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opening extract from

Tommy Storm and the Galactic Knights

written by

A.J. Healy

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THE SCOOP

If you just want to know the story and want to know it fast, then feel free to skip the footnotes and boxes of information sprinkled throughout.

Curiouser and Curiouser

But if you'd like to know as much as possible about the world of Tommy Storm, then the footnotes, the boxes and the Extra Bits at the end of this book are for you.

The Story So Far . . .

Tommy Storm and the Galactic Knights (TS2) is the sequel to *Tommy Storm (TS1)*. A reminder of what happened in *TS1* is set out below.

So if you plan on reading TS1, look away now . . .

TS1 is set in 2096 – a time when it's *always* raining on Earth due to climate change and a time when Earthlings have known for some years that intelligent life exists elsewhere in the Milky Way. The book opens with an invitation – Earth is requested to send five children to a training school called IGGY located in the middle of the Milky Way. Here they will

join other children from across the galaxy and receive training for a dangerous and secret mission. For various ignoble reasons, Tommy Storm, a 'loser' aged eleven and a quarter, is chosen as one of the five Earthlings to attend IGGY.

Tommy blossoms at IGGY and is put in a dorm with four 'alien' kids who go on to become his closest friends. Following a series of challenges and adventures, Tommy and his four friends are crowned IGGY Knights and save Earth from destruction. *TS1* ends with the IGGY Knights leaving the galaxy on a mission to save the universe from the Terrible Future Calamity (the TFC).

1

DEADLY BUZZ

The IGGY Knights were in a spot of bother.

Tommy Storm, Marielle, Woozie, Rumbles and Summy were hanging upside down in a dimly-lit cell, their feet and hands bound, their mouths gagged.

Tommy, a slight boy of fourteen who looked about twelve, was a mix of many races, with spiky, black hair and dark eyes. But right now he wasn't a pretty sight. Covered in cuts and bruises, his black trousers were torn, his black shirt ragged.

None of the other Knights looked quite so bad. Marielle – petite, blonde and human-like – retained a certain grace despite her shredded clothes and swellings. Woozie and Rumbles showed no sign of bruising (being furry), while Summy, a small, dragon-like creature, sported a ripped T-shirt and a smattering of welts beneath each wing.

Tommy opened his eyes. His right one was swollen from a blow he'd received hours – *or was it days?* – earlier. He looked around – all the others were asleep – and winced at the all-pervasive odour. A drop of perspiration trickled down his arm.

For the umpteenth time he tried to wrench his wrists and ankles, but they wouldn't budge. Alas, there could be no doubt. They were bound with tinderwire – an extremely flammable substance that's much too strong for any creature to snap with their hands. Tommy eyed the taut wire. From his

hands and feet, it stretched vertically to a high metal rafter, looping round it before angling down to a hook low down on the cell wall. There were four other hooks beside this one – each holding a length of tinderwire attached to an IGGY Knight. Marielle’s hook was right next to an orange plug socket.

He tried to call out – nothing more than ‘Mmuuuuuuuuhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh’ escaped from the gag across his mouth.

SSCCHHHIIIISSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS!!!

A burst of steam rose up from a stack of white-hot rocks across the room and the temperature rose a notch. Tommy blinked a bead of sweat from his eye and waited for the steam to clear . . . There, on a table below, were the IGGY Knights’ curved swords (known as flashscimitars, or scimmies for short).

He closed his eyes – picturing, concentrating – trying to tap into that inner power known as the Surge. *If I can lift the top scimmy and make it cut the tinderwire . . .* He fought and strained, sweat rolling off his brow. But five minutes in, the greatest reaction had been a vague levering upwards of the blade.

Just then, the cell door began heaving open. Tommy opened his eyes and the blade collapsed, the faint metallic sound drowned by his effort-quitting gasp.

Three creatures entered the cell.

The first was fearsome and bull-like with a chainsaw tail that buzzed when she eyed the captives. A muscular arm stemmed from her chest, gripping a baseball bat.

The second creature was smiley and furry and licking a lollipop the size of a dinner plate. He leant against a wall and surveyed the scene contentedly.

And the last creature was small and twitchy. ‘All right, you

layabouts,' he cried. 'Rise and shine!' He had what looked like a speaker under his arm and, with a jabbing smack, he plugged this into the orange socket next to Marielle's hook.

