

The
Last
of The

NAVEL

NAVIGATORS



DAVID HAILWOOD

The Last Of The Navel Navigators

5 Chapter Preview

David Hailwood

Book 1 in the Navel Navigators Series

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THE LAST OF THE NAVAL NAVIGATORS - PREVIEW

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1

Deliverance

IT WAS ERASIMUS T. Rigwiddle's last assignment. He was sixty years old today. Fifty-five of those years had been spent working as a courier for the Swift Wings Delivery Service, and the five years before that had been spent training to become a courier for the Swift Wings Delivery Service. As a stork, career options were extremely limited; it was either deliver babies for a living, or join the unemployment line.

So it was just as well that Erasmus loved his job. In his long, distinguished career he'd delivered babies to all five corners of planet Hotchpotch, for all manner of races. He'd delivered Sprites, Fairies, Goblins, Elves, Humans, Demi-humans, Semi-humans, Dwarves, Navigators, Orks, Sporks, Spiggots, Gollythrashers...one time he even managed to deliver a Troll. The lads back at the depot had said it couldn't be done, but by crikey he'd shown them what for!

Of course, that had been back in his younger days, before he'd become afflicted with bad hearing, a dicky heart and twenty million miles on the clock. Nowadays, even the tiny sleeping bundle secured in the delivery satchel strapped across his waist caused him to wheeze and splutter every flap of the way.

Time to retire gracefully, whilst there was still life left in this old sky-bird.

Tomorrow he would hang up his wings for good, buy a little place in the countryside and settle down with a nice lady stork. Then, if he was extremely lucky, perhaps another stork would bring them a child. A dragon, maybe.

Interspecies adoption was all the rage these days – orks were adopting fairies, dwarves adopting ogres – so he didn't see why he couldn't adopt a dragon. After all, who wanted a plain old boring ordinary baby when you could have one that was multi-coloured, fireproof and heated the house at night?

Yes, a Red Fanged Raxithorian Bird Hunting Dragon. That was the one for him! He'd have to teach it to stop hunting birds, of course. But that was all part of the joys of fatherhood. One final challenge to see him through his twilight years; was that really too much to ask?

Crrkkk! '-asimus!' a tinny voice barked in his left ear. 'This is Control! Are you reading me, over?'

'Reading you loud and clear, Control!' Erasmus piped back into his headset. 'Nothing but clear blue skies and plain sailing up ahead. Looks like I'm in for a frightfully dull end to an otherwise rip-roaring, seat of the britches, thrill packed career,' he sighed.

Crrrkt! 'Don't count your chickens whilst there's a fox on the prowl, Erasmus,' the air traffic controller crackled back. 'We have a severe weather warning! There's the mother of all storms converging on your position. And it looks like it's brought its family!'

Erasmus' eyes scanned the horizon. There was barely a cloud in the sky. 'Are you sure about that Control?'

'Absolutely certain,' the voice said sharply. 'Be advised: it's coming in fast, over.'

The light dimmed, the sky blackened and the heavens began to rumble...

'Ah, now this is more like it!' Erasmus grinned, as the rain lashed down upon him and the wind tossed him violently from side to side. 'Dashed decent of you to lay on a monsoon for me, Control. Please be sure to convey my

heartiest gratitude to the Weather Wizards. They've really excelled themselves this time.'

Crrrkt! '—othing to do with the Weather Wizards, Raz. It came out of nowhere. 'Fraid I'm going to have to order you to set down immediately and return to the depot on foot.'

'What?' Erasmus shrieked. 'Abort the mission and walk home with my bally tail feathers between my legs? Never! I'm a flyer, and proud!'

The rain was coming in thick and fast now, making Erasmus' flight goggles steam up. He could barely see the beak in front of his eyes, let alone the ground that lay a thousand feet beneath his wings. 'Not once in my entire career have I failed to make a delivery,' he said, urging himself onwards, 'and I'm certainly not going to start now. Not on my last da —'

A fork of lightning stabbed down through the sky and struck him across the tail feathers.

