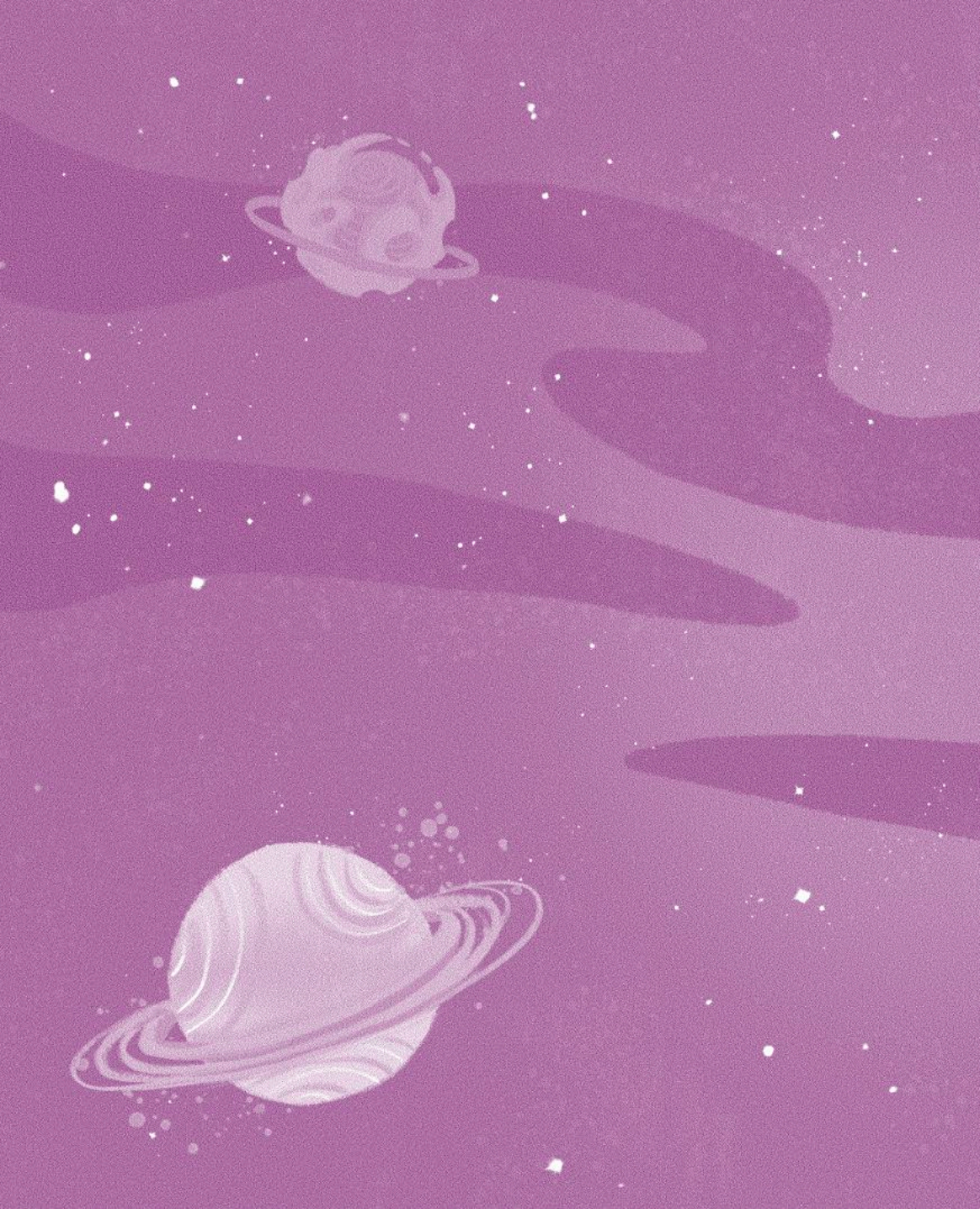




AND THE UNIVERSAL UNI-KORN





FOR KEEKS AND CASS, MY TWO FAVOURITE CADETS–R.C.

