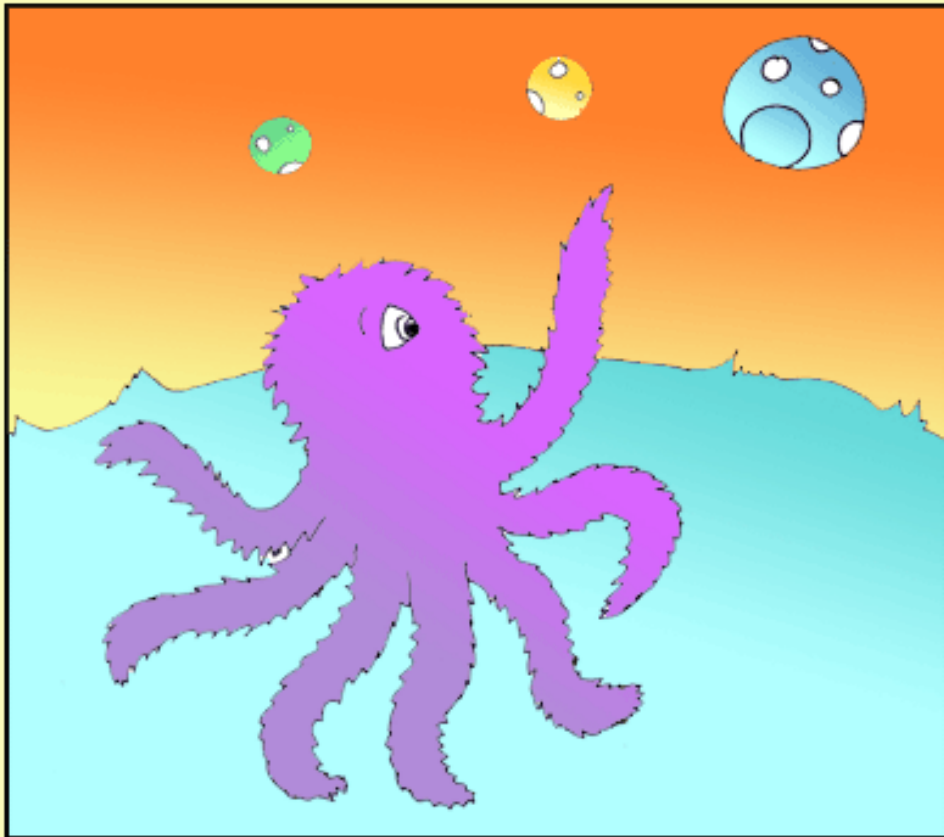


The Moon Monster



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The Moon Monster

Chapter One

Belinda was back!

My sister Roa was thrilled. But I was horrified. I thought we'd seen the last of that awful alien!

"Oh brave and noble Captain," I groaned to my father, "Why have Belinda's parents brought her back?"

He sighed. "Belinda liked our spaceship so much that she begged to come on holiday with us. And her parents agreed."

"Hah! I bet they did!" I muttered.

I nearly added something very rude. I nearly said, "I bet they couldn't wait to get rid of her!"

I stopped myself just in time. Belinda was the rude one, not me.

That was the whole trouble with her. I didn't mind her being an alien. I didn't care that she had strange yellow hair instead of proper purple fur.

It didn't bother me that she had only two arms, with funny little wiggles on the end. It wasn't her fault that she had no tentacles.

But her manners were another matter! They were *dreadful*.

Just then Belinda came stomping up on to the deck with Roa behind her.

"Well?" she shouted. "Are we nearly there yet?"

“Only seven thousand light years to go, beloved Belinda,” said my father.

“Seven thousand!” she screeched. “I can’t wait that long! I want to see those Marvellous Moons of Merzi *now!*”

“We’ll make the Space Jump there tomorrow,” my father promised.

“We’d better! What’s so marvellous about these moons anyway?”

“Oh, they’re amazing!” Roa said. “We only discovered them last year, when we were mapping this part of space. You can land on the biggest moon, and go swimming in the slime—”

“Yuck!” yelled Belinda.

“Or you can eat ice cakes—”

“Bleh!” bellowed Belinda.

