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MOONBERRY PIE



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STARLIGHT AND MOONSHINE

The Quest for the Golden Gastropod – Stage Three

The three sitting at the kitchen table in the real world stared down at the comic-book picture. “Captain Starlight’s covered in carni-wotsit plants,” declared Danny. “They’re probably eating her!”

“We know that,” hissed Lucy irritably, “But what are we going to do about it?”

“I think one of us has to go and get her out,” said their grandfather.

“I’ll do it,” offered Lucy. “I can run really fast.”

“The plants will most likely snare you before you reach the Captain,” warned Joshua, “And I don’t see how you could break her free.”

“What if they let go of her?” queried Danny.

“And why would they do that?” asked his sister.

“Meat,” Danny said simply. “Professor Dib-Dob said they eat meat, so if we give them some they’ll leave Captain Starlight alone.”

“Brilliant, I don’t think,” sneered Lucy.

“No, wait a minute,” cut in Joshua, “Danny may be right. Here’s what we do…”

It took a few minutes to prepare and they were ready. Lucy had her Moonberry Pie cookie in one hand and a small bucket in the other. In it was some leftover food from the fridge – a slice of ham, two sausage rolls, a number of meatballs and a lamb chop that Danny had only eaten part of. “It tasted gross,” he said with a sneer, “But the plants might like it.” There was only one way to find out.

Lucy took a deep breath, held up her cookie and called out: “Moonberry Pie!” As always, she sped through the fruit-tasting rainbow sky to appear on the flower trail a few paces from Captain Starlight; at least what could be seen of her beneath a tangle of squirming vines and rustling leaves. “Now, Lucy!” yelled Danny to the comic-book picture she was in. “Chuck the meat!”

Slipping her cookie into a pocket for safekeeping, she dipped a hand in the bucket and pulled out a sausage roll. Tossing it to the side of Starlight, she grabbed a couple of meatballs and threw them to a different spot. “It seems to be working,” said Joshua noticing that some of the tendrils holding the Captain had gone snaking after Lucy’s meat offering. “Throw a bit more further away, but save some until Starlight’s almost free.”

Another three meatballs were next. Vines and crawling plants left their captive to go after them and it was possible to see Starlight struggling to break away from the ones still holding her. “Here’s the last!” Lucy called out, swinging the bucket with its remaining contents and heaving it over Captain Starlight’s head to land well clear of her. With a flurry of activity, the plants unravelled and went after the bucket. As they closed in on it they seemed to be fighting over what it held. “Come on,

Captain!" shouted Lucy, grabbing Starlight's hand. "Run as if your life depended on it!" Which it did.

A few plants tried to grab them as they sped along the flower trail, but none managed to hold on. For them it seemed to take an age, when in fact it was less than a minute before they burst out into the sunlight. "Glad to see you back, Starlight," said Moonshine. "Did you have a fun time?"

"I'd hardly call it fun," replied the Captain breathlessly. "It was only thanks to Lucy that I got out at all." Turning to face the young girl, Starlight said: "I think it might be best if you went home now. We don't know what other dangers we face."

"Oh," moaned Lucy in disappointment. Looking up at the sky where she knew Joshua would be watching she pleaded: "Can I stay for a while please, Granddad?"

A few seconds of silence elapsed. Finally, the old man's voice echoed from above: "For now, Lucy. But be ready with your cookie, just in case."

Professor Dib-Dob had been listening but was more interested in the object he had spotted in Starlight's hand. "I see you have the third crystal wand, Starlight. That means we can move to the next stage of the quest." Reading from the ancient scroll he said: "We have to place the three wands on the Moonstone to be shown the way to the land of the Aysee Deesee."

"What's a Moonstone?" asked Danny.

"I have no idea," replied his grandfather, "But I'm sure they'll find one somewhere close."

The hunt was on for the Moonstone, although none of the characters in comic-book world knew what they were looking for. A number of times they found the odd round flat stone, but when they placed the wands on them, nothing happened. It seemed impossible; until Henshaw called out: "I think I've found it."

"Clever clogs," grumbled Lord Nuff-Nuff, and he came over to inspect. "Looks like all the rest to me."

"What about that, then?" said his penguin butler pointing to the round stone at his feet. "It's all black except for the curve of white on one edge."