TO MY LOVED ONES, YOUR SUPPORT IS MY ROCKET FUEL–R.F.

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COSMIC CADETS

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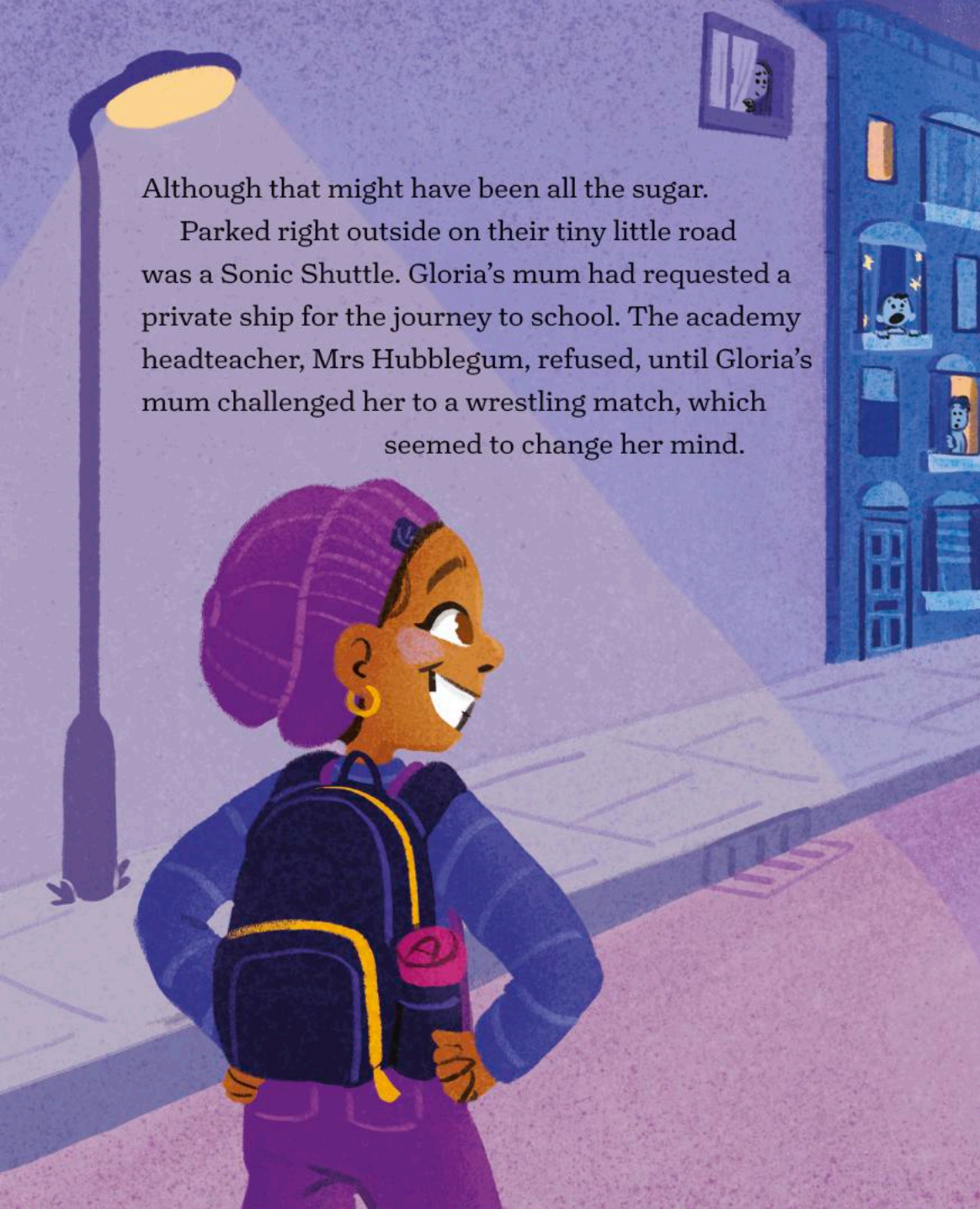


CHAPTER 1

GOODBYE EARTH

Gloria couldn't have woken up in a more spectacular mood. She scrubbed her teeth clean with an extra dollop of toothpaste particles. Then she gulped down a bowl of Cosmic Loops with three extra spoonfuls of subspace sugar. And then, after her mum made her brush her sugary teeth all over again, she was finally ready for her first day at the Cosmic Cadets Academy.