“Or you can go exploring in the caves and craters—”

“Horrid!” howled Belinda. Then she paused. “Actually, I quite like exploring. What sort of wild animals live there?”

“Oh, nothing lives on any of the moons,” said Roa.

“Our monitors show no life on them at all, dear child,” my father added.

Belinda looked disappointed. “Well, how many moons are there?”

“We don’t know,” I said. “You can’t count them, because they keep on moving. You never get the same answer twice.”

Belinda snorted. “Maybe *you* can’t count – but *I* can! I bet you I could count those moons! Is that all there is to do? Those moons sound really boring.”

“Well, they’re not!” I was looking forward to seeing the ice cliffs and swimming in the cool, pink lakes of slime.

It would be a wonderful holiday... if only Belinda wasn’t there.

Chapter Two

“Pass me another ice cake,” I said.

Roa handed one over. It was made of blue ice crystals and made my tongues tingle. I crunched it up as I floated in the slime lake.

Gazing upwards, I could see about a hundred little moons, all different colours, from palest yellow to deepest green. They sped across the sky like a distant game of marbles.

Our shuttle had landed on the biggest moon, which was blue. It was the only one we could walk around on without our space suits, because the other moons were too small to have any air.

Not that we really *walked*. It was more like bouncing. On this moon, there was not much gravity, so we felt as light as soap bubbles. We could jump right over each other.

And it was lovely and cold. My dear parents were basking in the delightful chill of the ice cliffs, while we went swimming.

This was the life! I stretched out my tentacles, enjoying the slithery feel of the pink slime on my fur.

But Roa began to fret.

“Where did Belinda go? I can’t see her!”

“She’s not far away,” I said lazily. “She didn’t like the lake, so she went off to explore that crater over there.”

“She might get lost!”

“If only,” I muttered. But I could see that my little sister was worried, so I waded out of the lake and shook myself. “Come on, then,” I said. “We’ll go and check on her.”

We left our dear parents behind and set off to the crater. Its edge was high and jagged, but we could easily bounce over it. The inside of the crater was dotted with rocks and caves and slimy pools.

“I can’t see Belinda anywhere!” said Roa.

I shouted out. “Oh excellent agreeable Belinda, where are you?”

There was no answer.

Roa’s fur began to shiver. Her voice trembled. “Where has she gone? What can we do?”

“Let’s look for tracks,” I said. We began to peer around. I saw no tracks – but I spotted something else.

“Look!” I said. “Crumbs of ice cake. She came this way!”

Although Belinda had said she hated ice cake, she had taken a huge slab of it. She must have been eating it as she walked – because there was a trail of blue crystals on the ground.

They led straight to a cave. We stood and looked at the dark entrance.

“Can she really have gone in there?” whispered Roa. Even though I knew this place was harmless, I felt a little scared.

“I’ll go back and get a torch,” I suggested.

But Roa plunged into the cave. I had to follow her.

I put out my tentacles to feel my way. The walls were cold and slippery with slime.

However, it wasn't completely dark. A pale glimmer lit up the place. Once my eye got used to it, I could see quite well.

The cave was deep and narrow, like a tunnel. Roa was hurrying to a crossroads, where more tunnels branched off.

"Oh kind and loving sister – ***STOP!***" I shouted.

She halted. "Why?"

"Don't run so fast! If we're not careful, we'll get lost! We need to mark our route."

With a tentacle, I drew a big **X** in the slime on the floor of our tunnel.

"Right," I said. "That **X** means exit. Now let's go and find Belinda!"

Chapter Three

We crept down tunnel after tunnel, looking for crumbs of ice cake, or footprints in the slime. Sometimes I thought I heard a strange gurgling noise – but when I called out, no-one answered.

There was no sign of Belinda. Each time, we returned to the **X** without her.

“She’s my best friend, and we’ve lost her!” Roa wailed.

Belinda was her best friend? That was news to me. But I didn’t like seeing Roa so unhappy.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “We’ll find her!”

“How?”

I was just trying to think of an answer when I heard that gurgling noise again, like a giant rumbling tummy.

And then I heard a shriek. It came from a tunnel that we hadn’t yet explored.

“Come on!” I dashed down the tunnel.