The smell of cooked chicken filled the air.

His beak coughed and spluttered, his wings seized up.

Suddenly he was falling.

'Mayday! Mayday!' Erasmus cried. 'I'm going down!' A thick plume of smoke trailed out behind him. 'Cargo has been lost! Repeat, cargo has been lost!'

Below him, the delivery satchel tumbled end over end, its singed and tattered strap flailing helplessly in the wind. From inside there came a noise, growing louder and louder and louder.

It was the sound of a baby crying.

'I'm coming, lad!' Erasmus hollered. He pointed his beak downwards, and launched into a dive. 'Just you stay put now.'

His only hope was to reach the satchel before it hit the ground. Then perhaps at the moment before impact he could cushion it with his own frail body.

‘By Jove, what a dashing heroic way to punch one’s ticket,’ Erasmus enthused. ‘The gods must be smiling on me today!’

G-force rippled his feathers. His scarf whipped around like a crazed King Cobra.

Just when he was so close he could almost touch the satchel with the tip of his wing, something wholly unexpected happened.

The satchel began to glow bright blue.

‘Oh!’ Erasmus said, barely able to keep the sense of wonder out of his voice. ‘You’re one of those sort of babies are you?’

With a brilliant explosion of light and a deafening ‘*Whuuuuuuuuuuuumph!*’ the satchel simply winked out of existence. Where it had been mere moments before, there was nothing left but a fading trail of stars.

In the deep dank wilderness of Southern America’s Sasquatch County, two foul-smelling dungaree-clad yahoos stood staring at a scorched delivery satchel that dangled precariously over the swamp, its strap tangled in a tree branch.

It had appeared out of thin air moments ago, and had given rise to much speculation.

‘What d’you think’s in it Pa?’ the youngest of the two – a scraggly, buck-toothed teenager named Shawney – said, scratching his buttocks. ‘Munnee?’

‘Nah. Gators wouldn’t be that interested in money,’ the eldest – a stocky balding brute called Kleetus – responded, motioning to the beady reptilian eyes that watched patiently from under the murky waters. ‘They got nuffin’ to spend it on, see?’

Shawney's mouth split into a grin so wide that it exposed all seven of his yellowed teeth. 'They could use it to buy shoes, Pa!' he yelled. 'Gator shoes. To replace the ones them poachers keep stealin'.'

Kleetus rolled his eyes at the heavens. 'Shawney,' he growled, 'don't make me fetch yer Ma now, y'hear?'

Shawney glanced warily at the hefty stick leant up against a tree next to Kleetus. It was seven feet long, thick as a tree trunk and had the word 'Ma' etched lovingly into its side. 'I'll be quiet, Pa,' he whispered.

'Atta boy, Shawney.'

As something began to move around inside, the satchel started to bob up and down on the branch. Kleetus and Shawney watched with renewed interest.

The branch creaked ominously.

'It's gonna fall, Pa,' Shawney said.

'Yup.'

'We prob'ly oughta do somethin'.'

'Yup.'

'We could always throw rocks at it,' Shawney suggested.

'Nope.' Kleetus picked up his stick and strode towards the edge of the bank. 'Got me a better idea.' He leant out as far as he could, stretched out an arm and hooked the strap with the end of the stick. Carefully he drew the satchel back across the water. The gators snapped at it as it passed by overhead, as if to say 'oi!' and 'that's my lunch!'

When it was safely within Kleetus' grasp he placed the satchel down on the ground, plunged in his thick, hairy arms and rummaged around inside. His fingers closed around something warm and soft.

'What is it, Pa?' Shawney asked, attempting to catch a glimpse over his father's broad shoulders. 'Food? Riches?'

