

# A Season of Happiness



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## MOONBERRY PIE



MP68

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### STARLIGHT AND MOONSHINE

## The Quest for the Golden Gastropod – Stage Two

Everything should have been covered, but their plan had gone badly wrong. Danny had rung the bell in the monastery belfry waking up the Dingbats; unfortunately the creatures had panicked, swooping on the boy, causing him to drop what he had been holding; and that included his Moonberry Pie. Without it, he couldn't get back to the real world; and he needed to because the Samurai were coming for him. They were close now and could be heard shouting angrily as they climbed the steps of the bell tower. There was only one way Joshua could think of to save his grandson: "I'm going for him, Lucy. Give me your cookie and Danny can use it to come home."

Lucy was reaching for her Moonberry Pie which was sitting on the kitchen table when she noticed something. "Wait, Granddad. Danny seems to have found his cookie."

"His eyes must have adjusted to the poor light," the old man observed.

"I've got it," declared Danny, "And I can see the hammer."

Lucy's heart almost stopped as she watched her brother shuffling across the floor of the belfry to where the hammer lay; and it was very close to the door; too close! "Leave it, Danny!" shouted Lucy. "Come home, *Now!*"

The shout startled him. Still on his knees, he froze on the spot; then the door burst open. In a matter of seconds the boy was surrounded by a ring of Samurai, all brandishing their swords. Obviously a small boy dressed in strange clothes was the last person they expected to see and they just stood staring in amazement. "*NOW*, I said!" screamed Lucy. Her voice echoing from somewhere above was enough to confuse the Samurai even further and they were all motionless, staring at the ceiling.

Danny gathered his senses and held up the cookie, calling out: "Moonberry Pie!" In a flash he was back in the kitchen where he scowled at his sister. "You don't have to shout: I'm not deaf." The atmosphere was tense. Slipping the strap over his head he passed Lucy's bag to her. "You can have this back," he said with a sneer. "I reckon even the Samurai thought I looked stupid carrying it." The heavy silence lasted but a moment; then the three people in the real world breathed sighs of relief; and in another second they were all laughing.

Eventually returning their attention to the comic-book pictures again they could see Captain Starlight's ship flying across the sky following the Dingbats. "It's a lot clearer now," observed Lucy.

"There's fog above them, though," Joshua had noticed, "So they must still be in the Foggy Sea and the Dingbats should lead them to the land of the Aysee Deesee."

On board the ship, Moonshine was doing his usual, leaning out from the front with the telescope to his eye. “The Dingbats are heading for what looks like a clump of green stuff.”

“That must be the next stage of the quest,” said Professor Dib-Dob as he scanned the scroll. “It says we should enter the wood and walk the perilous flower trail...”

“Hear that, Starlight?” chimed in a delighted Colonel Moonshine, “Perilous is my idea of Huge. Is that all we have to do, Professor; just walk the trail?”

“Much more,” said Dib-Dob, his finger tracing the instructions on the ancient script. “We have to collect three crystal wands.”

“Like magic wands, maybe?” suggested Moonshine hopefully.

“I don’t know about magic,” said the Professor. “Most likely just glass sticks of some kind.”

Closer to the clump of green it became obvious that it was a small forest. As the Dingbats neared it, they swooped down and continued flying just above the ground; then they disappeared straight into the trees. Starlight slowed the ship, stopping it altogether at the edge of the wood. “There looks to be a pathway which I guess is the start of the flower trail,” she commented.

“*Perilous* flower trail, don’t forget,” Moonshine reminded her with big grin.

“Whatever,” she said, “But I’ll never get the ship in there – it’s too narrow.”

“You can’t, anyway,” advised Dib-Dob. “The scroll says we have to *walk* the trail; and we must follow the instructions exactly. Maybe you could drop us off on the ground and fly your ship over the wood to meet us on the other side. What do you think, Captain?”