It turned and twisted like a slimy snake – and then, at last, we saw her!

There stood Belinda, covered in pink slime. It was all over her clothes. Her yellow hair was dripping with it, but her face was red.

Was she glad to see us? She was not.

“There you are!” she shouted. “I’ve been waiting ages for you to find me. Get me out of this horrible place!”

I stopped being worried and started being annoyed instead.

“Nobody asked you to come exploring here,” I said.

“There was nothing else to do, except sit around in a yucky lake of slime! There’s another yucky lake in here. I just fell over in it! Now I stink, and I’m freezing!”

I thought she smelt much better than usual – but I didn’t say so.

“Poor Belinda,” said Roa tenderly. “Let’s go back to the shuttle and have some nice sludge soup.”

“I hate sludge soup!” she bawled. “And I hate this place. I’m sure there’s a monster here!”

“There are no monsters anywhere on the Moons of Merzi,” I said patiently. “There are no animals at all, remember?”

“Oh yes, there are!” she yelled. “I heard a monster! It was rumbling and gurgling!”

“We heard a gurgling noise as well!” exclaimed Roa.

“I expect it’s just the slime running down the walls,” I said. “There’s no life here.”

“No?” Belinda snapped. “*Then what makes all this slime?* It’s like a million slugs have crawled all over everywhere! A million giant slimy monster slugs!”

I opened my mouth to tell her that was impossible. But before I could speak, I heard the noise again. We all did.

It was a burbling, glooping, slurping sound – like a stream of treacle gurgling slowly through the tunnels. It was getting louder and louder.

We all froze, staring at each other.

“Whatever it is,” I said, “it’s coming our way!”

Chapter Four

“I *told* you!” screamed Belinda. “The monster’s coming to get us!”

“Run!” cried Roa.

We all ran back up the tunnel to the crossroads.

But when I looked for the **X** that I had carefully drawn, I couldn’t see it. Everywhere was smeared with slime. There was no **X** anywhere...

“This way!” yelled Belinda, dashing down a tunnel. Roa hurried after her.

Although I didn’t think it was the right way, I had to follow them.

Suddenly the tunnel opened out into a giant cavern. It was so huge that I could barely see the other side. It was much bigger than our whole spaceship.

And it was full of gooey pink slime...

Belinda stopped dead. “*Yuck!* It’s the same slime lake I fell in before! We’ve run round in a circle!” She glared at me as if it was my fault.

But Roa pointed at the lake.

“There’s something in there!”

The slime began to bubble. It went BLOOP and GLURP and SLURP. It swirled and heaved, as if something was down there and just about to come up to the surface...

“The monster!” shrieked Belinda.

This time, I didn't argue. We raced away from the gurgling lake. The gloopy noises rose to a roar that echoed down the tunnel after us. The walls shook. The ground vibrated.

Whatever was behind us, it was really *big*...

When we reached the crossroads, the others stopped. But I didn't hesitate.

"This way! Follow me!" I shouted, picking a tunnel and setting off along it.

Five minutes later we all emerged into the open air. It was a relief to see the little moons in the sky above us. But we didn't stop running until we had left the tunnel entrance far behind.

"How did you know that was the right way to go?" panted Roa.

"I saw a tuft of purple fur stuck to the slime."

"That was lucky. Otherwise we might have been gobbled up by giant slug monsters!"

"There are no—" I began to say.

Then I paused. There was certainly *something* in that cave. We could still hear it, bubbling and rumbling. The ground beneath our feet began to tremble.

"I hate this stupid moon!" Belinda screamed. "Now it's having an earthquake!"

"A moonquake," I corrected her – but I was scared.

"I don't like this!" wailed Roa.

"Neither do I. Let's head for the shuttle," I said. "Our wise and wonderful parents will know what's happening."

We hurried across the crater. When I looked back at the tunnel, I was horrified.

A thick pink river of slime had started to pour out of the entrance. A new lake was forming. It was beginning to flood the crater.

“Run faster!” I cried.

For soon it would flood *us*...

Chapter Five

We began to go in huge leaps and bounds. Belinda was surprisingly fast for someone with only two twiggy legs instead of seven nice strong tentacles.

