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DRUMENDUS

MISSION TO THE DRUM PLANET



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For Rosie and Ellie,
who inspired the creation of Drumendus

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CHAPTER 1
THE PURPLE HALO

Ella Crinkle gazed up at the planet Drumendus. It hung above Earth like a giant purple marble in the night sky, tantalisingly close, yet so mysterious.

'Mercury, Venus, Earth, Drumendus, Mars,' Ella recited in rhythm, imagining herself zooming across the solar system at the speed of light, 'Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune!' A deep longing welled up inside her, as it so often did. 'One day, I'll be an astronaut,' she whispered. 'One day, I'll visit *you*, Drumendus.' She paused, then added, 'If Aunt Belinda can do it, so can I.'

Ella was desperate to follow in the footsteps of her world-famous aunt, Belinda Crinkle, the first person in history to walk on another planet, twenty-five

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years ago. Not to mention her uncle, Otto Crinkle, the *second* person in history to walk on another planet. Space travel was in Ella's blood, and she constantly dreamed of breathing the Drumendus air, exploring the purple landscape and, above all, *hearing* the legendary sounds of Earth's sibling planet.

'The first thing that hits you is the extraordinary drumming noise from deep below the ground,' Aunt Belinda had said on TV after returning to Earth all those years ago. 'Well, that and the fact you can wander around in normal clothes, without a care in the world – no need for a fancy spacesuit, and no bouncing across the surface, metres at a time. Trust gravity to spoil the fun! But the *sounds* are like nothing you can imagine: the wind, the water, even the birdsong are just so intense… so beautiful… and really rather terrifying.'

Aunt Belinda herself coined the nickname *Drumendus* on the first day of the mission. The planet was duly renamed, which cemented her iconic status across the world. '*Drumendus* is much more memorable than *Purple-1812*,' she had remarked at the time.

Despite the global triumph of the Drumendus Landing, a huge cloud hung over the mission for a single, tragic reason: only one Crinkle astronaut returned home alive.

Uncle Otto fell ill and died on the voyage back home. That's all the public knew, but Ella was sure there was more to it than that. Every time she asked Aunt Belinda about it, she was shut down instantly –

and it wasn't like her aunt to miss an opportunity to tell a Drumendus story.

Why all the secrecy? What really happened to her uncle up there, in the vastness of space?

A flurry of purple lightning bolts flashed across Drumendus, startling Ella back to the reality of the chilly summer's evening in Belton-on-Snare. A familiar dread came over her as she remembered what tomorrow had in store.

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St Hildegard's School Hall was crammed full of pupils and teachers waiting to go home for the summer. The end-of-year assembly had been as chaotic and rowdy as ever, and it was now Ella's turn to play her trombone as a final musical offering. Her legs trembled as she looked out across the sea of faces and played the first notes of her piece. To her surprise, it wasn't the pupils who voiced their disapproval but the school pets, dotted around the hall in cages, ready to be taken to their holiday homes. The hamsters and gerbils squeaked away each time Ella played a high note, and as the piece reached its final crescendo, form 8VE's famous chinchillas, Rall and Tando, stole the show with a perfectly timed series of screeches.

Ella lowered her trombone and bowed awkwardly to a smattering of applause and grumbling.

'Ah, the magic of music,' said the headteacher, Mrs Clapstick, ushering Ella to her seat. 'Thank you for that… interesting piece, "The Purple Halo", written

by Ella herself. Gosh, so many… loud notes. I expect it's inspired by Drumendus, with that title?'

Ella nodded and shuffled in her chair. The murmuring swelled amongst the pupils.

'Settle down, thank you,' said Mrs Clapstick, but the unease in the hall continued, and heated discussions broke out between the older pupils and even some of the staff. 'I said, settle down!' She glared at a group of teachers in the corner, who visibly shrank into their chairs as silence descended. 'Yes, Drumendus is back in the news, with its extra-bright glow and… rather stormy weather. But there's no danger whatsoever, despite the hysteria flying around. I mean, *really*, many of these rumours are quite frankly absurd. Someone could report that a six-legged, seven-eyed squishy purple alien had been discovered in the Buckingham Palace gardens, and many people would think it was a Drumendus attack!' The pupils chuckled at the way she said *squishy*. 'Well, I'm not going to lose any sleep over a bit of bad weather up there, and neither should you. That barren planet has always been Earth's neighbour, and we are stuck with it. Not even the Drumendus fanatics are worried.' She turned to Ella unexpectedly and said, 'You're one of them, aren't you, dear – what do you call yourselves again?'

