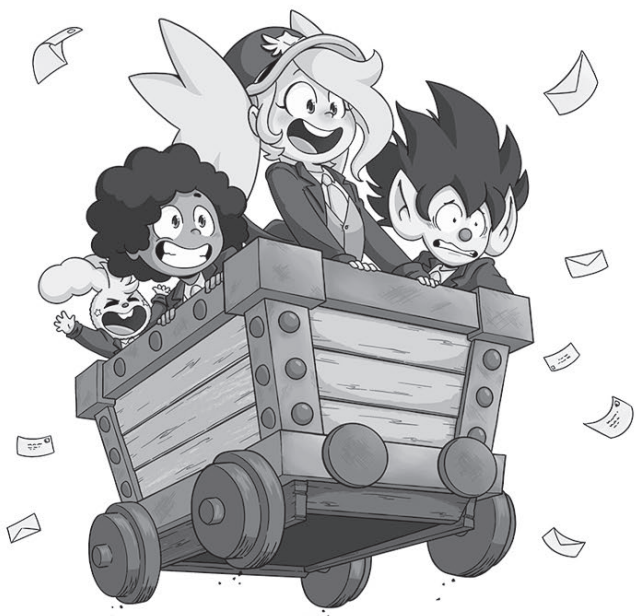
CELESTE EXPRESS

THE PURRFECT CRIME



ALEXANDER SLATER

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The Purple Comet

Deep in the far reaches of the universe, comfortably enveloped between space and stars, was the cosmic realm of Galaxandria – an absurd, ever-shifting world where towns, countries and whole continents were housed on planets, all in constant orbit of each other. It was a land that annoyed logic and infuriated map-makers.

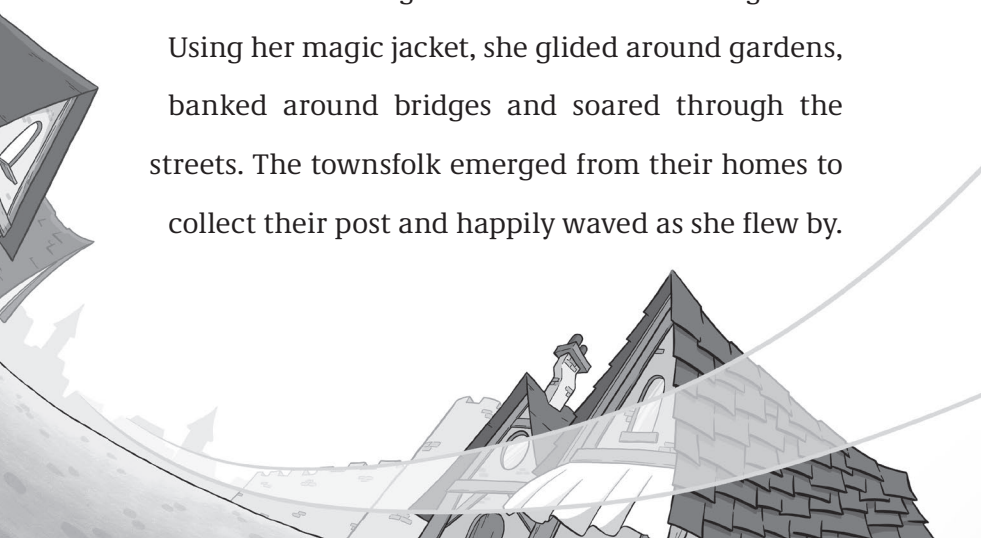
At the very centre of Galaxandria was Castle Town, the capital city. The sun and morning moons rose over its grand streets to awaken its sleeping residents, who had no clue that high above their quiet, snoozy town was a blazing purple comet, hurtling towards them at full speed.

WHOOOOOOOSH!

The violet fireball tore through the clouds, plummeting faster and faster on a collision course with Castle Town. Then, just before it smashed into the ground, it took a sharp turn and zoomed through the streets. A barrage of letters fired from it and landed precisely in post flaps and on doormats. Navigating the streets' tight corners, the comet slowed down just enough to reveal who was behind its fiery purple blur.

It was Celeste Starwing, Galaxandria's cosmic postmaster.

Her golden star-shaped hair flailed behind her as she rocketed through town with its morning mail. Using her magic jacket, she glided around gardens, banked around bridges and soared through the streets. The townsfolk emerged from their homes to collect their post and happily waved as she flew by.