At the crater's edge, we leapt up over the jagged rocks. I hoped the edge was high enough to hold back the flood for a while.

At last we reached our shuttle.

"We respectfully request a rapid rescue, oh perfect parents!" I gasped.

"Why?" said my mother. "Whatever is the matter, cherished child?"

I pointed at the flooding crater. "*That's* the matter!" The slime was pouring over the edge and creeping towards us.

"We need to get away!" cried Roa.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Step on it!" Belinda bellowed.

My parents wasted no time. Within five minutes we were all on board our shuttle and shooting back up into the sky.

Our little shuttle carried us to the spaceship that was waiting up amongst the moons. Soon we were safely on its deck.

Looking at the screen, I saw the big blue moon below. By now the crater was full of bubbling pink slime.

"A volcano?" wondered my mother.

“A monster!” shrieked Belinda.

“There can’t be a monster,” I said, yet again.

“How do *you* know? You don’t even know how many moons there are, fuzz-ball!” she yelled. Then she stuck her tongue out at me and waggled her wiggles.

So I stuck out *both* my tongues at her, and waggled my tentacles, and bristled my fur. “I know more than you do, stringy-head!” I retorted.

“Don’t you talk to my best friend like that!” cried Roa – and she boxed all four of my ears.

My dear mother looked horrified. “Children! Your manners! Please go to your cabin, until you have remembered how to be charming and polite.”

We trooped off to my cabin. Roa’s fur drooped, and I felt quite ashamed of being so rude.

Belinda stamped over to the porthole and glared out. “I’m going to prove that I know more than you. I’m going to count those moons!” she growled.

“You won’t be able to,” I said. I stood behind her, to make sure she didn’t cheat.

“Twenty-three, twenty-four – bother! Why do they whizz around like that?”

“There’s no planet to keep them in orbit,” explained Roa. “So they just float all over the place.”

Belinda began counting again.

“Forty-six, forty-seven, forty- *NOOO!*” she howled. “Why won’t that little yellow moon keep still?”

“Told you,” I said.

Roa pointed at the big moon. “See the slime lake now! It’s enormous!”

“It’s still growing,” I agreed.

“Look!” cried Belinda. “The big moon’s following that little yellow moon!”

“Maybe they’re having a race.” I was joking – but it really did look as if the moons were chasing each other.

We watched as the big blue moon gained on the little one. It caught it up – and next minute, I couldn’t see the yellow moon any more.

“Where is it?” I wondered. “It must have gone behind the big one.”

But Belinda clutched at my fur. “Did you see that? It just *ate* the little yellow moon!”

“Nonsense,” I said. But I stared harder. Where had the little yellow moon gone?

And why did the big moon look just that little bit bigger?

I had a horrible feeling in my stomach as I watched the big blue moon. Now it was chasing a small green one. The green moon began to zig and zag as if it was trying to get away.

As the big moon turned to follow, the giant crater faced us. It looked just like a huge, pink, slimy mouth....

“It’s hunting that green one now!” Belinda cried. “That’s why you can’t count those moons – they’re being *eaten*! And they keep moving because they’re trying to get away!”

“No, no, that can’t be right,” I said. “They’re moons. They’re not alive.”

But Roa was quivering in fear. “There are no monsters *on* the moon,” she whispered. “The monster *is* the moon! And what’s more, it’s a cannibal!”

Chapter Six

“We’ve got to stop it!” cried Belinda. She shot out of the cabin like a cork out of a bottle.

“What’s she doing?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” said Roa. We both ran after her as she sprinted up to the Captain’s deck.

My father looked sad to see us. “Much-loved children, I thought we told you—”

“Put Star Drive on *right now!*” Belinda yelled. “Get ready to make a Space Jump!”

“But what—”

“Just *do it!*” she shouted. She dived at the controls.

Our polite parents stood transfixed. I hurried to switch on the Star Drive, while Roa fired up the fuel cells.

My father began to wring his tentacles. “Mutiny! Mutiny!” he wailed. “Oh precious progeny – what are you doing?”

I turned and pointed at the screen. “We’re escaping from *that!* That dreadful cannibal moon!”

My gracious father gasped. My adored mother screamed. All their fur stood on end.