‘No Shawney, it’s a...it’s a...’ Kleetus slowly drew his hands out of the satchel. Cradled within them was a newborn baby boy. He had been wrapped in a bright yellow blanket that had ‘express delivery’ stamped upon it in red. ‘It’s a buh...a buh...a buh –’ Kleetus stammered, as the baby stared up at him through big, curious eyes.

‘A big pink jellybean!’ Shawney cried.

‘Not quite, son,’ Kleetus said, regaining his composure. ‘What we have here is a real live genuine baby.’

Shawney leant in closer and inspected the child. He let out a guffaw. ‘No wonder his parents didn’t want him,’ he snorted. ‘He’s only got ten fingers, and none of his toes are webbed!’

‘Poor little tyke,’ Kleetus said, as the baby attempted to suck at Shawney’s eleventh finger, and spat it back out, realising something wasn’t right. ‘Looks hungry.’

‘We got some cheeseburgers back at the ranch,’ Shawney said.

Kleetus’ eyes widened as the alarm bells of unexpected fatherhood sounded in his mind. ‘Now hold on there, Shawney!’ he said sternly. ‘We can’t possibly keep ‘im. Bringin’ up a child takes a lot of responsibility. He’s not like them chickens I brought yer last Christmas. Fer one thing, the chances of eggs is unlikely.’

‘But no one else wants him, Pa,’ Shawney whined. ‘Xcept the gators, and I don’t reckon they’ve got his best innerests at heart.’

Kleetus cast his eyes around the swamp. There was no one else around for miles; Ma’s reputation had made sure of that. ‘You got a point there, son,’ Kleetus said, eyeing the child thoughtfully. It gurgled at him, and blew a snot bubble. For Kleetus that was the deal clincher. ‘I guess it would be useful to have a spare pair o’ hands around the house, fer doin’ chores and the like.’

'Them dishes still need doing, Pa,' Shawney said brightly.

'I don't think he's quite ready fer the dishes yet, Shawney,' Kleetus said, gently placing the baby back in the satchel and fastening it up. 'We'll start him on the smaller jobs first. Gator wrestlin' and that.' He grabbed the satchel by the strap and hoisted it over his shoulder.

'What we gonna call him, Pa?' Shawney asked, as they stomped their way through the undergrowth, heading back towards their weather-beaten shack.

'Don't rush me, Shawney,' Kleetus said. 'I only just got round ta namin' you.'

2

A Beastly Birthday

THIRTEEN YEARS PASSED.

Kleetus finally thought of something.

'Jellybean!' he cried, pointing a finger at the scrawny dark-haired youth who was dragging a mop around the kitchen floor's impenetrable layers of grease, cheerfully spreading it from one place to another. 'From now on, yer name's Jellybean.'

The youth paused momentarily in his duties and gave his father a sidelong glance. 'Why's that then, Pa?' he asked.

Kleetus' thick brow caved in as he tried to remember what had sparked the idea in the first place. 'Don't ask awkward questions, boy!' he snapped. 'Do you want yer present or not?'

'Yes please, Pa,' Jellybean said. 'It's a great name. Just what I've always wanted!' Since Jellybean's previous names over the years had ranged from 'Boy', 'You There' and 'Not Shawney' to 'Snot Nose', 'Stink Face' and 'Gator Bait' it was certainly the best he could hope for.

A wide grin spread from ear to ear. He'd only been awake ten minutes and already he'd been given a new mop and a new name. This was going to be the greatest birthday ever!

'If you think that's good, jest wait 'til yer see yer next present.'

Jellybean's eyes gleamed. 'There's more?'

Kleetus stepped to one side and gestured grandly to the pile of dirty dishes that sat festering in the sink. 'Today,' he declared, 'you become a man!'

‘I’m not sure I like the sound of that, Pa,’ Jellybean said. The light in his eyes faded as he looked upon a mountain of crockery that towered high into the sky, poking out through one of the many holes in the roof. From a distance it appeared as if the shack had two chimneys, except one of them was covered in flies rather than soot.