'Drumgazers,' Ella murmured, her face burning in embarrassment.

'That's it,' said Mrs Clapstick, her tone becoming more enthusiastic. 'Well, you *would* be a drumgazer, with your family history.' Ella knew what was coming. Mrs Clapstick never missed an opportunity to bring

up Ella's famous family past. The number of times the pupils had heard all about it… 'Most of you will know that Ella here is the niece of two world-famous astronauts,' she started.

Ella groaned and stared intently at the trombone balanced across her lap. Mrs Clapstick launched into the story of the Drumendus Landing, making the usual mistake of calling Aunt Belinda 'Bonnie'. She didn't bother to mention BASS – the British Agency of Space Study – or the team of astronauts and scientists that had made the mission possible in the first place.

Ella longed to be off the stage.

Mrs Clapstick banged the lectern in excitement, her face full of pride. 'What an honour to have a Crinkle sat here, in our midst.' She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths, clearly exhausted from telling the story so theatrically.

It was precisely during this awkward pause that Ella's trombone chose to slide off her knee and clatter onto the wooden floorboards, much to the glee of the baying onlookers. Even the chinchillas seemed to laugh. Ella decided that this was officially the worst five minutes of her twelve-year-old life.

Mrs Clapstick waved her arms in the air in a feeble attempt to restore calm. 'A final word about leaving the school in a quiet and orderly—' she started, but the scraping of chair legs drowned her out as everyone stood up. She sighed and hobbled to the edge of the stage, stepping over Ella, who was scrabbling around on her hands and knees for her trombone. 'I give up,' she muttered. 'School dismissed.'

As Ella placed her trombone into its case, a scrunched-up piece of paper bounced off her head and landed on the scuffed floor beside her. She opened it and glanced down at the scrawled writing:

Ella Crinkle, the famous LOSER!

Her heart dropped. A pitiful attempt at her playing the trombone had been scribbled above the message. She looked over her shoulder to see a pupil known only as Drawl squeal with laughter, flanked by his two bullies-in-crime.

'That was pathetic, Crinkle,' Drawl said. 'I'd rather cook my own toes than listen to that awful racket!'

Mr Pulp, the music teacher, bustled over. 'And happy holidays to you too, Mr Drawl.' He was the only one in school who called him that. 'Now, if you're quite finished…?' Drawl scowled and shuffled off. His friends followed in obedient formation. Mr Pulp turned to Ella. 'It takes guts to play in assembly, Ella,' he said, 'and your trombone piece was certainly *not* awful.'

'Thanks… I think.'

'It might not have been everyone's cup of tea, but it had an *impact*. Music must have an impact, Ella, otherwise it belongs in a lift… if you know what I mean.'

'Not… really.'

'Good, good.' He beamed and toddled off.

Ella said her goodbyes to a couple of friends and

wandered out to Mum's car. She slung her trombone into the boot and jumped in the front, harrumphing as she wrestled to put her seatbelt on.

'I'm guessing "Hello" is out of the question?' Mum laughed. 'How was your performance?'

Ella slumped in her seat, blushing at the memory of it all. 'Okay, I suppose.'

'I bet it was more than *okay*.' Mum cleared her throat and changed her voice into that of an over-excited game-show host. 'Ella Crinkle – are you ready for your summer adventure with… *AUNT BELINDA*?'

Ella sat upright. 'Oops, I forgot about that. Are we going… *now*?'

'Of course – it's always at the start of the holidays,' said Mum, frowning. 'Remember?'

'But… I haven't packed.'

'I noticed.'

'I'm *not* wearing Aunt Belinda's clothes, no way!'

'Don't worry, it's all done. Your suitcase is in the boot.'

'Phew! Thanks.'

Mum drove away from the school gates. 'One more thing.'

Ella groaned. 'Not… the song?'

'Of course the song!'

Before Ella could protest further, Mum had launched in:

'Aunt Belinda's holiday trip
Is the highlight of the year!'

'Mum,' Ella cringed as they passed hordes of St Hildegard's pupils streaming along the pavement. 'Do we have to?'

'Yes! It's tradition.'

They turned onto the main road and sped away from school. Ella felt her spirits lift and her worries evaporate as she thought about her trip to Aunt Belinda's. Eventually, she broke into a wide grin and couldn't stop herself singing along with Mum:

'Aunt Belinda's holiday trip
Is the highlight of the year!
She's number one, it's so much fun,
Let's all give her a cheer!
A giant…
Holiday… CHEEEEEER!
Yeah!'

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