stage grabbed the microphone and tapped it against his snout.

'Testing. Testing. Heeeellllloooooo.....Club Craaaaabulousssss' he sang in a deep, lazy voice.

The lights behind him came up and revealed his band.

There was a guitarist on either side of the singer, much smaller than him. They also wore sunglasses and had mops of tangled hair which swung from their heads like old ropes. Long, straggling beards reached down to their knees.

Behind them were three even smaller figures, sitting on one stool behind a drum kit. They wore exactly the same as the others, and each held a drumstick, which they twirled above their heads.

The singer sang 'Oooh yeah, less go!'

The mess of tangled hair behind the drum kit struck up a beat and the guitarists started to play their strange-looking guitars.

Everyone swayed slowly, snapping their claws and pincers as the creature started singing...

OOOOOOOOOH, YEEEEAAAAH!

WE'RE CLAMMIN'...CLAMMIN'!

I wanna clam it wid you.

We're clammin'...clammin',

And I hope you like clammin', too.

The crustacean crowd went crazy.

The singer produced a bucket from inside his long coat and plunged his claw into it. He pulled it out, full of small, dark objects and flung them into the dancing crowd, who went even crazier. They were juicy clams and the dancers caught them, crunching and gobbling them up with glee.

The singer continued...

Oooooohhh yeeeahhhh....

We're clammin'...clammin',

We can see you folks are having a blast!

We're clammin'...just clammin'

And I hope these clams are gonna last!

Gilbert was having a great time, clapping his hands along to the music.

'Come on Gilbert,' urged Stanley. 'You haven't touched your Seasquirt Surprise, it'll get cold.'

Gilbert, now feeling relaxed and happy, took a long slurp.

The singer jumped off the stage into the crowd, who all cheered. He carried on singing and hurling clams...

Ooooooooooh, yeah!

We're clamming....we're clammin',

We're clamming in de name of the lord!

We're clamming....clammin',

And I hope you crabs 'aint gettin bored!

Gilbert began to feel odd.

The cocktail had burned an icy trail down his throat and now he could feel it sliding around inside his stomach like a trapped squid. He felt queasy.

Stanley watched him with interest.

The singer was moving between the tables, as if looking for something.

Now Gilbert felt really strange. Everything was blurry and changing colour and the music sounded echoey. He felt terribly hot and started to sweat.

Stanley slipped his long pincer around Gilbert's shoulder and whispered in his ear, but Gilbert couldn't understand a word he said.

The singer saw Gilbert and quickly moved towards him, singing loudly....

We're clamming....we're clammin',

It's time to put our skates on and scoot,

We're clamming....clammin',

I hope you kids are ready to shoot,

Everything happened at once.

The guitarists spun their guitars round, gripping them like machine guns, and faced the dancing crowd. The drummers kicked the lids off the drums and you could see they were full of pink goo and that the guitars were connected to the drums by tubes.

One of the drummers flicked a switch on the bass drum and thick, pink gloop jetted out of the ends of the Gun-guitars, spraying the crowd.

‘Aaaiiiiiieeeeeeeeeeeeeee,’ cried the crustaceans in horror as they became coated in the pink goo... ‘THOUSAND ISLAND DRESSING, WE HATE IT!’

Confused, Gilbert stared at the big singer, whose mop of hair and beard had fallen away. He reached across Stanley’s table and a familiar, blue snout moved close to the boy’s face.

‘Doan you worry Gilbit ma boy...Ziggy Bonedance here now, you be OK!’

He swept Gilbert into his arms and clutching him tightly, ran for the door. Crunchy Crabs crunched beneath his large, lizardy feet.

Furious, Stanley yelled for his guards, but in the commotion, no-one heard him.

The panicking sea creatures were slipping around in the pink gloop, screaming and fighting to escape, they were terrified of Thousand Island Dressing.

The Gun-guitarists ran around the stage, bouncing off each other and giggling.

Their disguises had fallen off too. It was Douglas and Lily of course, spraying tasty pink seafood sauce into the crustacean chaos on the dancefloor.

The trio of little drummers ran around with buckets. They scooped up Thousand Island Dressing from the big drum and hurled it into the terrified crowd, egging each other on in their squeaky voices....