‘Be grateful!’ Kleetus growled. ‘Most boys your age only get nasty old cake fer their birthdays. What you’re gettin’ is a lot more valuable. And you know what that is now, don’tcha?’

‘Responsibility,’ Jellybean intoned.

‘That’s right. Responsibility!’

‘I’d prefer cake.’

Kleetus tossed him a rag that was almost twice as dirty as the dishes. ‘Once yer done there, go make a start on the gator pit.’

‘But Pa –’

‘No buts!’ Kleetus snapped. ‘I want them gators clean enough to eat my dinner off. Same goes fer them dishes, or you an’ yer Ma’ll be havin’ very stern words.’ He stomped out, swishing his stick through the air as he went.

‘Yes, Pa,’ Jellybean sighed.

He held the dishcloth out before him for protection and took a tentative step towards the washing up, like a priest with a crucifix advancing on a nest of vampires.

This was going to be the worst birthday ever.

Grrrruumbbble rumble rumble rrruumbbbbblllle!

Jellybean lay in the barn in his tatty Gator Bait pyjamas (the ones with a picture of a cartoon alligator on the front, biting a man’s legs off), hands clutched over his ears,

desperately trying to ignore his digestive system's cries for attention.

By the time he'd gotten a small portion of the dishes clean enough to eat off of, there'd been nothing left for him to eat; he'd missed breakfast, lunch and supper. There was always the possibility of a midnight snack, but once he'd bypassed the tripwires, snake pits and bear traps that Kleetus left to defend the pantry, it would probably be breakfast time again.

Rruuummmmmble rummmbbblle rumbbble!

The only one to answer his stomach's distress signal was Brian the goat, and that was clearly something he did with reluctance. He ambled over from his corner of the barn, his ears twitching away in annoyance, and dropped a half-eaten boot down beside Jellybean's bed.

'Um, I'm all right for boots thank you Brian,' Jellybean said.

Brian looked expectantly from Jellybean to the boot, and then pushed the boot closer.

'It's not that I don't appreciate the offer, but I'm really not that hungry.'

Grrrrumbbble rrrrumble squiiiiiiirkk!

Brian eyed Jellybean's stomach suspiciously.

Jellybean was quick to realise that if he didn't get his rumbling under control soon he might well be eating that boot whether he liked it or not. He cast his eyes around the barn, hoping to find something to take his mind off food. Other than hay bales and cow dung, there was precious little in the way of entertainment.

He looked up. The stars were out, twinkling away through the cracks in the rafters. They were his friends; he knew them all by name. Not just their constellation names, such as Cassiopeia, Orion, Ursa Major and Aquarius, but by their individual names. He decided to recite them.

‘Sparkly Trevor, Shiny Mildred, Kluktruut The Unkind, Nondescript Norman, Skrofrekruktulthrax The Unpronounceable, Nimtec The Misbegotten –’

A cloud drifted across the night sky, blocking his view. Usually Jellybean could see the stars with crystal clarity, even in the daylight, but hunger was breaking his concentration.

As the enormous pressure of another gargantuan rumble welled up inside him, his eyes strayed down towards his stomach.

There, nestled in his bellybutton, was the answer to all his problems.

Fluff!

An unnaturally large build-up of fluff.

There was enough there to keep him occupied for a good few hours, if he paced himself. He decided to pick at it a while, hoping the sheer monotony of the action would be enough to send him to sleep.

*Pick pick pick pick pick pick **click!***
WHUUUUUUUMMMMMFFFFF!

The barn was bathed in a brilliant blue light and a glimmering portal opened from out of nowhere. At its centre a vortex of stars shimmered and swirled, almost as if someone had pulled the plug out of God’s bathtub, and the entire universe was going down the drain.

Jellybean froze, unable to tear his eyes away. Something inside the portal was winding its way towards him.