Marielle had woken and muffled sounds filled the air as Woozie, Rumbles and Summy followed suit. Tommy looked over at his friends. *At least we're alive!*

'Sorry to have left you *hanging around* for so long,' said the small, twitchy creature with a chuckle. 'Now, can any of you numbskulls remember my name? Well?'

The IGGY Knights (now also known as *the FiiVe*) tried to answer, but their mouths were still gagged.

'It's Nack,' said the creature with the chainsaw tail. 'Nack Jickilson.'

Nack smacked his head down hard on to the table top. 'Duh!! Shotputtska, I wasn't asking *you*!'

Shotputtska swung the baseball bat violently towards her buzzing tail, splicing half an inch of wood off the end of it. 'How was *I* supposed to know?'

'So, yeah,' intoned Nack, shaking the grogginess out of his head and addressing the FiiVe. 'Now you're sure of my name, be sure that I *will* get the truth out of you *this* time.'

There were two heavy metal tables in the cell. The FiiVe's scimmies rested upon one. Taking a seat, Nack placed the speaker on the other. 'This is a lie detector,' he said, tapping the speaker. 'It's called *PoF!* – which stands for, Pants on Fire!® – and it's fitted with the latest Auntie-Porki-Pi™ technology, so no fib, however small, will go unnoticed. When I turn it on, it'll make a loud buzz any time anyone in this room tells a lie.' He pointed at Rumbles. 'Shotputtska, cut down that three-armed, hairy oaf. I reckon she's ready to sing.'

Nack Jickilson was human-like, except that the dark,

receding, just-got-out-of-bed hair tufting from his jittery head also sprouted out along the length of his back. His eyes looked as though they wanted to pop out of their sockets and his black eyebrows twitched dementedly.

With her chainsaw tail, Shotputtska cut the tinderwire holding Rumbles aloft. The charcoal-furred bear fell to the floor in a heap. Meanwhile, Nack slid a poker into the white-hot stones on the far side of room.

Once Rumbles had been tied to a chair and her gag removed, Nack returned to his seat opposite Rumbles, holding the fiery red poker aloft. 'I have yet to decide where I'll stick this if you tell me so much as *two* lies.' One of his eyes was twitching, as though wanting to leap out of its socket and ram the poker into Rumbles itself. Nack motioned to Shotputtska. 'Remove the gags from the others . . . Now,' he said, addressing the four hanging Knights, 'if any of you says a word out of turn, I'll stab your furry friend with this poker.'

Shotputtska flicked on *PoF!*

'I'm not afraid of you,' said Rumbles, eyes gaping up at Nack. *PoF!* made an angry buzz.

Nack smiled, together his eyebrows forming into a *V*. 'That's your first lie gone. No more chances . . . Tell me why you came here, to Planet Skanger, and searched me out. You work for a rival criminal, don't you? Else you're with the Universal Police and want to bring me in.'

Rumbles eyed the orange-hot poker nervously. 'I told you before,' she said. 'We all told you . . . We're trying to save the universe from the TFC – meaning the Terrible Future Calamity – which is due to destroy the universe and everything in it in less than eighteen years. And we don't know where to start. We don't even know what the Terrible Future Calamity is.'

Nack looked over at the lie detector. It was silent. He thumped it to ensure it was still working. Rumbles continued in a splurge of nervous energy: ‘In the three years since we’ve left IGGY, we’ve visited many galaxies and talked to lots of scientists, geography teachers and paw readers¹ – with no success. So when we heard about you – a notorious criminal genius – we thought we’d seek you out. We hoped you might be able to come up with some scrap of information that might point us in the right direction.’

Nack stared at *PoF!*. It hadn’t made a sound.

‘We’ve had a few faults with this lie detector,’ he said. *PoF!* buzzed loudly. Much to Nack’s fury. ‘Stop wasting my time!’ he yelled at Rumbles. ‘I’m a very busy man!’ Again *PoF!* buzzed – which made Woozie laugh out loud. ‘How dare you laugh at me!’ cried Nack. ‘I’m an extremely important person.’ *BUZZ!!* ‘Worthy of immense respect.’ *BUZZ!!*

Nack plunged the poker into Rumbles’s midriff. But the bear-like creature was big and the poker had grown cold. ‘Stop!’ she cried. ‘Ha-ha-ha! You’re tickling me! Stop!’

Nack flung the poker across the room in exasperation. Then he slammed his head against the table top. Twice. ‘Aaaaghhhhh!’ he screamed – which seemed to exorcise his temper. When Rumbles stopped laughing and Nack eventually spoke, it was with a chilling calmness. ‘Enough . . . Shotputtska, let’s kill the lot of ’em right now! You can lay each one out on the table and cut them in two with your tail.’