Ever since she could remember, Gloria had dreamt of being a Cosmic Crusader, travelling the stars, protecting the cosmos from evil space sorcerers and terrible galactic giants. And the only way to become a crusader was by graduating from the academy. So when she grabbed her backpack and stepped out the front door to see the ship waiting for her, she felt like dancing with joy.



Although that might have been all the sugar.

Parked right outside on their tiny little road was a Sonic Shuttle. Gloria's mum had requested a private ship for the journey to school. The academy headteacher, Mrs Hubblegum, refused, until Gloria's mum challenged her to a wrestling match, which seemed to change her mind.



Gloria, and her nosy neighbours, soaked it all in for a few more seconds. Then she strode up the shuttle ramp and turned back to wave. Not at her nosy neighbours. But at her mum, who was in her dressing gown, making embarrassing heart emoji shapes with her hands.

Gloria would NEVER hear the end of it if she didn't respond, so she drew a quick heart on her chest, smiled at her mum, then headed inside.

The inside of the ship was just as spotless and spectacular as the outside. Everything was made of lustrous black and shimmering silver metals that reflected the lights of the pilot's dashboard like a disco ball. Gloria settled into the passenger seat beside the pilot. Her dream was finally within reach.

But as the shuttle door slid shut, her heart began to pound. Maybe it was because she was leaving Earth for the first time. Maybe it was because she was leaving her mum for the first time. Or maybe it was the oxygen vent blasting her in the face and reminding her there was no air to breathe in space.

Gloria tried to settle her nerves as she gazed into one of the shiny panels. She snatched off her beanie, puffed up her dark curls, and unveiled the single purple coil of hair that she'd managed to hide from her mum—since she wasn't actually allowed to use hair dye.

Then she peeped out of the window, peered over the crowd of waving onlookers, and hoped she was too far

away from her mum to be told off.

While Gloria couldn't hear her mum over the engine powering up, she could definitely see her mouthing, 'YOUR HAIR,' and rolling her eyes.

Gloria would probably have some explaining to do when she got back, but for now, she simply waved vigorously and yelled, 'Bye Mum!'

Then her thoughts turned to the three crucial pieces of advice her mum had given her.

The first was: 'Make a splash.'

And Gloria certainly intended to. She never settled for second place. She was going to be the best cadet of all time. Especially when she'd already hopped over a thousand obstacles just to get this far.

There was her application to the academy, which had been lost somewhere in the nebula of magnetic mailboxes.

Then she was an hour late for her online entrance exam because cosmic clocks do NOT include a snooze button, and Gloria's brain simply does not function without an extra ten minutes of sleep and several spoonfuls of sugar.

And finally, to top it all off, it turns out that writing 'Earth' as your home planet is an instant FAIL because