‘Go Tiggy! Spray those sideways scuttling seascum!’

‘Go Jiggy! Craze those crabby critters!’

Go Wiggy! Soak those stinky shellsters!’

Gilbert was sure he must be dreaming. He imagined he saw Douglas and Lily, running around the stage, spraying pink goo out of their guitars. And three tiny, blue lizards, screaming with laughter.

Holding Gilbert tight, Ziggy hurtled towards the stone doors, which the Megalobsters were desperately trying to close.

The mighty lizard lowered his head and charged, busting through the doors with his jaw - CRACK!

The Megalobsters went flying.

The cold, fresh air in the tunnel soon brought Gilbert back to his senses. The effects of the Seasquirt Surprise quickly wore off.

Ziggy ran down the dark tunnel, which was suddenly flooded with an intense, emerald light. Gilbert blinked and looked up at Ziggy with surprise. The light was shining straight out of his eyes!

‘Whatchew lookin at, Gilbit?’ chuckled Ziggy, ‘all us lizards have green laser eyes.’

With his long, lazy strides, they soon reached the end of the tunnel. Ziggy banged twice on the wall and the cliff-face door slid open.

They stepped out into the cool moonlight.

Tiggy, Wiggy and Jiggy

Gilbert and Ziggy sat facing the Stinkleweed Sea.

The first sun was slowly rising, lighting up the pale yellow doughnut of Gloop, hanging in the sky nearby.

Gilbert felt much better.

‘Ziggy. Were those my friends on the stage, or was I dreaming? And who were those little creatures, they looked just like you!’

Ziggy didn’t have to answer.

There was a rustling and noisy whispering in the bushes behind them. A tiny, blue snout popped out, then another, and then a third, sniffing the air.

Out stepped Douglas, followed by Lily and then three little blue lizards, into the dim dawn light. They were covered from head to toe in sticky, pink goo, the children’s hair was matted and their clothes stuck to their bodies.

They saw Gilbert and great big grins split their pink faces as they charged down the dunes, falling and rolling and yelling, ‘GIILLLLLBEEEEERT!’

Douglas was fastest and reached the dazed boy first, hitting him like an express train. Gilbert was knocked over backwards and they tumbled into the sea, wrestling and hugging each other. Lily caught up and threw herself into the sea with them. The three of them clung to each other, laughing and whooping as a pink, oily slick formed around them.

Finally, they emerged from the water, gasping and chattering, full of questions.

Tiggy, Wiggy and Jiggy cuddled together on their father’s lap and the happy children sat down beside them.

‘These my little girls, Gilbit,’ said Ziggy proudly, ‘they very brave. They helped save you life!’

Gilbert hugged them one by one, making them giggle and squirm.

‘Thank you all so very much, but how did you get out?’

‘Oh, we got secret tunnels runnin ever’ which way,’ said Jiggy.

‘Good job too,’ said Ziggy, ‘cuz lass night Gilbit, you were guest of honour on the dinner menu.’

Gilbert shuddered. No wonder they had given him that awful cocktail.

‘Is that where you disappeared to, Ziggy,’ asked Gilbert, ‘when the crabs caught up with us?’

‘Thass right Gilbit. Straight down a tunnel. No way I coulda fought off all dem crabbys. Too many! But I knew where they’d be taking you, so we came up with the rescue plan.’

‘And you two...how did...where did...?’

Douglas could barely contain himself.

‘You should’ve seen it Gilbert, you should’ve heard it! Lily made the jungle go mad, it was dancing and singing and...it was amazing...!’

‘Jivani,’ said Gilbert quietly to Lily, ‘I heard you in my sleep, I knew it was you.’

Lily gave him one of her nearly-smiles as Douglas crashed on...

‘Then Jiggy and Giggy and Tiggy came out a hole in the ground and took us and we slid all the way down to an underground waterfall which was awesome and we splashed right through it and into a massive black cave which was unbelievable and they lit it all up with their eyes, bright green like lasers, then Ziggy came and told us about you and the Crunchy Crabs and what we must do and we made the plan and got our disguises on and...and...it was just incredible...’

Gilbert didn't know where to start telling them about what had happened to him. So he just took his shoe off and showed them his foot, still glowing and changing colour with a soft hum.