A mysterious robed figure stepped out, framed by the light. His features were obscured by an enormous pair of metallic glasses that whirred and clicked like an angry insect as its lenses adjusted to focus on Jellybean. In his hand he held a small cylindrical device that emitted a constant beep.

'Target identified!' announced the device suddenly.
'Commence dialogue!'

'Eh?' said the figure. 'Oh, right. Yes, the speech!' He thrust the device into his robe's top pocket and marched purposefully in Jellybean's direction. 'Do not be afraid!' he bellowed. 'I am Caspian Thrall! Revered Techno Mage from the city of Chromebrood, and I –' Something went 'squish' beneath his feet. He looked down and grimaced. '...have just trodden in a cowpat,' he sighed. 'Terrific.' He sat down on a hay bale and scrubbed at the sole of his boot. 'Bear with me a moment, oh mighty one,' he said, waving a handful of soiled straw in Jellybean's direction. 'Technical difficulties.'

Jellybean watched with detached interest, relieved that he seemed to have finally fallen asleep. As dreams went, this wasn't a particularly good one. Usually there were monsters, or at the very least an explosion or two. Tonight his imagination was clearly as starved as his stomach.

'Halfway across the universe for this,' the mage muttered. 'Absolutely typical.' He got to his feet and cautiously weaved his way towards the foot of Jellybean's bed, making doubly sure to avoid any cow related obstacles. 'Right,' he said, looking from Jellybean to Brian. 'Which one of you lads is the Navigator?'

Jellybean stared at him blankly.

'Me-e-eh?' said Brian.

'Ah! Fantastic!' The Techno Mage bowed down grandly at Brian's feet. 'At last, my liege! You have summoned me!' he declared. 'I am so happy that I, Caspian Thrall, am the one you have chosen to protect you on this quest! Long have I prepared for this moment. My heart is a glowing beacon of pride. My body is strong, my spirit is willing, my shoe smells vaguely of cowpat, but let us not dwell on such matters! Command me, my liege! Command me!'

He paused a moment, waiting for an answer.

'Bleeeh,' said Brian, poking out his tongue.

The mage slowly raised his head and looked into Brian's eyes. 'Well what sort of a command is that?' he sneered. 'If that's the best you have to offer we're not going to get very far on this quest are we?'

'Um,' Jellybean said.

The mage thrust out a hand for silence. 'Don't interrupt. I'm talking to the all powerful Navigator here.'

'No,' Jellybean said, in the slow measured voice he usually reserved for explaining simple tasks to Shawney. 'That's a goat.'

The mage squinted at Brian. He removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Without them his face instantly lost its air of mystery and Jellybean was surprised to discover he was a lot younger than he'd expected. Judging by the feeble cluster of hairs on his chin, and the ridiculous pencil moustache that looked like it was badly in need of an eraser, the mage had only recently thrown off the shackles of puberty to make an undignified break for adulthood.

'You're right,' Caspian said, upon completing his inspection of Brian's stocky four-legged form, 'it is a goat. Sorry about the mix-up – got a bit blinded by the light there.' He put his glasses back on, got to his feet, cleared his throat, and bowed down grandly before Jellybean. 'At last, my liege, you have summoned me –' he began.

Before he could get any further, a hideous decaying stench filled the air; an overwhelming reek of such repugnancy that Jellybean was grateful for the first time today that he hadn't actually eaten anything. The Techno Mage was not so fortunate. He coughed and gagged, and buried his head in his robe. 'All right, own up,' he said. 'Was that you or the goat?'

It was neither.

More shapes were forming inside the portal; inhuman things that writhed and slithered. They arrived in the portal's opening as one huge pulsating mass of claws and teeth, struggling with each other to break through and claim their prize. Their eyes, of which some of them had many, were all focused on Jellybean.

