

GRIMSTINK

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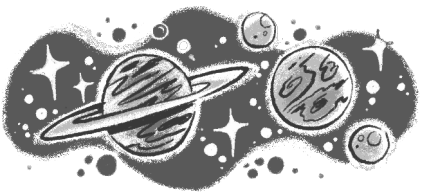
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Miami
Beach Party

DAY ONE: FRIDAY



LAYLA

Mum said I had to get a job when I turned thirteen. But I didn't think she meant *on my actual birthday*. I got home from school today expecting, you know, maybe a present or something, but instead Mum has given me an ugly green backpack and a stack of glossy leaflets.

'What's this?' I ask.

'It's your new job,' she tells me. 'Delivering promotional material to homes across the local area. Happy Birthday, love.'

I look at the leaflets: *Fences and Gateways at Incredible Prices*. 'Is this a joke?' I ask.

'No,' says Mum.

'This is my actual birthday present? Ten million leaflets for fences and gateways at incredible prices is my *actual birthday present*?'

'I went to a lot of trouble to arrange this for you, Layla. You'll get five pounds for every hundred leaflets. If you work hard, you could earn quite a lot of money.'

I think about it. This is the worst so-called 'present' anyone has ever been given in the history of planet Earth, but maybe I can take advantage. I could dump the leaflets in a bush and claim the money.

'And don't think you can dump the leaflets in a bush and claim the money,' says Mum. 'Mr Phelps said he'd check at three random addresses and if they haven't had leaflets, you won't get paid.'

Bums. So I'll have to actually do the job.

I hear a snuffly wet laugh from the corner of the room. My brother Reece is there, hunched over his phone. He might be laughing at one of his stupid TikToks but more likely he's laughing at me.

It's Reece's birthday too. We're not twins or anything. It's just an annoying coincidence that he was born on my second birthday, so we have to share the 'celebrations' every year. And this year is even worse because Mum's given him a *bike*. It's completely not fair, and I say so.

'It's not unfair at all,' says Mum. 'You got a bike when you were eleven.'

'No, I didn't. I got a bike when I was *eight* and I've

still got it now. It's bright pink and it's got a unicorn on the side.'

Reece snorts again. He's definitely laughing at me. I hate him.

Mum is still banging on. 'If you work hard at this job, Layla, you'll be able to afford a new bike. And meanwhile, when Reece is thirteen, he'll get a job as well. It's perfectly fair.'

Mum never admits she's wrong about anything and she never will. Once again, I have to accept the massive injustice of my life: my brother is the chosen one, the golden child, and I am the nobody. My brother gets a bike, and I get signed up for slave labour, delivering stupid leaflets that everyone puts straight in the bin, creating extra damage to our environment and threatening the future of our planet.

I grab the backpack and the leaflets and storm off towards the front door.

Mum calls after me: 'Change out of your school uniform first please, Layla.'

But I ignore her. On the way to the door, I pass Reece's shiny new bike, propped up against the radiator. There's no way I'm doing this job on my dinky unicorn bike, so I help myself to Reece's birthday present, swinging my leg over as I open the front door and coast out onto the street. There's a bike helmet dangling from

the handlebars so I put it on. Not to be safe but because I like stealing things from my brother.

Behind me, Reece has guessed what I'm up to and comes running out of the house.

'Mum, Layla's robbed my bike!' he whines. 'Make her give it back! Mum!'

It sounds like he might start crying, which cheers me up a bit, but soon I can't hear him anyway because I've travelled so far and so fast. It's a really nice bike to be honest.

As soon as I'm a safe distance from the house, I stop and look inside the backpack. Mr Phelps has put in a list of addresses, and there's something else too: a small wrapped-up birthday present with a sticker saying *Happy Birthday Layla, love from Mum x.*

So Mum did get me a proper gift after all. I'm still annoyed with her though, and I'm slightly hoping it's a rubbishy present, so I won't suddenly have to feel grateful. I open it up. It's a necklace with a little green stone on it. It's OK, nothing special. Probably from Argos. I clip it round my neck and look at this pile of leaflets I've got to deliver.

None of the streets on Phelps' list are anywhere near here, so I'll have to travel about a mile before I can even start earning my money. Good job I took the bike.