They stared at it in amazement.

Finally, Gilbert had to ask the question.

'Did any of you see what happened to Ronnie?'

Everyone went quiet.

They looked out to sea, then down at the sand.

Buried Treasure

The second morning sun had risen and it was warming up.

They sat on the beach, still talking about Gilbert's narrow escape.

Eventually Tiggy, Wiggy and Jiggy ran off and began to dig holes in the sand, searching for buried treasure. Gilbert's head began to nod and before long, he fell asleep on Ziggy's lap, exhausted after his terrifying escapade.

'Kids,' said Ziggy to Douglas and Lily, 'why don't you have a scout around for some food. Don't you go too far OK?'

The pair of them headed off into the trees.

Gilbert woke a few hours later and the suns were blazing.

Ziggy beckoned him over, and he climbed onto the lizard's knee.

'So Gilbit ma boy, what we gonna do with you kids, hey?'

'Well Ziggy. I think we really need to get home.'

He'd hardly thought about his family at all, everything had just happened so quickly.

'You right of course, boy. Have to get you home.'

'Can you do it, Ziggy? I don't even know where I am.'

'Well, I know where you are, boy. You on ma knee!'

They both laughed and Ziggy went on more seriously.

'Now you juss have to truss me, Gilbit, we think of a way.'

Tiggy, Wiggy and Jiggy ran up the beach, screeching with excitement. Behind them came Lily, dragging an old wooden chest behind her.

'Look what they found', she shouted.

Douglas came running back from the opposite direction, carrying a banana branch laden with fruit.

'Breakfast is served,' he yelled.

They all sat in the sand, laughing, eating, and trying on the fine jewellery from the ancient treasure chest. Ruby and sapphire brooches, diamond-encrusted rings, heavy, gold necklaces and dangling, coral ear-rings. They were piling up the silver coins and gemstones, when something greeny-white landed SPLAT on Gilbert's shoulder. He heard the beating of wings and the familiar and irritating 'AK AK AK AK!'

The big, orange Bonkerbird landed in the middle of the glittering trove of treasure.

'Welllllll, looky who here,' said Ziggy, 'what a surprise....'

'Gooood morning, silly, blue lizards!', cawed Lord Zanzibar Karrot loudly.

Then he burped most fishily.

'I see you've found the stupid boy and his flying friends.'

'Where have you been?' shouted Gilbert, furious, 'where did you fly off to, then? If it wasn't for these 'silly lizards', the Crunchy Crabs would've eaten me!'

'Ak ak ak ak...and who do you think sent the silly lizards to help you...?' the bird squawked smugly.

Gilbert looked a bit embarrassed. He glanced at Ziggy and raised his eyebrows in question.

Ziggy shrugged his shoulders.

'Iss true Gilbit, ma boy. Iss true that Zanzi here is an irritatin', bad-smellin', rude bird. But iss also true that he flew all the way up de volcano to find us. He knew de Crunchy Crabs were on the march an' would come to eat'cha. So he found us an sent us down to help you.'

'Ak ak ak ak!' crowed the bird triumphantly.

He pecked Gilbert sharply on top of the head for good measure and did a poo in the sand.

'OW!' cried Gilbert, 'stop it!'

The Final Journey

Ziggy lay in the sand on his back, with Lord Zanzibar Karrot marching about importantly on his chest. The two creatures talked for a while. They nodded their heads and then shook their heads and then finally nodded them and called the children over.

'Right,' said the bird.

'We're sending you all home tonight.'

'Will you fly us back Lord Karrot?'

'Don't be silly, Gilbert,' said the bird, 'Gulp is a very long way, too far even for me.'

'Ziggy, can you do it?'

'Cain do it, Gilbit. I can swim a loooong way. But not that far. I sorry!'

'Then how? How do we get back home?'

'There is someone we think can help. But it must be tonight and you must all be ready. Now get some rest,' said the Bonkerbird.

The children slept soundly, tired out from their unexpected adventure on the Island of the Puffaroons. Ziggy woke them just as the first sun had started to set and they ate ravenously.

'Right,' said the bird, 'she should be here soon, I'll have a scout around,' and he flew off.

'She?' said Gilbert curiously.