‘There’s no need for that,’ said Rumbles with a giggle (she found it hard not to laugh at serious things so soon after a tickling).

‘What? You think I’m joking! You think I won’t have you killed?’

1 Similar to palm readers.

‘No, I—’

‘So you think we’ll set up some stupid, over-elaborate way to kill you, giving you time to escape?’

‘No, of course not,’ said Rumbles. *PoF!* buzzed. ‘Hey, don’t mind that machine! You’re right, it must be defective.’

Nack turned to the furry, smiley creature who’d just taken a big bite of the lollipop. ‘Doogle, jump up on the table there and show these people we mean business.’

Doogle climbed on to the table and sprawled across it. Shotputtska, meanwhile, climbed up to the rafters and looped a length of tinderwire round it. She grabbed hold of its free end, then waited, chainsaw tail buzzing with anticipation.

Nack gave a nod and Shotputtska pushed herself off, swinging in an arc towards the furry figure of Doogle sprawled across the table. Doogle wasn’t watching. He was turned towards Nack, whispering: ‘She’s not going to hurt me, right? We’ll just pretend – to scare these kids – like we agreed.’

‘Of course,’ said Nack. ‘She won’t touch you.’

PoF! gave a loud buzz. Doogle heard it, realized his mistake and in the same instant knew it was too late . . . A split second later, he was chopped down the middle, from groin to neck. Tommy saw a shard of lollipop nestling in the freshly opened guts.

‘You think I’m serious now!?’ cried Nack to Rumbles and the other IGGY Knights.

‘Please!’ cried Rumbles. ‘I told you *everything*.’

‘Yeah, I know,’ replied Nack. ‘*That’s* why it’s time to kill you.’ He turned to Shotputtska who was clearing Doogle’s gooey body parts off the table. ‘Kill them all. Careful to kill one before you cut down the next.’ Then he addressed the IGGY Knights. ‘You’ll all be dead in under five minutes.’

No buzz issued from *PoF!*

2

MURPHY'S LAW

There's a planet in a remote galaxy of the universe that revolves on its axis every twenty-four hours and travels round its sun every 365 $\frac{1}{4}$ days. This planet has a single moon and harbours (supposedly) intelligent life.

Down on this planet, in the year '2009', a great meeting was coming to a close, watched on TV by almost all the planet's six billion inhabitants. The only ones who missed it were either in bed, on the loo, or had failed to pay their TV licence.

A self-important man called Chancellor Rommel stood up before the assembly and everyone hushed. 'Vee haff only fifteen minutes left to make our choice,' he said.

This caused a stir of nervous comments from the crowd – 'Why didn't we start thinking about this sooner?' 'Yeah, we had *years* to come up with an answer!' And an argument began raging about who was to blame for the delay. It only subsided when Rommel shouted: '*Eleven* minutes to make our choice!' And he indicated to a large screen behind him. 'Zis projection vill remind you of da message vee received ten yearz ago.'

The projection looked like this.

REQUEST FOR HELP

It is vital that we come up with the Wisdom of Life, Death and The Universe in under 25 words. We would be grateful if your planet could help us by making a suggestion in precisely 10 years and 10 hours from the time of this message.

Note:

- If you come up with a good answer we will shower you with riches.
- Please put your 'wisdom' into the sock provided.

Rommell waved his arm. The projection disappeared. 'Then, some weeks later, ve received ze following message.' A new projection appeared.

CORRECTION TO PREVIOUS MESSAGE

When we said 10 years and 10 hours, we meant 10 years and 9 hours . . . to come up with your 'wisdom' in under 25 words.

Note:

- If you make no response or if your answer is 'not good enough', then your planet and solar system will be crushed by THE HAND.
- Please write your answer on to a postcard and put it into the toaster attached to this note – NOT into the sock.

'Why the change in time?' cried a voice from the crowd. 'We should have another hour to come up with our answer!'

'Who cares about the time!' yelled someone else. 'First they were going to give us *riches* for our answer, then it's: *oh, we're gonna crush your planet!*'

'It must be a bluff!' announced someone else, which

resulted in a deluge of voices.

Rommel reached under the podium and took out what looked like a two-slicer toaster. ‘Vee discussed all dis,’ he said. ‘Vee agreed to choose an anszer and put it in da toaster. If it’s a bluff, then vee haff lost nossing . . . By da vay, *ten minutes* to go.’