Dib-Dob wandered over to join them and observed: "The white curve is a crescent just like a new moon. Bring the wands and we'll try it." The three crystal wands were brought to the stone and placed on it in a row. At first it seemed this was just another stone; then the white crescent began to glow. Everyone jumped back a step as the wands began to move all on their own. They spread apart at the ends closest to the crescent, while joining to a point at the other. "That's it!" gasped the Professor excitedly. "The wands have formed into an arrow." Picking up the Moonstone very carefully he turned to show the others. When he did, the arrow with the crescent as its base swung on the stone to point in the same direction it had before it was moved. "It's like a compass," declared Dib-Dob. "It will always point in the same direction no matter which way the stone is turned."

Handing it to Lucy, he took the scroll from his satchel. "It says to seek The Wall of Light beyond Nothing." The Professor frowned as he scanned the surrounding area. "Beyond," he muttered to himself. "Beyond what? The script said 'Nothing'. I wonder what that could be?"

While Dib-Dob was pondering, Lucy had been turning on the spot, watching the arrow on the Moonstone in her hands. "No matter which way I face, the Moonstone arrow keeps pointing to the horizon," observed Lucy. "But there's nothing out there," "It's like a desert."

"So?" remarked Danny as he watched what was happening in the comic-book picture. "Nothing's nothing. That's where you've got to go."

Like the others, Moonshine had heard the conversation. "By Jove, Danny's right. We have to cross the Nothing desert to find The Wall of Light; but everything out there looks the same, so which way do we go?"

"Wherever the Moonstone leads us," said Dib-Dob with confidence. "Let's get on board the ship. Captain Starlight can follow the compass arrow and take us to The Wall of Light."

How long they travelled was not known because time in comic-book world was different to that in the real world. It could have been hours or days. All Danny and Joshua saw were two pictures: one of Captain Starlight's ship flying over a wasteland of sand and rocks; then another as it was approaching a white cliff. Tall and long it was, stretching as far as the eye could see. "What now?" queried Moonshine.

"Well," replied Dib-Dob. "The script seems clear enough. We have to meet with the Keeper of the Gate and request entry to The Land of Everlasting Summer. There seems to be a door in the rock wall," he added, pointing to an archway. "Maybe that's the gate, but there's no sign of any Keeper."

Starlight lowered the ship to the ground and they all climbed down. Walking cautiously towards the cliff face, they simply stood and puzzled over an indentation that appeared to be an archway of sorts. "If that's the gate, how are we supposed to go through?" grumbled Nuff-Nuff. "It's solid rock."

"Weren't you listening?" chided Henshaw. "We have to meet the Keeper and ask for entry."

"Okay then," sneered Nuff-Nuff. "Where is he or she? The only thing that looks like a person is a woman's face carved into the stone over the arch."

"And if you notice," put in Professor Dib-Dob, "The face is surrounded by a sunburst; and there's one in the temple that The Golden Gastropod is set in."

"Instead of just standing here, why don't we ask?" suggested Lucy. Staring up at the carved face she said: "Excuse me, ma'am, are you the Keeper of the Gate?"

Nuff-Nuff groaned. "How dumb is this – talking to a stupid lump of rock...?"

His words petered out and he stumbled back a few steps as the face in the sunburst above the archway came to life. Not only that, but it spoke: "Are you calling me stupid?" said a woman's voice.

"Um-er...", started Nuff-Nuff.

"Trust you to open your big mouth," muttered Henshaw.

"Both of you be quiet," ordered the face. "I shall speak only to the young girl with the good manners. You wish to enter the Land of Everlasting Summer, yes?"

"We do, ma'am," replied Lucy. "With your permission."

The face above the archway took a moment to inspect the newcomers before musing: "No visitors for three hundred years; then two groups in less than a week. Most unexpected."

Professor Dib-Dob was astounded. "*Another* group was here?"

All of a sudden a beam of light shone from the face and began playing on the fancy braid and buttons of Moonshine's jacket. "One of them was dressed like you. He was very rude. I wouldn't have let him enter, but he presented the key, so I had no choice."

"I don't like the sound of this," declared Dib-Dob. "The only rude person I know who dresses in military uniform is Filcher. I thought it was suspicious when I noticed him skulking around in the Society museum. As I have the only copy of the ancient script it's my guess he stole the original; which is how he knew the way and got here before us."

“Why would he bother?” asked Lucy. “Coming all this way just to look at the sacred snail doesn’t make sense. It’s not like him.”

Dib-dob scowled. “Legend has it that the temple of the Aysee Deesee not only holds the sacred snail, but is filled with gold and treasure. That’s what Filcher would have been after.” Turning to the Keeper, he asked: “When did the others leave?”