'By the Great Wizard's gizzards!' Caspian exclaimed. 'You didn't close the portal!' He cast off his robe, revealing an impressive suit of armour covered in tiny shimmering circuits, and jabbed a button on the palm of his glove. A crackling white staff of pure energy materialised in his hand. 'Back!' he yelled, leaping between Jellybean and the portal to bar the way. 'Go back to the foul chasms that spawned ye!'

The creatures snarled and snapped their defiance.

'Go on!' Caspian cried, giving his staff a mighty shake. '*Push off!* Don't make me tell you twice!'

A slimy green tentacle lashed out and knocked him to the ground.

Jellybean squealed with delight as it slithered towards him. Now this was more like it! This was the sort of dream he usually had, filled with weird bug-eyed creatures and endless life-threatening situations. Finally his imagination had perked up a bit.

'Close the portal!' Caspian commanded.

Jellybean's delight turned to horror as he felt the cold, wet touch of the tentacle on his foot. It felt hideously real. 'H-h-how?' he stammered.

'What do you mean "how"?' Caspian cried, rolling to avoid a swipe from a pair of claws almost twice the size of his head. 'Put your finger back in your bellybutton! It's not that difficult is it?'

The tentacle began to coil its way around Jellybean's body, pinning his legs, working upwards towards his arms.

Hurriedly he thrust a finger in his bellybutton.

Click!

The portal flickered briefly, but remained. The tentacle's grip tightened.

'Well?' Caspian yelled as he struck a nameless horror in the unmentionables. 'What are you waiting for? Give it a poke!'

'I have!' Jellybean wheezed.

'Then why is it still here?'

Jellybean didn't reply. He was too busy having the life slowly squeezed out of him.

'Something must be mimicking the portal's frequency,' Caspian said. He scanned the writhing mass of creatures, cycling through the settings on his glasses; he tried Infra Red, Ectoplasmic Green, Thermal Imaging, Ethereal Imaging, Optical Illusion, Dark Aura, Light Aura, and Twilight Resonance. Finally, he removed the glasses and used his eyes. They instantly fell upon a repulsive rotting hag with lank grey hair and a gigantic elongated jaw that hung down to her waist. She stood in the centre of the portal, swaying from side to side, pale eyes turned to the heavens as she expelled a ghostly melody from the depths of her haunted soul.

'Aha! A Screaming Heebie-Jeebie!' Caspian enthused. 'These are very rare. You should feel privileged.'

'Gluk!' said Jellybean, struggling to remove the tentacle wrapped around his throat.

'There's only one way to deal with a creature like this,' Caspian announced. 'And since I don't know what it is, I guess I'll have to find another.' His eyes darted around the barn until they settled on Brian, who'd retired to a corner to eat his boot in peace. 'Hey, you! The hairy fellow! Bring that over here.'

With a snort of indignation, Brian ambled over and spat the boot out at Caspian's feet.

'Much appreciated.' Caspian picked up the boot by its laces, swung it round his head a few times to gather momentum, and let go. With a sickening crunch it struck the old hag square between the eyes, breaking her concentration along with her nose.

There came a blinding flash of light as the portal winked out of existence, taking the snarling slithering beasts with it.

'That takes care of that,' Caspian said, powering down his energy staff and donning his robe. 'Good thing there wasn't more of them. Get three Heebie-Jeebies in a room together and they start singing folk music. Very rare to survive that ordeal.' He patted Brian, who was staring forlornly at the spot where the portal had been, clearly wondering where his boot had got to.

Jellybean shook himself free from the twitching severed tentacle, and dived beneath the bed covers. Caspian strode over and pulled them back down. 'Okay kid,' he said. 'What have we learnt today?'

'Bu-bu-buh –' stammered Jellybean, his face almost as white as the sheets he was hiding in.

'That's right,' Caspian said. 'Keeping a portal to the Other Worlds open for longer than necessary is extremely bad. Make a mental note of that. It could save your life.'