Starlight agreed and lowered the ship until it was sitting on the ground supported by its wheels. The rope ladder was lowered for the walkers of the trail to disembark. Because Colonel Moonshine had to remain on board to help with the balloons, this left the next stage of the quest to the Professor, his nephew and the penguin butler Henshaw. Needless to say, Lord Nuff-Nuff was complaining as usual: “It could be a very long walk; and I don’t really see why I’m needed at all.”

“Because we have to collect three crystal wands,” Henshaw reminded him. “That’s one each.”

“You could take two, couldn’t you?” grumbled Nuff-Nuff. “That would be the kind thing to do.”

“To be perfectly honest,” droned the penguin, “I don’t feel like being kind to someone who keeps moaning all the time. And what would *you* be doing while I’m in there risking life and flippers...?”

“Enough!” hissed the Professor. “All three of us are going, and that’s an end to it. I’m still not sure exactly what we’re looking for, but we can figure it out on the trail.”

Cautiously, they began along the path through the wood. It seemed pleasant with the smell of sweet blossom drifting on the air which was most likely coming from the flowers lining the trail. After a short way Nuff-Nuff picked up the pace saying: “Nothing perilous here that I can see...” He broke off and pointed. “Something’s hanging from that little tree, and it’s sparkling. I bet it’s one of the crystal wands.” He set off confidently towards it with his hand out. Fingers closed around what appeared to be a glass stick and he turned to announce: “How easy is this?” In a second he was gasping as a slender white tendril snaked out of a large yellow flower and wrapped itself around his wrist. “Aargh!” he yelled. “Help me!”

“What a wimp,” droned, Henshaw casually. “It’s only a flower.”

"More than just a flower," the Professor observed fearfully. "It's pulling Nuff-Nuff towards it. I think it's a carnivorous plant, a meat-eater; and that means people!"

"Let go, you overgrown daffodil!" Nuff-Nuff shouted at the flower; then: "Henshaw! I order you to free me from this... *thing!*"

"There he goes again," said the penguin butler, "Throwing his weight around. Maybe if I let the flower eat him I'd get some peace. Then again," he mused as an afterthought, "He could make the flower sick and I'd never forgive myself." Hurrying to his whingeing Lord he grabbed hold of Nuff-Nuff's arm and tried to pull it free of the tendril. "It's no good. The plant's too strong. I may have to leave you to your fate."

"Don't you dare!" grated Nuff-Nuff. "Do something, you useless servant!"

Following a reluctant sigh, Henshaw began attacking the tendril with his beak. A few sharp pecks was all it took. The slender white snake let go of Nuff-Nuff and withdrew into the yellow flower. "There," said Henshaw. "Now are you satisfied?"

Before an argument could erupt, the Professor said: "Come on you two. We have to find the other wands; then we can get out of here."

The trek was fraught with danger. Every few paces the plants tried to grab them. Seeing as he already had his wand and wouldn't have to go close to the edge anymore, Nuff-Nuff was shuffling along in the middle of the path. Unfortunately, it was only narrow and he came to a halt behind Henshaw who was reaching up into a tree for a second wand. "Get a move on," grumbled Nuff-Nuff.

Henshaw paused with his flipper in mid air and glared back. "Just wait, will you. My wand's higher up than yours was."

"Stand on tip-toe, you dozy penguin," ordered his Lordship.

Henshaw scowled. "In case you hadn't noticed, I don't have toes like you."

Watching the progress from the safety of the kitchen, Lucy saw something in the comic-book picture and called out: "A plant's coming for you, Henshaw!" She was too late. What snaked out of the undergrowth was like a giant squid's tentacle which began to encircle the penguin's body. He pulled away, bumping into Nuff-Nuff in the process, and both fell to the ground.

Danny was watching this too, of course, and his eyes widened at the sight of a mass of vines crawling on the ground from under the flowers straight towards Lord Nuff-Nuff and his butler. He yelled at the picture: "Professor, they need your help before...!"