'Doan you worry boy, you gotta trust us, she get you home...'

Gilbert was both nervous and excited that they were finally going home.

'Come here, boy,' said Ziggy quietly, taking him aside.

'Take this,' he pressed something cold and hard into Gilbert's palm, 'one day you might need it.'

Gilbert looked at the thing in his hand. It was long, and curved, and pointed.

'What's this, Ziggy?'

'It's one of my teeth, Gilbit,' Ziggy chuckled, 'knocked it out when I charged down those stone doors. I want you to have it. One day it might come in useful.'

'Oh my goodness,' said Gilbert sadly, 'that must've really hurt.'

'Course it hurt, boy,' the big lizard laughed.

'Sometimes in life...you get hurt. It's not a bad thing, Gilbit. Doan be scared of getting hurt, now. Life is like a rainbow, boy, it needs both the rain and the sunshine to be complete.'

‘Thank you Ziggy,’ said Gilbert. ‘I will always keep it.’
He tucked it away carefully in his pocket.
‘COME ON YOU TWO! ARE YOU GETTING MARRIED?’ Lord Karrot squawked rudely from above them, ‘GET A MOVE ON, SHE’S HERE!’
Gilbert had butterflies in his stomach.
‘Less go kids!’ shouted Ziggy.
Tiggy, Wiggy and Jiggy ran up to the children and threw their arms around them, giggling. They reluctantly piled all the treasure back into the old chest and set it down on the shore.
Ziggy led the children to the water’s edge, with the Bonkerbird flying overhead. They waited, as the last sun set, leaving behind a soft, pink glimmer in the sky. Douglas’s ears twitched.
‘I can hear something coming,’ he whispered.
‘There...look,’ said Ziggy softly, pointing out to sea. Gilbert could see nothing.
‘Right there,’ said Ziggy.
This time Gilbert saw it.
A distant glow, getting closer and brighter.
‘Here she come...now doan you be shocked ma boy, she get you home OK.’
The glimmer in the ocean was growing faster. Gilbert could see the water bubbling and steaming as it came.
He gripped Ziggy’s leg tightly.
Suddenly, right before them, a whirlpool appeared.
‘What on Glorb...’ exclaimed Douglas.
There was a blinding flash and a voice hissed in Gilbert’s ear.
‘Hello Gilbert. Would you like some popcorn?’
Gilbert recognised the terrible voice and shrieked in horror.
Here she was...two luminous, glistening eyes, a wide mouth crammed with spiky teeth and a long, pink tongue hanging out.
SISTER SKULLDUST THE BOYMUNCHER!
Douglas and Lily looked mystified. Who or what was this bizarre creature and why was Gilbert so terrified?
Ziggy hung onto Gilbert as the boy struggled to get away.
‘Calm down boy...calm down...iss ok!’
He lifted Gilbert off his feet and hugged him close.
‘I say calm down Gilbit...she the only one strong enough to take you home. She OK.’
‘But she munches up boys!’ cried Gilbert.
‘No she doesn’t,’ said Ziggy. ‘Not right now, anyways. She on a diet...’
‘But how can you trust her?’ moaned Gilbert.
‘Becaaaauuusse...’ said Ziggy, opening the lid of the treasure chest.
Emerald light poured from the lizard’s eyes onto its contents. The fabulous trove of treasure sparkled and glittered in a million green directions.
Sister Skulldust’s eyes grew even larger and wetter and her pink tongue twisted round like a corkscrew.
‘OOOOooooooOOOOOOOhhhhhhhh!’ she crooned.
‘Get the kids to Gulp safe and sound, Skulldust,’ said Ziggy in a commanding voice. ‘Then the treasure, it all yours.....’
Sister Skulldust smiled one of her widest, scariest smiles and hissed, ‘climb aboard, children...’
Gilbert shuddered and looked up at Ziggy, horrified.

‘She love jewelrerry, Gilbit! She adore it! No way she goin’ to munch you or you friends. The Puffaroons will know when you safe an’ sound . They know everthin.’
‘AK! GET A MOVE ON YOU LOT!’ squawked Lord Karrot impatiently.
Douglas and Lily waded into the Stinkleweed Sea and clambered onto the revolting creature’s spiny, wet back.
Reluctantly, Gilbert followed them and with their encouragement, he too, climbed onto the cold, clammy back of Sister Skulldust the Boymuncher.
The three of them clung to each other.
Gilbert looked at Ziggy Bonedance for the last time.
He was about to say goodbye, when Sister Skulldust hissed, ‘I’ll be back.’
Everything became a watery blur.
They were gone.