My fur was standing on end too. For the monster moon was closer than ever. It was still chasing the little green moon.

“Let’s get away from it now!” I exclaimed.

But Belinda did not steer the ship away. Instead, she steered straight at it.

“What are you doing?” I cried. She didn’t answer.

The monster moon turned its blue face towards us: a face with no eyes, just a giant, gaping, slimy mouth.

As if it had seen us, it began to head our way. My hearts thumped at the sight of that huge, glistening crater.

And then, like a pair of giant jaws, the crater began to open wider still. The jagged rocks around it looked just like giant teeth...

“Space Jump! *Now!*” I yelled.

But to my horror, Belinda did not press the button for the Space Jump.

“Wait,” she said.

“*Wait?* What for?”

“For this,” Belinda said.

The monster moon was nearly on us. The giant crater filled the screen. We were about to be eaten!

“*Now,*” said Belinda, and she pressed the button.

There was a gigantic lurch as we made the jump through space. In the blink of an eye, we were light years away, in an empty part of the galaxy.

We had left all the moons far behind – all except one.

“It’s come with us!” Roa screamed. “You let it get too close!”

By the time we jumped, we were almost inside the monster moon. We had brought it with us to this empty part of space.

It was still there, filling the screen, and snarling with those huge rocky teeth!

“You’re crazy!” I shouted at Belinda. “Now it’s *really* angry – and it’s going to eat us!”

Chapter Seven

“Oh, no it’s not,” Belinda said. She pushed at the controls and sent the ship hurtling away at top speed. We were all thrown backwards.

“We can’t go this fast,” my dear father cried. “The engines will burn out!”

“Don’t worry,” said Belinda. “Any second now...”

I could hardly bear to look. The jagged teeth were closing on us.

We felt them rasp and scrape against the ship’s hull. Then we were pulling away – only just in time. We were free!

But for how long? I knew my noble father was right: the ship couldn’t keep going at this speed. There was no escape. With its next bite, the monster moon would munch our ship up like a peanut.

Suddenly there was another giant lurch. We all fell over.

Belinda had pressed the Space Jump button a second time.

It took me a moment to struggle to my feet. I stared out at the stars.

They looked perfectly peaceful: not a single moon in sight. This time, we had left the monster moon behind us. It was stranded.

I felt quite weak. My tentacles had gone all limp, and Roa was no better.

“Why did you do that?” I said. “We nearly got eaten!”

“I wasn’t going to let it gobble up all those other moons,” Belinda said defiantly. “I saved their lives!”

“They don’t have lives,” I said. “They’re not animals. They’re lumps of rock.”

But my wise father the Captain shook his head.

“Not just ordinary rock,” he said. “That was a kind of rock I’ve never seen before. Those moons were definitely alive. And as for that monster moon...” He shuddered.

“We were lucky not to get eaten in the cave,” said Roa.

“We were probably too small for it to notice us,” I said.

“We just tickled its tongue and made its mouth water!”

Belinda giggled. “I wonder how many of the other moons of Merzi are little baby monsters?”

“We shall have to warn ships to avoid that part of space,” said my dear mother. “Thank you, oh charming and clever children, for your quick thinking!”

“You are truly ingenious infants,” my noble father added.

“It was Belinda’s quick thinking really,” I admitted. “And she was the only one brave enough to take over the controls.”

“You can have them back now, oh rather purple quite nice captain,” said Belinda. She stepped aside, looking very pleased with herself.

“Dear father,” begged Roa, “take us far away from those Murderous Moons of Merzi!”

“Yes, please!” I agreed. “Let’s go somewhere else for the rest of our holiday.”

“Certainly,” said my mother. “Because Belinda was so brave, she shall choose where we go.”

I thought that should make Belinda happy.

But she stopped smiling. She put her hands on her hips, and glowered at us.

“Go somewhere else?” she shouted. “No! No way! I want to go straight back to those moons of Merzi!”

“*What?*” We stared at her in disbelief.

“That was the best holiday ever! The Moon Monster was totally brilliant.”

“*Brilliant?*”

“I want to go back and find another one. Maybe we can catch it, and keep it as a pet! Those moons were marvellous! I can’t wait!”

THE END

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