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STARLIGHT AND MOONSHINE

The Quest for the Golden Gastropod – Stage One

For those of you who haven't read any of the previous Starlight and Moonshine stories I'd best explain something. These two heroes have their adventures in comic-book world where amazing, often Huge things happen; and watching the stories unfold are three people in the real world. They are here now – Lucy, Danny her younger brother, and their grandfather Joshua – all sitting at the kitchen table with the latest comic open in front of them. There's something else you should know: not only do they read the stories, but they have a way of talking to the characters in the comic. And, when necessary, they are able to actually transport themselves into comic-book world by using their magical Moonberry-Pie cookies. More of this later. For the moment let's join Lucy, Danny and Joshua as they enjoy this new story, The Quest for the Golden Gastropod...

Now that they were back in their own comic book; not that they could recall having been anywhere else; Starlight, Moonshine and the others were on board the ship about to start out on another adventure. This was at the request of Lord Nuff-Nuff's uncle, Professor Dib-Dob. "What do you mean you've been commissioned?" Nuff-Nuff asked him.

"I was commissioned once," announced Moonshine proudly. "That's how I became a Colonel."

"It's nothing like that," explained Dib-Dob. "The Society of Right Royal Explorers has given me the job of finding The Golden Gastropod. That's what a commission is – just a job, really."

"And I bet it will be a HUGE one," mused the Colonel with a beaming smile.

Henshaw, Lord Nuff-Nuff's giant penguin butler groaned. "Knowing our luck it will be a disaster from start to finish."

"You don't have to come," Nuff-Nuff advised him sourly. "Stay behind and give the Manor a spring clean, why don't you?"

"I could; if it was spring, which it isn't," remarked Henshaw, "But then you'd have to look after yourself, and I can guess how much you'd enjoy that."

Nuff-Nuff scowled at his butler before addressing Dib-Dob: "So, our quest is to find this Golden Gastropod."

"What is it exactly?" questioned Captain Starlight, "And where do we look for it?"

The Professor began his explanation. Apparently, The Golden Gastropod was the sacred guardian of the Aysee Deesee, a tribe that some said didn't exist at all and was just a myth. The Gastropod was claimed to be a golden snail set in the

image of a sunburst on the wall of their temple; and this brought warmth to the land along with gentle rain to water the crops.

“So, what’s the commission?” asked Nuff-Nuff. “I suppose we have to find the snail and take it back to your Society.”

“Dear me, no,” stated his uncle. “The Golden Gastropod must *never* leave the temple; otherwise the land of the Aysee Deesee will perish. We merely have to see it to confirm it does actually exist; and I shall make some drawings of it for display in the Society’s museum.”

“Sounds pretty average,” droned Henshaw. “I’d probably have more fun doing the cleaning.”

“Oh, it will be anything but boring,” declared the Professor, taking a roll of old-looking paper out of a satchel. “Inscribed on this ancient scroll are the stage-by-stage directions on where to find the land of the Aysee Deesee; and we have to follow them in exactly the right order. The Quest for the Golden Gastropod will take us to places very few others have been. There may even be unimaginable dangers along the way.”

Colonel Moonshine let out a delighted chuckle. “Now that’s more like it. I knew we’d get to do something really Huge.”

“So, where do we start?” asked Captain Starlight.

“The instructions on the scroll are like a story,” explained Dib-Dob, “And to find The Golden Gastropod we have to act it out. The first part is a bit of a mystery, though. The top of the scroll is hard to read because something seems to have been spilled on it. Two words are barely readable – the best I can come up with is ‘*Mountain Monster*’ which doesn’t make a lot of sense; then next it says to ‘*Follow the flight of the Dingbats*’. I have no idea what that means.”

“Nor me,” grumbled Lord Nuff-Nuff.

Henshaw tutted. “That’s because you have absolutely no imagination.”

“And you have, I suppose?” sneered Nuff-Nuff. “Go on then, smarty-penguin: amaze us with your brilliant deductions.”

“A Dingbat is a silly person,” said Henshaw, and he smiled. “You’d know all about that...”

The three people in the real world were reading the comic as the story unfolded; and one of them could see this was going to become another bickering session. Joshua cut in before the argument continued: “I think you’re almost right, Henshaw,” he said to the comic on the table, “But here’s another thought: a silly person is often said to have bats in the belfry. Now, if the word Monster is actually Monastery, it would most likely have a bell tower, also known as a belfry...”

“Ah, Yes!” Dib-Dob interrupted as it became clear to him. “And if there were bats in it, maybe we have to ding the bell to wake them up so that they can fly off and show us the way.”