It's raining. I didn't notice the weather before I left the house so I didn't bring a coat, and I can hardly go back for it now. I turn up the collar of my school blazer, which makes no difference at all, and steer Reece's bike into a shortcut through Heathway Park. The rain clouds have made everything darker and there are no people around. I cycle through puddles, past the playground and around the boating lake – ducks scattering out of my way as I go, over the footbridge, past the empty tennis court.

I notice a bright, multicoloured light up in the sky. Not a star – it's too cloudy to see stars – and not a plane either because it isn't moving, just sort of floating there. You sometimes get police helicopters hovering over the park and for a split second I panic that Reece has sent the cops to get his bike back. But helicopters make a noise, and this is completely silent.

Weird.

Even weirder, the light suddenly swells up like a balloon, then breaks apart into six bits, all different colours, and the bits slowly float down towards the ground. It's like a slow-motion fireworks display.

The biggest light, the purple one, seems to be falling onto the path ahead of me so I cycle off in that direction to see what it is. I get to a bench with a rubbish bin next to it. A sign on the bench says: 'For

Granny Jo, who loved this spot.' Why Granny Jo loved sitting next to a rubbish bin overflowing with dog poo bags it doesn't say. Anyway, I can't see the purple thing. Maybe it burnt to ash before it landed. This place is giving me the creeps so I'm about to cycle on when I notice a sort of dim light glowing from inside the rubbish bin. A purple light. I get off the bike, drop my bag onto the bench and look in the bin. There's this thing. It's a stone. A fancy-looking stone, more like a jewel. I wonder if it might be worth money.

I pick the jewel out of the bin. It's nothing like the cheapo stone on my birthday necklace. This one's about the size of a Quality Street, only much heavier, and it isn't just glowing – it's *pulsing* like a little heart. I don't know what to do. Should I leave it here or hand it in to someone? Or should I keep it?

It is my birthday after all. I think I might keep it.

I go to put the stone into my pocket. But it won't drop. It sticks to my hand like a magnet. I peel it away with my other hand, but now it sticks to that one. I try to throw it away. It won't go. I shake my hand around, but the stone stays attached.

This is so freaky. The purple stone is still glowing in my hand, still sticking tight, except now it's doing more than just sticking. It's melting itself onto my skin, spreading up around my wrist as if it is another

hand grabbing hold of mine. Now it's pulling me forwards, like a doorhandle being yanked open from the other side, forwards and up into the air.

'Help,' I say, much too quietly. I try again: 'Help!'

But there's no one around and, anyway, what could they do?

I'm scared now. I try to get on my bike and ride away, but my feet won't push down on the pedals. It's like the bike isn't real anymore, and neither is the park and there's not even a path underneath me, not even the ground. There's only me, surrounded by clouds. And the clouds bubble into the shape of a face – an angry, nasty face, pretending to be human – and the face rushes towards me and then past me, and as it passes me I get a cold shiver of evil and then I fall down and down and down into nothing and my last thought as I fall is that maybe I shouldn't have taken Reece's bike after all.



GRIMSTINK, SON OF GRIMSTINK

Time until the Cleaving: 27 hours
Atmospheric pressure: 1.7 psi
Air composition: nitrogen/oxygen/argon/carbon dioxide
Air temperature: 12 degrees
Gravitational pull: 9.80665 m/s^2

I open my eyes and look around. If any creature of sufficient brain size has witnessed my crossing, I will destroy it. But the location is quiet. I would have liked to mark my arrival with a swift and brutal killing, but no matter. There will be opportunity for that later.

First I must confirm that my devices are in working order. The databox is operational. So too is the wire I wear around my ears and throat to allow communication with this planet's inhabitants.

Communication with the earthlings is not strictly necessary but it will amuse me to hear them beg for mercy as I obliterate them. Most important of all, my Tanglestone is where it belongs, hanging on a cord around my neck.

I analyse my immediate surroundings: plant life, several varieties of fungus, miscellaneous birds and small mammals. As predicted, the planet is similar to my own. This is why the Tanglestones were activated and why they brought me here.

Beside me lies a two-wheeled vehicle and a green sack containing sheets of glossy paper. A label on the sack reads: *Layla Tenby, 18 Warrington Road*. I assume this to be the creature with whom I exchanged co-ordinates and who now lies dead at the far side of the galaxy. I turn my attention to the glossy papers: *Fences and Gateways at Incredible Prices*. By scanning these printed symbols, I make a partial analysis of the planet's written language.