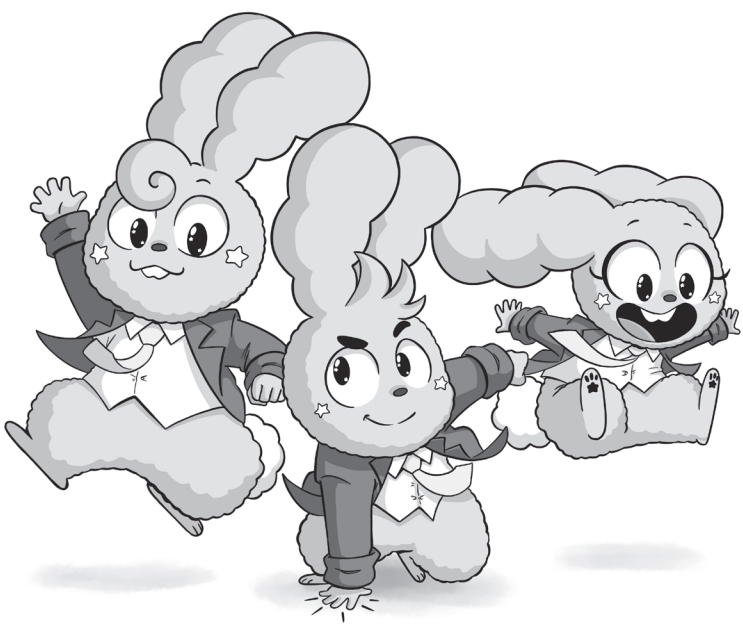
'Hey, they're racing again!' Celeste heard one of them cry out from their doorway. 'Go, Celeste, go!'

Celeste came to an abrupt stop above the rooftops, and frantically looked around to catch sight of her opponent. It might just be a friendly competition, but she still wasn't fond of losing. Seeing the coast was clear, she pulled out three large bundles of tightly wrapped letters from her satchel.

'BONNIE, BLUFORD, BUZZ!' she shouted. On to the closest building hopped three stardust bunnies – magical little rabbits made of golden, crystalized stardust who, like Celeste, wore matching purple post-officer uniforms. They saluted as she called their names. 'He can't be far behind. Quick, deliver these!' She chucked them a bundle of letters each and the bunnies quickly jumped down from the roof to hand them out to the people on the street.

Celeste flew up high into the air. Grabbing an armful of post, she twirled ferociously and released it with a flourish, painting the morning sky with

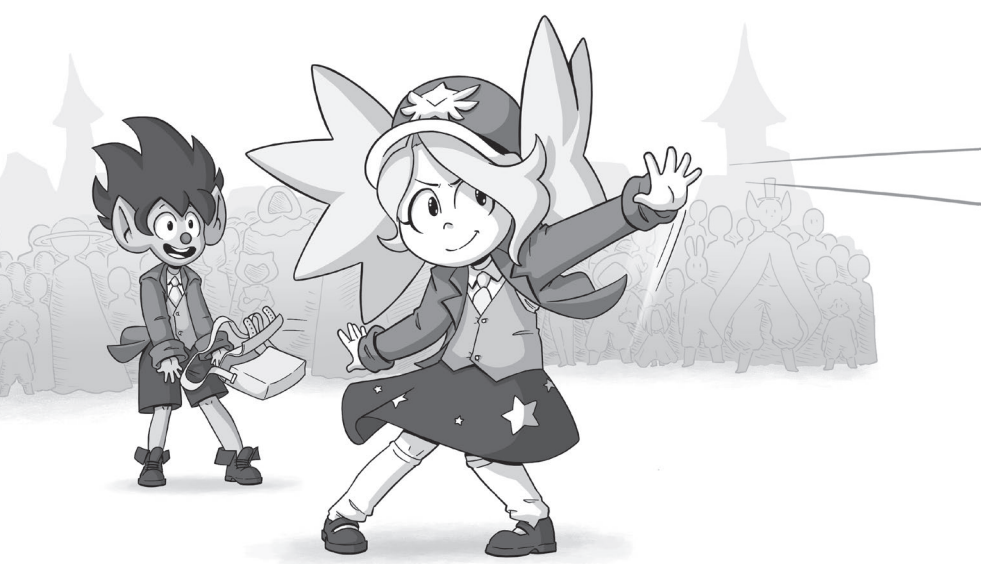
fireworks of envelopes that magically fluttered down to the exact doors where they needed to be delivered. She pulled one last letter from her bag and looked across town to where she had to take it: town hall, the finish line. She could see a small crowd had gathered there, including her fellow post-officer pal Oswald, who was waiting beneath the clock tower.



Celeste shot off in one last dash. She thundered through the air so fast that her postmaster cap nearly flew off her head. Swooping into the square and skidding along the cobbles, Celeste threw her final letter. It landed precisely in the town-hall letterbox just before the clock struck nine.