55A, Milky Way

Gilbert woke up in his bed. What a strange and powerful dream he’d had.
Wait until he told Douglas and Lily. They’d think he was bonkers!
Then he saw his clothes lying on the floor.
They were soaking wet.
He grabbed his trousers and quickly searched the pockets.
A long, curved tooth fell on the floor.
It was chipped at the top, where it had hit the stone doors of Club Crabulous.
Gilbert felt a rush of exhilaration. It had not been a dream.
He drew his curtains and saw that the first suns had risen. It was also drizzling, and stretched right over Milky Way was a beautiful double rainbow.
He held Ziggy’s tooth tight and heard his deep, lazy voice.
‘Life is like a rainbow, boy, it needs both the rain and the sunshine to be complete.’
Gilbert smiled to himself.

There was a scratching at his door and he opened it. Slobberdog came bounding in, howling with excitement. The hairy beast knocked Gilbert onto his back, sat on his chest and licked his face so fiercely that he could barely breathe. Guzzlemutt slobber flew everywhere.
‘Get off Slobs, get off me,’ Gilbert shouted happily, delighted to see his companion again.
Pinky Moon appeared in the doorway in her fluffy, pink dressing gown. She saw Gilbert lying on the floor, wrestling with the huge, panting beast.
Her screams could be heard as far as Nebula Street.
Sidney Moon came clattering up the stairs, his pipe clenched between his teeth.
‘What on Glorb...’ he exclaimed, seeing his wife slumped against the bed, whilst Gilbert struggled about on the floor, under the suffocating weight of Slobberdog.
‘Gilbert,’ he said with amazement, ‘where the glob have you been? We all thought you were dead.’
‘Hallo Dad,’ said Gilbert with difficulty, yanking a hairy Guzzlemutt paw out of his mouth.
‘I can explain. It’s a long story.’
Sidney diverted Slobberdog’s attention with an a broken keyboard, then helped Gilbert and his mother to their feet.

Pinky grabbed Gilbert and tried to kiss him, but he escaped and fled down the stairs, pursued by his howling, hairy friend.

The Moons sat around the breakfast table. Nellie skulked beneath it, eyeing Gilbert with malice. She wasn't at all pleased to see him. At all.

She thought that she'd finally got the whole place to herself. But it seemed not.

Sidney calmed his wife and poured everyone a cup of tea. He handed his son a slice of toast with a fat dollop of Glorberry Jam on it.

'Now then son,' said Sidney, firing up his pipe.

'Where on Glorb have you been? The school called and said you'd disappeared into space and probably been eaten by Globsters. We were a bit concerned.'

'Oh Gilbert...my little Skrögling,' wailed his mum, wringing her chubby hands, her bracelets clanging.

Beneath the table, Nellie stared with wonder at Gilbert's foot as it slowly changed colour. She was impressed.

Gilbert took a deep breath and told them the whole story.

Sir Grenville's Eyebrows

The next day, the three children stood nervously outside their headmaster's study.

The minutes ticked by.

Finally Douglas piped up.

'Listen you two. I'll take all the blame. I know it was my fault.'

'That's absolutely true, Dougy,' said Lily, 'you're an idiot.'

Gilbert gazed uncomfortably at the ceiling.

'But no way,' continued Lily, 'I won't let you take all the blame. We're Team Moon now. We stick together.'

Dougy's eyes swivelled about in surprise and the headmaster's door flew open.

Miss Trembells red hair poked out, followed by her thin face.

'Well well,' she said sternly, looking them up and down. Then she saw how scared and tired they looked and her features softened.

'Welcome back,' she whispered, beckoning them into the room.

They filed into Sir Grenville Badgut's study.

It smelt of shoe polish and teabags and, Gilbert thought, a little bit like the Stinkleweed Sea.