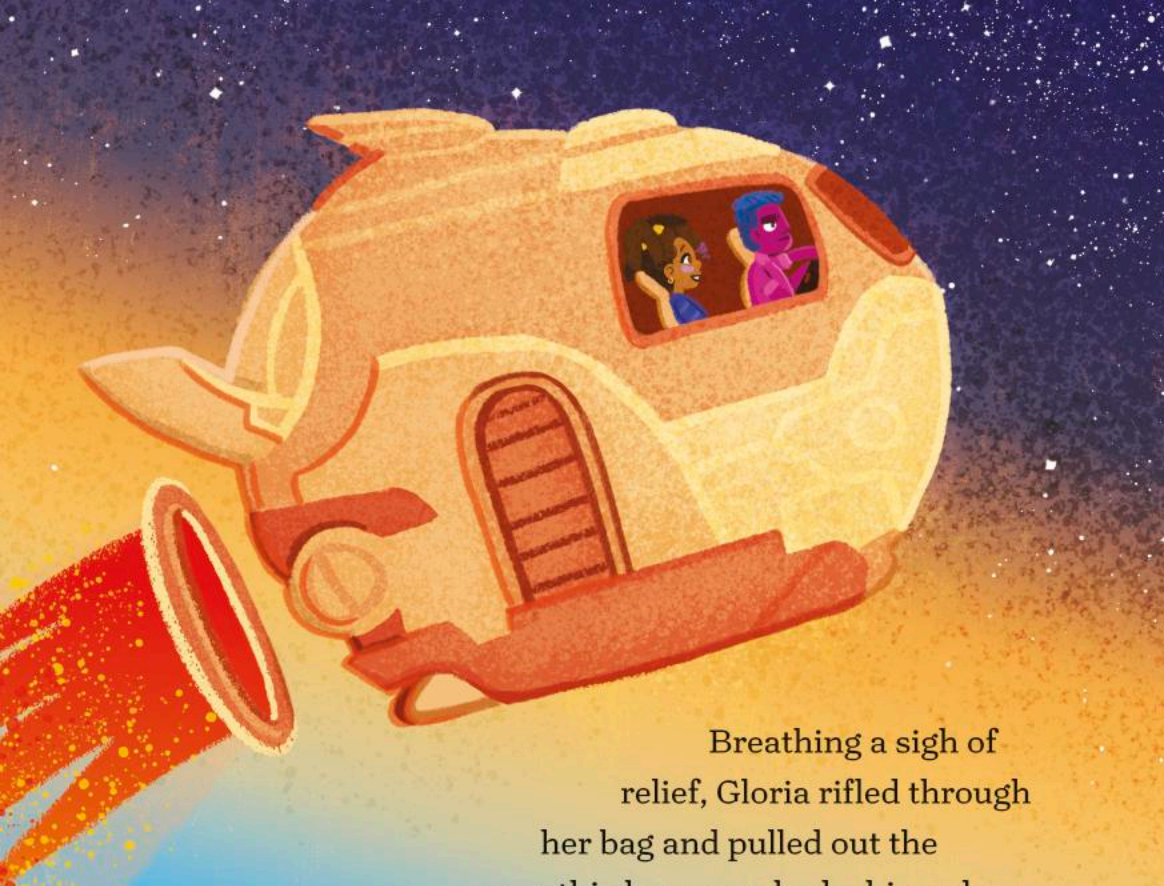
nobody at the academy has ever heard of it!

Unfortunately, it took nearly a month to fix all those mistakes and approve her application. By then, she'd missed the start of term. So the other cadets already had a head start on stealing her top spot!

'Ready for take-off,' Gloria said eagerly.

'Gravity belt,' said the unimpressed-looking pilot, tapping his waist with one of two thumbs on the same hand.

Gloria quickly grabbed hold of her chair and strapped herself in as the Sonic Shuttle blasted off into the sky. She tightened her belt as they rocked and bounced through the clouds. Then, as they reached outer space, everything felt silent and calm.



Breathing a sigh of relief, Gloria rifled through her bag and pulled out the smoothie her mum had whipped up for her. As she tried to take a sip, it shot up the straw and blasted straight up her nose.

'First time in a spaceship?' the pilot said, frowning as Gloria wiped the raspberry-coloured moustache off her face. 'Did you read the cosmic travel handbook?'

'Of course I read it,' Gloria stubbornly replied, knowing very well that she absolutely had not. Why on earth would she need to read about space travel when she'd already seen a million Cosmic Crusader documentaries?

'And this is no spaceship!' Gloria scoffed, as she shuffled her bum on the velvety cream seat and read the pilot's name tag. 'No, no, Mr Mora. This is a Comet-class Sonic Shuttle. With a Type-II projectile ring turbine. I'd hardly call it a spaceship. Also, the trip will be faster if you slingshot around the rings of Squizzonia-4. That's where you're from, right?'

'Impressive,' the pilot said, chuckling. 'And it's just Mora. Now let's get you to the academy, Cadet.'