Captain Starlight had been listening. “This is all very interesting, but where do we find the Mountain? Is there anything else; a map, maybe?” She was peering at the scroll, initially with a frown; then her face brightened. “I don’t think the smudge is a spill at all. I know this shape. It’s the Sea of Smoke, or to be more accurate the Foggy Sea. It is said to hide an ancient world that few sailors dare to enter. Those who did venture into the fog were never seen again.”

“There!” exploded Colonel Moonshine excitedly. “Didn’t I tell you this was going to be a HUGE adventure?”

Lucy, Danny and Joshua were watching the comic-book pictures change as Starlight's ship set sail; then, using the balloons, it rose into the air and began flying over the ocean. "Not much happening," commented a disappointed Danny.

"Don't be so impatient," said his sister. "Once they get to the Foggy Sea it will be different."

"Very different is my guess," Joshua added; and he was oh so right.

Those on board the ship became nervous as they approached a distant cloud of what looked like smoke; and it grew and grew as they came closer. Still in the air, they were almost over the fog which appeared to stretch as far as they could see. "We'll never find anything from up here, Moonshine," observed Captain Starlight. "We'll have to go down and continue by sailing on the sea."

Colonel Moonshine agreed and let air out of the balloons, lowering the ship into the cloud of fog. Soon enough they were rocking lazily on water. "Take it slowly, Starlight," he advised. "We don't want to run into anything."

Bit by bit they sailed deeper into the fog, seeing nothing but that. Nuff-Nuff, Henshaw and Professor Dib-Dob kept watch over the sides, while Moonshine was at the front peering through his telescope. Eventually he spotted a dark shape looming ahead. "We're coming up on something, Starlight," he called back, "And I don't know why, but the fog seems to be clearing." Sure enough, he was right. Although the surrounding area was still misty, it was now possible to make out the dark shape they were approaching. "It looks like a mountain of some kind," announced the Colonel, "And there's a big building at the bottom. Maybe I should do the blow-up thing – what do you think Starlight?"

"It might be a good idea to stay clear of any danger," said Joshua. "By the looks of it, I'd say the building is a monastery..."

"Maybe it's where the belfry is," put in Dib-Dob.

"Maybe," said Joshua, "Except, now we're close enough to see the people on the ground, they don't look much like monks to me."

"They're Samurai," declared Danny quite casually. "They've got those funny skirts and there are swords hanging on their backs."

"They could be Ninjas," suggested Lucy.

"Can't be Ninjas," said Danny. "Don't look anything like turtles."

"Whatever they are," Dib-Dob added, "They look pretty fierce. I think you really should do the blow-up thing, Moonshine, before we get any closer."

"Better hurry Colonel," said Lucy. "The Samurai have spotted you."

It certainly seemed so. The courtyard of the monastery was a hive of activity as the skirted warriors looked to the sky and began throwing things at the ship which continued to drift towards them. Starlight's ship had started to rise, but not fast enough and those on board could hear thuds as some of the things being thrown hit the hull and sides of the vessel. Moonshine jerked as one of the objects smacked his telescope, nearly knocking it from his hand. He stared at what was sticking in the wood of the spyglass. "Looks like a metal star," he observed as he went to touch it with a finger. "Ouch! That's sharp!"

"I thought only Ninjas chucked *them*," mused Danny; which didn't really help.

"Never mind the stars," warned Joshua. "Some of the Samurai have bows. Very soon they'll be shooting arrows at you. If just one pierces a balloon you'll be in serious trouble. Go higher and move away from the monastery, Starlight; and quickly!"

Captain Starlight managed to pull her ship away; not before a few arrows found a target, but fortunately none hit the balloons. Hovering in the sky a short way from

the mountain gave them a bit of breathing space. "We're going to need a plan," said Dib-Dob. Moonshine, can you see if the monastery has a belfry?"

"There's some kind of a tower poking up from the top," reported the Colonel, "And it's got little windows."

"That's most likely it, and will be our way in," declared the Professor. "We can float above and someone could get down to it using the rope ladder. They can climb through a window and ding the bell."

"I suppose the Samurai archers might hold their fire while we do it," muttered a critical Henshaw, "If we asked nicely."

"Point taken," commented Dib-Dob. "However, did you notice that, although it's quite clear close to the ground, just above the top of the monastery the fog begins to thicken? If you take your ship into it, Starlight, the Samurai won't be able to see us. Our biggest problem is who to lower down. The windows in the belfry might be too small for any of us."

Straight away, Danny had the answer: "I've climbed through little windows before. Would you let me do it, Granddad?"

Joshua wasn't happy at first. "It will involve more than just climbing through a window, Danny. Also, dangling on the bottom of the rope ladder will be dangerous – you could slip." Hearing this, everyone went quiet, until someone suggested tying Danny to a rope and lowering him down that way. As often happens, the plan had to be changed when other problems were foreseen. Following a long talk and lots of suggestions they managed to come up with solutions to cover whatever might be likely to go wrong; at least they thought they had.