Once he had silence, Rommel called on the six chosen delegates to approach the platform. ‘Da votes haff been cast,’ he said. ‘Each ov you haz da anszer proposed by da one billion people on dis planet dat you represent.’

One after another, the delegates opened the envelope in their hand and read out the ‘answer’ written on the piece of paper inside. These answers were:

- 1 Life is silly. Then you die.
- 2 Oh, to be rich and famous! With two big houses, four sports cars and seven marriages.
- 3 Eh, sorry . . . We don’t know.
- 4 Death is not the end. It’s the beginning (fingers crossed) – but still, please don’t kill us.
- 5 Your aunt Agnes would like you to call her after the assembly.
- 6 Life is a mystery. A *whodunnit* we’ll never know the answer to.

‘Sank you,’ said Rommel when the delegates were finished. ‘Now I vud like you all to uze da electronic voting machines under your chairs to vote for your favourite out of dese six possible anszers . . . By da vay, we haff *five minutes* left to make our choice.’

As the assembly voted on its choice, over four billion TV viewers phoned in their votes at a cost of \$4.50 each – votes which would have no effect on the proceedings, but which

promised the chance of winning a two-week holiday in a prize draw (assuming the planet wasn't destroyed beforehand).

'Da assembly votes are almost in,' said Rommel as a projection of the number 60 appeared behind him. 'By da vay, *one minute* to go.'

60, changed to 59, then to 58 and continued counting downwards.

Someone popped an envelope into Rommel's hand and he opened it, eager to see what his planet had voted as Wisdom of the Universe. The bespectacled man's face registered surprise when he saw the answer. *Your aunt Agnes would like you to call her after the assembly.* Yes, a huge majority of the delegates had voted for Answer No. 5. Rommel shrugged – *democracy is a beautiful and mysterious thing.*

I should say two things here. One, the delegates had actually chosen Answer No. 4 ('Death is not the end . . .'), but a fault with the voting machine software meant that all votes for No. 4 read as votes for No. 5. Two, the 'answer' known as Answer No. 5 was there due to a clerical error. A nervous administrator, who'd received a call from a very irate woman professing to be Delegate Five's auntie ('He said he'd call me last week!'), mistakenly put the auntie's message into the Answer No. 5 envelope and inserted a slip of paper into Delegate Five's message box that read: 'Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.'

Rommel lifted the postcard and held it, poised, over the toaster. By now, the projection behind him was at 12.

'Eleven . . . ten . . . nine . . . eight . . .' The entire assembly chanted down the numbers with increasing excitement – caught up in a fervour of New-Year's-Eve proportions. They all saw Rommel drop the postcard into the toaster. They all cheered when the digits reached zero.

Then silence.

Everyone digesting the situation. Nothing happening . . .

Nothing happened! We're still alive!!

Then the cheering resumed, louder than ever.

'Bluff! Bluff! Bluff' cried a section of the assembly with boisterous enthusiasm.

One group took to chanting, 'Right answer! Right answer! We gave *the* right answer – to the wisdom that we know!' Over and over they sang these lines, and as more people joined in, they all clasped hands, knocking chairs aside, dancing in a circle to the rhythm of the words.

All over the planet, TV viewers joined hands in the same chanting dance. The song reached such a crescendo that no one noticed something strange happen – with the exception of an overly thin girl called Twigletta who stayed watching the telly because she was waiting to watch her favourite show, *Almerica's Next Super-Vain Model*.

The TV image was fixed on a close-up of the toaster. Except the toaster was no more. It'd melted into a puddle of silvery-black goo and was bubbling away like acid, eating into the podium.

Unfortunately, all of the world's astronomers, bird watchers and peeping toms were singing, dancing or falling out of trees at that very moment, so not one telescope on the planet was being looked through. Had Twigletta raised the alarm and the authorities been called super-quickly, one of these determined telescope-wielding observers might've gazed up at the night sky and seen what looked like a giant hand – ten times the size of the planet's solar system – appear from the blackness of space.

But the revelry continued and Twigletta panicked – dashing to the fridge to gorge on a stick of celery.

Seconds later, the planet, its sun and planetary neighbours had been extinguished. With one crush of the hand, all voices, bar one, were silenced.

This solitary voice boomed out across the emptiness where once a cheering planet had revolved. 'I AM DEATH. DESTROYER OF WORLDS.'