The vines made it to Nuff-Nuff who cried out: "Oh no! What *now?*"

Henshaw had managed to stand upright and began stomping on the squirming flowers. "On your feet before you're eaten by rampaging petunias! I can't keep jumping up and down forever."

Hearing Danny's warning, Dib-Dob had rushed back to help Henshaw with the stomping and soon Nuff-Nuff was able to stand. Then they all tackled the snaky thing around Henshaw's body, eventually freeing him. Before the three of them took off, with a leap into the air Henshaw launched himself at the dangling crystal stick and snatched it. "Well done," said the professor. "That's number two. I spotted the third wand further along the trail. Let's grab it and get out of here before we end up as Sunday lunch for hungry flowers."

Employing a series of skips, hops and ducks, they wove their way along, eventually coming to the wand that the Professor had seen. It was close to the end of the trail and the flowers must have realised that. They renewed their onslaught, snaking and grabbing. Dib-Dob caught hold of the last crystal wand, brushed off a tendril and dashed for the opening at the edge of the wood. Nuff-Nuff and Henshaw

were close on his heels. Soon enough, all three were standing in the daylight puffing and blowing, and very relieved to have survived. "Right, let's take stock," said the Professor after he caught his breath. "Have we each got our crystal wands?"

"Um-er, not exactly," mumbled Nuff-Nuff sheepishly, looking down at his empty hands. "I must have dropped mine."

"You can't be serious!" rasped Henshaw in disbelief. "Only you could mess up something so simple. You'll just have to go back and get it."

"Never in a million years," declared Nuff-Nuff shaking his head. "Anyway, we've got two wands. What difference is an extra one going to make?"

"All the difference," stated Dib-Dob positively. He was scanning the ancient scroll again. "It says we have to place the three wands on the Moonstone to be shown the way to the temple of the Aysee Deese. *Three* wands," he repeated. "Someone has to go back along the trail to get the last one."

"The flowers will be waiting," said Danny ominously. "Whoever goes to get the wand will have to be quick."

"I could do it," offered Lucy. "I'm a fast runner. I won the hundred metres at the school sports day."

"No, too dangerous," said her grandfather. He glanced at the next picture to see Captain Starlight's ship coming down from above to sit on the ground. Moonshine was preparing to lower the rope ladder as Joshua spoke to him: "How fast can you run, Colonel?"

"Not all that," said Moonshine, "Starlight's a lot quicker than me. Why?"

Joshua explained the problem and the way to resolve it. Once the rope used to lower Danny to the belfry was tied around Starlight's waist, Joshua said: "As soon as you've got the wand, Captain, the others will pull you to safety."

"How will we know when she's got it?" asked Moonshine.

"We will be looking at the comic-book pictures," said Lucy, "So we'll be able to see Captain Starlight on the flower trail; and when we tell you to pull, do it quickly."

Everything was ready. Starlight was in her starting position at the edge of the wood with the others holding the end of the rope. Taking a deep breath, in she went, running and jumping over the snaking tendrils and crawling plants, all trying to grab her. The three in the real world were watching. Danny spotted something further along the trail. "The wand's just ahead of you, Captain Starlight," said the boy. "Get ready to grab it."

Closer and closer she came; then she was right over the glittering crystal stick. "At your feet, Captain," advised Joshua. He waited a second or two for Starlight to pick up the wand; then he shouted to the next comic-book picture which showed the others beyond the wood: "Pull, now!"

Starlight jerked as the rope went tight. Bit by bit she was dragged along, feeling things snatching and clawing at her. It all seemed to be going well; too well as it happened.

Suddenly the rope became untied and slipped from her waist. With the rope free of Starlight's weight, the four comic-book characters outside the wood fell back and collapsed in a heap on the ground. As for Captain Starlight, the last picture on that page showed plants closing in and beginning to cover her.

"Um-ah!" exclaimed Danny, and his hand shot out to turn the page.

"Not yet, Danny!" barked Joshua. "Not until we figure a way to save Captain Starlight." Following a heavy pause he added fearfully: "Always assuming we can."