Sir Grenville sat behind his great Glorbwood desk, looking very grave and very grumpy. His hairy eyebrows performed their jerky dance and he breathed noisily through his nose. He jabbed his finger at the three solitary chairs lined up before his desk, and growled 'sit'.

Miss Trembells stood to one side, tugging on her ear nervously.

'Soooooooo...' Sir Grenville started grimly.

'You three children. Stole an Emergency Escape Jet...and you drove it. Straight through the wall. OF THE MAGNATUBE!' he shouted, in an incredulous voice.

The children stared at their feet.

Sir Grenville's face turned redder and a high-pitched beeping came from somewhere inside his shirt.

He thumped his chest and it stopped.

‘Soooooooo...’ he continued.

‘...not only do you steal a Starfleet Jet, the property of Magnacorp Universal Conglomerate, a very generous sponsor of our Bumbellball team, but you smash it through the wall of their Magnatube. Then you blast it hundreds of miles into outer space. And burn up millions of Glorbites of Octofuel!’ he gasped.

‘THEN...’ he slammed his hand down on his desk, so hard that his pens jumped.

‘...THEN...you abandon it in deep space and join up with an outlaw gang of well-known intergalactic troublemakers!’

There was absolute silence.

Douglas cleared his throat and timidly raised his arm.

‘Sir,’ he squeaked.

‘Shut up, boy!’

Sir Grenville slowly pushed himself up out of his deep chair. He pointed sternly at the black holophone on his desk.

‘I got a call this morning,’ he growled, thunderously.

His voice sank even lower and his face turned redder.

‘...from someone you might know,’ he said suddenly, looking up.

His eyes twinkled beneath the dancing eyebrows.

Then he started to grunt, slowly at first.

Deep, heaving grunts.

Miss Trembells looked concerned.

‘Are you alright, Sir Grenville?’

He held up his hand. The children looked bewildered.

The grunts increased, then strangely turned into a gravelly laugh.

‘Harrrrr...harrrr...harrrr...harrrrrrr.....’

Miss Trembells and the children looked at each other with concern. What was happening?

Was Sir Grenville going mad with rage?

They heard the door open behind them and Sir Grenville’s old face creased into the broadest, happiest smile.

The children turned around.

Their mouths fell open with shock.

There stood Ronnie Bottles, his arm in a sling, a big grin on his scorched face, his gold tooth flashing.

‘Allo sproglets!’ he cried.

The children quite forgot where they were and threw themselves at the big man, who enveloped them all in a one-armed hug.

‘Children, children,’ cried Miss Trembells embarrassed, flapping her arms.

‘Beeee calm, Miss Trembells, beeee calm,’ soothed the headmaster, ‘everything is fine.’

Miss Trembells was so confused. She collapsed into an armchair, staring at the children hanging off the strange, one-eyed man who’d just appeared.

Once Ronnie had convinced the children he was ‘right as rain’ and ‘in the pink’, he limped over to Sir Grenville. They saluted each other very stiffly and then shook hands warmly.

‘Commander,’ said Ronnie with respect.

‘Sergeant Major Bottles,’ growled Sir Grenville, ‘how very good to see you again.’ He grasped the big man’s hand in his old fists.

‘I always knew our paths would cross again. Sit! Sit!’

Sergeant Major Bottles heaved his battered body into an armchair and gathered the children around his knees.

‘C’mere, c’mere,’ he said.

‘Y’see. Me and yer ‘edmaster, Commander ‘Battlin’ Badguts, we was together in the Really Great Custard Wars on Gloop, many years ago.’

‘Sergeant Major Bottles, children, he saved my life,’ said Sir Grenville proudly.

‘A very brave man,’ confirmed the headmaster, ‘he took a flying spoon for me...’ he pointed at Ronnie’s eyepatch, ‘...lost an eye. See. Hah!’

‘That’s right kids. So when you mentioned Sir Grenville’s name Dougy, when we first met up there, well...I couldn’t let me old Commander down, could I?’

‘How did you get out of the cab, Ronnie...I mean Sergeant Major Bottles,’ Gilbert corrected himself, ‘it was on fire.’

‘Yeah. Thought it was all over meself,’ admitted Ronnie.