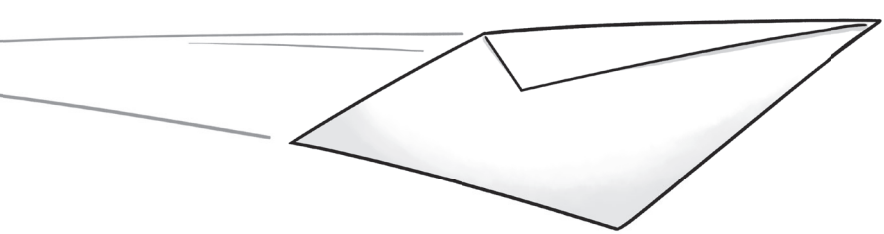
GONNNGGGG!

WINNER! The crowd cheered Celeste, who took a bow. She was the victor of this morning's postal race!



Oswald clapped, looking at the clock. 'W-wow, that was your f-fastest time yet!' the young goblin stuttered in amazement. Bonnie, Bluford and Buzz caught up, clapping as Celeste climbed the town-hall steps.

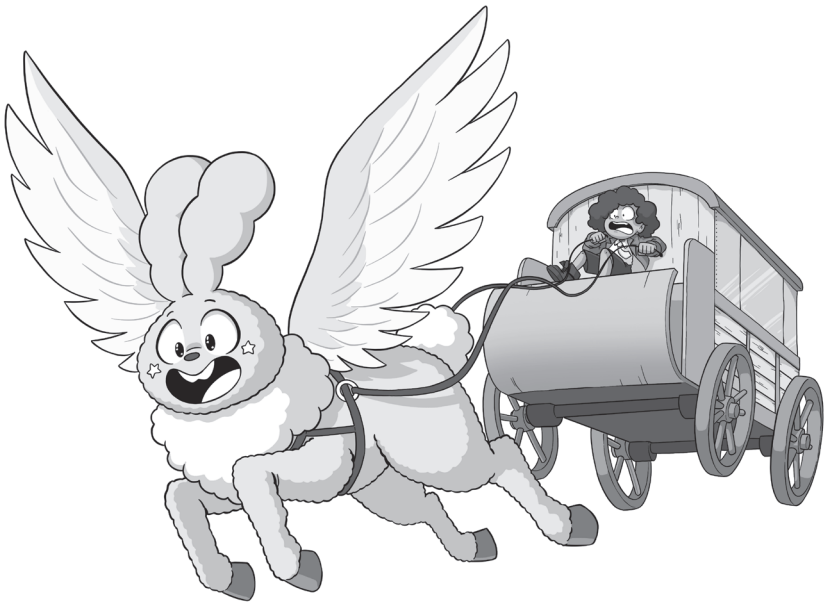
'What can I say? I'm the fastest postmaster there's ever been!' Celeste beamed, ecstatic she'd beaten her own record. 'Good morning, Galaxandria! It's good to be back!' The crowd settled down as she addressed them. 'I know you're all excited to receive your morning deliveries courtesy of the Celeste Express parcel service. Unfortunately, my opponent isn't quite as fast as yours truly, but I'm sure he'll be along any minute . . .' Celeste trailed off with dramatic effect.



Right on cue, she could hear her rival approaching: a loud rattling, and the sound of hooves. Then, in the blink of an eye, her best friend, Podge, came hurtling into town on top of a large wagon being pulled by a wild, flying creature made of golden stardust.

The Celeste Express parcel service used to operate with the help of hundreds of stardust bunnies like Bonnie, Bluford and Buzz, who could turn themselves into boxes to deliver goods. But then all but a few stardust bunnies had to leave the post office after they merged their dusty bodies to stop a giant wormhole from destroying Galaxandria. Now the post officers had to deliver most of the items by hand, along with the few remaining bunnies – some of whom had combined to form a speedy winged bunny-horse, which Celeste had appropriately named . . .

'Rockett!' she cried. The galloping stardust stallion came crashing into the town square. Rockett cantered around them a few times before finally halting. He happily stamped his feet in greeting.



‘I’m sorry, Celeste,’ Podge apologized, sounding a bit shaken. ‘He came in too fast to slow down.’

‘It’s OK – no harm done. And, actually, not fast enough. I still made all my deliveries before you got here. Better luck next time, big guy!’ she teased Rockett. ‘Come on, let’s get these delivered!’

Celeste opened the back of the wagon, revealing a plethora of parcels and packages. The impatient crowd hurried around them, eager to get their post.



Then Celeste and Oswald, with the help of Bonnie, Bluford and Buzz, handed out everyone's packages while Podge tried his best to keep Rockett from blasting off again.

But there was one member of the crowd who was not rushing to get their mail. Among the happy customers, Celeste could've sworn she saw a short, hooded figure, watching the post-office crew closely. But, as soon as she blinked, the skulking shadow had disappeared.