“They haven’t,” declared the woman’s voice, “Not yet; and that puzzles me; something else too. Shortly after they entered, the Land of Everlasting Summer began to grow cold, very cold. It has never been like that.”

“Filcher, I bet,” hissed Dib-Dob. “I’d say he not only stole the temple’s treasure, but also took the sacred snail. We have to find it and return it to the sunburst.”

“You can do that?” asked the face on the wall.

“We can give it our best try,” said Starlight.

“Not just try, Starlight,” warned Moonshine. “We can’t afford to fail: the sacred snail must be returned to the sunburst or the land of the Aysee Deesee will perish.”

“If you can prevent that we will be indebted to you,” said the Keeper. Her light shone again, this time on the Moonstone in Lucy’s hands. “Place this key on the gate and it will open.”

Lucy looked down at the Moonstone in her hands, then back to the solid stone in the archway. Although she hadn’t noticed before, there were indentations in the rock the same shape as the arrow on the Moonstone. Stepping close, she turned the stone over and gingerly positioned it so that the wands and crescent fitted in the grooves. At first nothing happened; then the round stone began to glow. Lucy gasped and stepped back when it disappeared altogether. “The Moonstone and the crystal wands have returned to where you found them,” explained the Keeper. “In a moment the gate will open.”

Frozen in The Land of Everlasting Summer

The spot where the Moonstone had been continued to glow and the light spread until it filled the arch. Another second and the light had intensified so much that all who stood before the White Wall had to close their eyes.

They opened them when something strange occurred. The stone slab had completely gone and a chill wind blow was blowing over them from the archway. “Come on,” ordered Dib-Dob. There isn’t a moment to lose. We have to find the golden snail and put it back in the temple.”

“I’m worried about the ship,” said Starlight. “If we leave it unattended and Filcher comes out before us he’ll probably steal it.”

A woman’s voice echoed from above the archway: “I can make sure that doesn’t happen,” offered the Keeper. “Once you are all through the gate I will close it until you return.”

With that reassurance the group of comic-book characters and one person from the real world began to file hesitantly through the archway and into what was supposed to be The Land of Everlasting Summer; except it was nothing like. “This is freezing,” moaned Lord Nuff-Nuff. “I don’t know how long I’ll last.”

“Stop complaining,” said Henshaw. “Walk faster – that will warm you up.”

Nuff-Nuff wasn’t the only one feeling the cold and Joshua was becoming concerned: “You should come home, Lucy,” he said to the comic-book picture. Before his granddaughter could argue he added: “Not only is the extreme cold dangerous for you as a real person; we have to remember that this is Starlight’s and Moonshine’s story. We can still help in small ways; but The Quest for the Golden

Gastropod has to be completed by our comic-book heroes alone. Surely you understand that?"

Reluctantly, Lucy agreed. In another second she was back in the kitchen watching the comic story unfold. Shivering along through the chill wind with Professor Dib-Dob in the lead, the small band of heroes passed a few people who were just standing still. "They must be the Aysee Deesee," said Starlight through chattering teeth, "And they're covered in frost. They look to be frozen stiff."

"Hopefully they'll be alright once we find the golden snail and return it to the temple," said Moonshine, "I'd say this pathway we're on probably leads there. So, where, I wonder, is the snail?"

Then they came across Filcher and his men. "Hey," chirped Danny, "They're frozen too, just like the Aysee Deesee."

"And they are all carrying golden artefacts and treasure," observed Henshaw. "Maybe one of them has the golden snail." Following his suggestion they began a search. "I suppose we ought to return this treasure to the temple," said the penguin butler.

"I say we just find the snail," put in Dib-Dob. "Once it's back in the temple the land will start to warm up; then the Aysee Deesee should defrost and they can take the treasure back themselves." They hunted and poked about among the bags and pockets of Filcher's frozen crew but the sacred snail was nowhere to be seen. Shivering on the spot, the Professor said: "Where can it have gone?"

"Snails make trails," Danny commented. "I've seen them in the garden. Look for a snail-trail."

It sounded easy enough, especially as the ground was covered by a light coating of frost, but after five minutes of stumbling around there was no sign of a snail trail. "This is madness," grumbled Nuff-Nuff stepping over a low wall that bordered the pathway. "Oh, wait a minute," he added as he spotted something. "There's a line in the frost and it goes over there." In a jerky shuffle he followed the line and eventually declared in an excited stammer: "I've, f-f-found the s-snail!"