‘Cab was on fire, fallin apart, hit the water. I was stuck anyways. In me ‘ead I said goodbye to everyone. Watched the bubbles washin by as I sunk into the depths. Then this thing grabbed me. ‘Orrible thing, big round eyes, spiky teeth, tongue ‘angin out. Strong as an ox though. Yanked off the cab door, pulled me out an’ said she was going to gobble me up... dragged me to the surface and took a bite out of me.’

He pulled up his sleeve and showed them a nasty, semi-circular imprint of teeth on his arm.

‘That was Sister Skulldust,’ exclaimed Gilbert.

‘Well, I don’t know who she was, but she didn’t like the taste of me. Coz she pulled a rotten face, spat in the sea, then swam off hissing. Juss left me there!’

‘Awesome,’ said Douglas, ‘she saved your life!’

‘She did,’ laughed Ronnie, ‘then I swam to the island. Lucky I got this,’ and he patted his bulging stomach, ‘mostly full of gas, kept me afloat!’

Ronnie and Sir Grenville let out roars of laughter.

‘But how did you get back, how did you get here?’ asked Gilbert.

‘Well, luckily, me old mate Reg Belly had been tracking me in his cab. Saw I was in trouble an followed me in. Good job too, I was wanderin aroun’ the island for ages, lookin for you lot. Nuffink there but silly coloured rocks.’ Gilbert felt his foot vibrate gently.

‘So Reg an me full speed it back to Gulp to raise the alarm. Called the Commander, who tells us you kids are already back home! Did I feel stupid...’

Miss Trembells remained in her armchair, trying to take it all in, her head was spinning.

‘Now children,’ said Sir Grenville, ‘I have some very interesting news for you.’

The children looked at each other in expectation.

‘From next term, Mr. Bottles will be joining us at The Academy as our new Geography teacher. He knows more about this planet and the surrounding Glorbiverse than anyone I know. He’s an expert.’

The children clapped their hands and even Miss Trembells joined in. Ronnie didn’t look or speak like any other teacher she’d ever met. But the children clearly loved him, and a fine, rugged figure of a man he was too, she thought approvingly.

‘Now children. Back to class. More than enough excitement for one day,’ Sir Grenville growled.

‘So...sir,’ ventured Douglas, ‘we’re not in big trouble then?’

Sir Grenville looked down at him with a frown.

‘Well, this time young Plugley, I’ll let this go. Ronnie here spoke very highly of you children and I know you’ve had quite an ordeal. But if I was you lad, I’d stay away from MUC Escape Jets for a while,’ and he winked kindly at the boy.

‘Yes, sir,’ said Douglas sincerely, ‘no more Escape Jets for me.’

They said goodbye to Ronnie, or Mr.Bottles as he now was, and followed Miss Trembells back to Class 5B.

What's Got Into Gilbert?

They entered the classroom, and their classmates crowded around them, cheering.

'Tell us all about it.'

'What's an Escape Jet like?'

'Were you kidnapped?'

'What's deep space like?'

'Did you fly through the Gloophole?'

'What were the Terroristas like?'

'Did you miss me, Gilbert?'

'You've been on the news you know!'

Miss Trembells calmed everyone down until they were all seated back in their Swotpods.

'Now, children. There will be plenty of time later for you to talk to our three intrepid Glorbonauts. This is still a Biology lesson, and it's about time we did some learning.'

The fun was over and Class 5B settled down.

'Now I do have something rather different for you this morning,' said Miss Trembells.

'Eric, please, can you dim the lights.'

Eric did as he was asked and Miss Trembells grunted as she heaved a large, steel box onto her desk. The children waited in anticipation as she unclipped the lid and put her arms into the box. A warm glow bathed her thin face.

Gilbert felt light-headed. His foot started to buzz gently.

'And what,' announced Miss Trembells triumphantly, 'do you think this is?'

She lifted the glowing rock out of the box and placed it on her desk.

The children gawped with amazement.

'Oh my Glob!' yelled Gilbert.

He leapt clean out of his Swotpod and sprinted out of the classroom, waving his arms wildly.

Everyone looked after him with astonishment as he disappeared down the corridor.

'Globness me!' exclaimed Miss Trembells.

'What's got into Gilbert?'

And if you listened very carefully, you could hear the chuckle of a Puffaroon.