Captain Starlight flew her ship higher into the fog and headed back to hover right above the monastery belfry. "That's good, Captain," said Joshua. "Judging by what we can see in the comic-book picture your ship is just a vague shape; and I don't think the Samurai warriors below can see you at all. It's time to test out the plan."

"You're on, Danny," said Lucy. "Have you got everything?"

"I've got a torch, and a hammer to ding the bell," he said. "Thanks for that idea, Granddad." What he meant was that Joshua figured the bell would be big and too heavy for a small boy to push so that it could ring in the usual way. Hitting it with a hammer was the next best thing. "And I've got a knife to cut the rope once I'm inside the belfry." This was thanks to Lucy who claimed her brother was hopeless with knots and wouldn't be able to untie the rope that he would be attached to. "But I don't reckon much to carrying the stuff in your bag, Lucy," the boy added with a scowl. "It's girlie."

"Better than dropping it all," said his sister. "Now, have you got your Pie?"

Danny held up his cookie. "Do I go now?" he asked eagerly. After a slight hesitation, Joshua nodded; so his grandson called out: "Moonberry Pie!"

In an instant he was whisked through the rainbow sky to appear there in the picture on board Captain Starlight's ship. They were ready for him. Moonshine tied the rope around Danny's waist and escorted him to the side, helping him up to sit on the gunwale. Turning to the others he ordered: "Make sure you keep hold of the rope, and lower Danny on Joshua's instructions." Then to the boy: "Are you ready?"

Danny's nervous nod set the plan in motion. Guided by Joshua who could see the boy coming down out of the fog, Starlight adjusted the direction of her ship so that Danny was directly above the belfry. Then the old man concentrated on telling the ones holding the rope: "Let out a few more feet... easy... down a bit more... a little more..." Finally he said: "That's it! Hold steady everyone. In you go Danny."

The boy climbed through the closest belfry window without a problem and cut the rope. The next picture surprisingly was almost black for a moment or two, even though it was still daytime outside; then a light shone in the darkness as Danny switched on the torch. "The bell's really big," he said, swinging the light onto it; then he panned the beam around the inside of the belfry. "Where are the Dingbats?"

"Probably above you," advised Joshua.

The light shone up to the ceiling. "All I can see up there is a load of what look like black plastic bags hanging," said Danny.

"That's them," confirmed his grandfather. "Make sure you have your cookie in the other hand when you hit the bell with the hammer. The sound should wake the Dingbats, but the Samurai will hear it too; so you must Moonberry Pie back here before they get to you. Understand?"

"No worries, Granddad," confirmed the boy. "Right, here goes..." It seemed straightforward enough, but Danny suddenly realised that he could have done with an extra hand. Switching the torch to the one holding the cookie, he stepped close to the bell and hit it with the hammer which was in his other hand. As a ding echoed around the belfry he shone the torch up to see that the Dingbats hadn't moved. "Come on, wake up," he hissed at them. They didn't budge. "Okay, you asked for it," he growled, and took a mighty swing with the hammer.

A loud, deafening clang resounded. The Dingbats woke in fright and panicked. They flapped and screeched here there and everywhere in the belfry, swooping down on the boy below their former resting place. Danny yelped and put up his hands to shield his face, dropping the hammer, torch and cookie in the process. The comic-book picture was instantly dark again as the torch hit the floor and went out.

"Danny!" called Lucy. "Danny, are you alright?"

"What do *you* think?" the boy gasped, "I've dropped my Pie," then: "Get out of my hair, stupid Dingbat!"

Aside from Danny's voice, other sounds that reached the two in the real world seemed to confirm that the Dingbats were at last leaving the belfry through the windows, so they wouldn't be bothering the boy anymore; but there were voices shouting, faint at first and growing louder. "The Samurai are coming!" Lucy almost yelled at the comic-book picture in fear. "Find the cookie, Danny, quickly!"

Danny was grunting and sobbing as he scabbled about the floor in desperation: "It's too dark in here. I can't see it."

"We have to do something, Granddad," Lucy pleaded. "If the Samurai get Danny, who knows what they'll do to him."

Joshua was very aware of this. "We need a diversion to lure the Samurai down from the tower," he said and continued thinking out loud: "If Starlight brought her ship out of the fog so they could see it, that might be enough..." He broke off when he glanced at the next picture of the comic and realised this option was no longer possible: Starlight's ship was already well away from the monastery following the flight of the Dingbats.

Danny, it seemed, was on his own awaiting capture; and what then...?