"Well done," said Starlight. "Best give it to the Professor and we can take it to the temple before we all freeze to death."

"N-no, I sh-should keep it," stated Nuff-Nuff strongly. "This is a very precious artefact and I'm a L-Lord, s-so I ought to be the one to p-put it b-back in the s-sunburst."

"I don't care who carries it," said Dib-Dob, "Just as long as we get it to the temple quickly. I'm beginning to seize up, as I'm sure everyone else is."

On they went, growing slower and slower as the cold made them stiffer by the minute; all except for Henshaw. When Nuff-Nuff asked why he was the only one who didn't seem to be affected by the icy conditions his butler replied: "Because I'm a penguin, of which you keep reminding me; and penguins are used to the cold. Now stop whingeing. Not long to go now – there's the temple up ahead; and someone's standing in front of it."

The person he was talking about would have been very impressive if not for the coating of frost over his fancy clothing. "Judging by his appearance and the ornate head-dress," commented the Professor, "I'd say he's the High Priest of the temple. It might be polite to ask him if we can enter. You do it, Henshaw, seeing as you're moving quicker than the rest of us; and take the sacred snail with you."

Nuff-Nuff complained, needless to say, but he had to admit that the cold had him rooted to the spot. Henshaw had to prise the golden snail from his Lordship's trembling hands. "There's no way you can even make it up the steps," explained his

butler, "Let alone put the snail back in the sunburst. However, I'll do it for you. What else is a servant for? Does that make you feel any better?" All he received in return was a growl through gritted teeth.

Walking to stand before the frozen High Priest, he said: "Would I be permitted to enter?" Holding out the golden snail, he added: "I wish to replace this in the sunburst." Only the eyes moved in a kind-of shiver, but there was no sound. "I'll take that as a yes, then, shall I?" Still the High Priest said nothing.

Careful not to touch the holy man, Henshaw waddled past into the temple. He had to wind his way around a number of display stands and small tables that had been knocked over, presumably by Filcher and his men when they had stolen the precious artefacts. Soon enough, Henshaw was standing before the sunburst. It was quite dull at first; until he gingerly placed the sacred snail in the centre. He was sure he heard a sound, a singing maybe, as the snail began to glow. The light spread to the sunburst and in seconds it was shining brightly as well. The air was growing warm, too; and the heat was flowing past him towards the temple entrance.

The giant penguin butler followed the wave of heat to where the High Priest was standing. It was like a miracle: the cold was rapidly fading and the Land of Everlasting Summer was returning to its former sunny glory. Henshaw stood there in amazement, barely noticing movement at his side; then he felt a hand touch his shoulder. It was the High Priest. "You have performed a wondrous great service for us," said a deep voice that was as golden and warm as the day was becoming. Removing his fancy be-jewelled necklace, the holy man placed it over Henshaw's head to rest on his shoulders and hang proudly on his chest. "May the golden snail on this chain keep you safe as ours does the land of my people. From this day forth you will be known as Prince of the Aysee Deesee; and the story of you and your companions will be recorded in our history."

As soon as Starlight, Moonshine and the other two had warmed up enough they went to congratulate Henshaw. Only part way through this back-slapping and flipper-shaking a small group of Aysee Deesee came running up and all began babbling at once. The High Priest held up his hands and the natives fell silent; except for one who reported: "We have recovered the treasure stolen from the temple and have captured the thieves, O Mighty One. What would you have us do with them?"

"I think it best that we ask our new Prince." The High Priest nodded and smiled at Henshaw. "Should we make them our slaves, or perhaps do something even worse to them?"

Never before had a mere butler been given such an important responsibility and Henshaw was overwhelmed; well, almost. Taking a deep breath, he announced in his poshest butler voice: "I suggest you put them to work polishing up the artefacts they stole; and maybe have them do a bit of digging in the fields. Release them after a bit. The long walk back with nothing to show for it might teach them a lesson, and I doubt they'll ever return."

The High Priest smiled broadly. "Indeed, you truly are a kind and worthy Prince. What is your name?" On hearing it, the holy man frowned and said: "Henshaw, a very odd name. I believe we should give you a new one. What about Fohpar? Yes, Prince Fohpar sounds good to me."

"Prince Fohpar!" muttered Nuff-Nuff to himself. "Ludicrous! I'm never going to hear the last of this."