Behind me is a wooden receptacle. I investigate its contents: fruit peelings, plastic bottles, a half-eaten pouch of fried vegetable shavings labelled 'prawn cocktail' and several small, unmarked green bags, tied at the neck. I tear one open to find it filled with a brown substance which smells foul and tastes even worse. At the base of the receptacle lies a printed

journal called *Celebrity Gossip*. I examine the pages, consolidating my grasp of Earth culture.

My next priority is to establish a headquarters from which to work. Ideally a vacant warehouse or other abandoned structure. I apply rational thought: I arrived here by taking the place of 'Layla Tenby, 18 Warrington Road'. Therefore, Layla Tenby's dwelling place now stands vacant. I must find 18 Warrington Road and occupy it for myself.

This is logical.

I throw the two-wheeled vehicle into the bushes to cover my tracks, then emerge from the woodlands into a populated area. The dominant species of earthling is a bipedal, apelike mammal similar to Qarlians like me. This will allow me to pass unnoticed amongst them. I walk along the roadway, past the temple of WETHERSPOON. Past GREGGS the baker and BOOTS the cobbler. Some of the earthlings are on foot; others travel in metallic, carbon-fuelled vehicles. Clearly they remain at a primitive stage of development. Once the gateway opens it will be a simple matter to overpower them.

But now I encounter a problem. A male earthling (they call themselves 'man') stands by the road, staring at me with frank disbelief. Does he recognise me? Of course not: on this planet, Grimstink's face is not yet

known. Then why is the man shocked? Is it the wire around my ear or the Tanglestone at my throat? No, both are hidden by the thick coils of hair that hang from my head. I follow the man's gaze to my body. Now I understand; he is shocked because I am naked. Before crossing the galaxy, I shed my clothing for ease of travel. Now I must dress myself in a manner befitting my new surroundings.

I will steal this man's clothes.

I walk towards the human, smiling, my arms outstretched in greeting. But before I have the opportunity to speak, the man turns and runs away.

'Do not be afraid! I am your friend!' I lie, as I chase the man at speed, but he calls back to me: 'Go away you lunatic! And put some underpants on for God's sake!'

He sprints across the highway and I follow, narrowly missing the speeding vehicles. The man is fast, but Grimstink, son of Grimstink is faster and I soon reach my quarry, bringing him to the ground with a simple swift kick to the back of the legs.

My first instinct is to end the man's life, and I would not lose a moment of sleep in regret if I did so. But I need information. So instead, I touch a finger to a particular spot on the man's throat, taking him to a state halfway between consciousness and

oblivion. This done, I ask him a question: 'Where is 18 Warrington Road?'

The man points a trembling finger in a northeasterly direction before passing out. I strip the clothing from his body – trousers, shirt, tunic and hat – and dress myself. The man's shoes are too small for my feet; I leave them behind.

A few short minutes later, I reach my destination: a narrow brick dwelling. The number 18 is affixed to the main door.

Before entering, I use the databox to scan the building from top to bottom. The dwelling contains two human lifeforms. This is a problem: I had hoped it would be unoccupied. But I am not deterred. I hammer at the door, and it is soon opened by a female earthling – or 'woman' – of middling years in a long cotton gown reading *WINE O'CLOCK*.

The woman eyes me warily. 'Yes?' she says.

'I come to offer fences and gateways at incredible prices,' I say.

'No thank you,' says the woman, moving to close the door.

I wedge my foot between the door and its frame. 'Do not thwart my purpose, Earth woman.'

But she is not intimidated. 'Bog off!' she says. 'I'm not buying anything!'

I place a finger on the woman's throat, and she too collapses into a deep but harmless sleep. I will kill her in due course. For now, I step over her motionless body and enter her humble dwelling.

There is little to see. A kitchen and a small sitting room with table and chairs. Affixed to one wall, a large flat screen displays what passes for human entertainment: one earthling has prepared a meal; two others taste it and make approving comments; the first earthling begins to weep. A pitiful display.

The other lifeform I detected is on the upper level of the building so I ascend a narrow stairwell to the bedchambers. The lifeform is behind a door bearing the sign *Reece's Bedroom – KEEP OUT. Layla that means YOU*.

I kick the door to splinters and step inside.