'Wh-wh-wh –'

'What were those things?' Caspian finished for him. 'Dark creatures, from dark dimensions. They want your power for themselves to use for, ooh, dark purposes I should imagine. Seems to be their style.'

'W-w-what power? I don't understand.'

'There's a time and a place for everything, my liege.' Caspian leant across and laid a comforting hand on

Jellybean's shoulder. 'All you need to know is now that I'm at your side, standing loyal and firm, no harm will ever come to you.'

A food tray at the far end of the barn clattered to the ground. Shawney stood in the doorway, staring wide-eyed at the strange man stooped over his younger brother's bed.

Caspian stared back at him. 'Yes?' he said eventually. 'Can I help you?'

'*Paaaaaaa!*' Shawney yelled. 'There's a man in a dress in the barn wiv Jellybean!'

'It's a robe, actually,' Caspian muttered.

Kleetus' gruff voice called back from the outhouse. 'Is it Cousin Henry?'

Shawney looked Caspian up and down. 'No Pa,' he hollered. 'It ain't Cousin Henry.'

The outhouse toilet flushed with urgency. 'Go fetch me Petunia!'

A wicked grin stretched across Shawney's face. 'Yer fore it now!' He fled the barn, heading for the shack.

Caspian picked up an apple that had rolled towards him, and shined it casually on his robe. 'Who's Petunia?' he asked. 'His wife?'

The wall of the barn beside him exploded, showering him in splinters.

'No,' Jellybean replied. 'His shotgun.'

Another hole exploded in the wall. Shawney's ugly face peered through it. 'Yer missed again, Pa,' he said.

Caspian dived headfirst into a haystack and attempted to bury himself. 'Open a portal!' he cried. 'Open one now!'

'B-b-but what about the beasts?'

'I've got news for you, pal – the beasts are already at the door, and they're armed! Now get us out of here!'

FOOOOOOOOOOOOM! went Petunia, carving yet another jagged hole in the wall.

At this rate there wasn't going to be much left of Jellybean's bedroom. He reluctantly poked a finger in his bellybutton and opened another portal.

Caspian made a mad dash for it, scattering hay in every direction. 'Come on! Excitement and adventure awaits! Follow meeeeeeeeeeee!' He leapt into the portal and vanished, buckshot flying overhead.

Jellybean stared into the shimmering blue haze. It had been quite an unusual day really, and he was starting to consider that closing the portal, curling up in bed and pretending none of this had ever happened might be the best thing for all concerned. Let that strange man in the dress have all the excitement and adventure he could handle; in the morning, Jellybean still had dishes to do.

Just as Jellybean was about to give his bellybutton another poke, Brian's ears pricked up, and with an excited bleat he ran full pelt towards the portal's opening.

'Brian! Wait!' Jellybean cried. 'I'll get you a new boot.'

But it was too late. The goat had already vanished.

That settled it. Jellybean swung his legs over the edge of the bed, put on his snuffling pig slippers and headed towards the portal.

'Jellybean!' Kleetus yelled, poking his furious face through a hole in the wall. 'Get back here and finish your chores!'

'I'm just going to fetch Brian,' Jellybean said, giving his father a reassuring wave from the mouth of the portal. 'I'll be back in a minute.' He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and stepped forwards into the unknown.

3

Small World

APART FROM EXPERIENCING a slight chill, and his ears going 'pop', little else happened to Jellybean on his journey through the portal. In a fraction of a second, it was over. When he opened his eyes, he was stood on the dull grey surface of an alien planet. He scanned the surroundings, expecting to at once be bombarded by breathtaking unearthly sights that would thrill him to his core.

Well, there was none of that.

All this planet had was a tree. It was an extremely tall tree, granted, but it wasn't worth travelling fifty billion light-years for. On closer inspection Jellybean noticed shoes of every shape and size dangled from its branches, almost like someone with no imagination had put them there in a desperate attempt to 'alien' the place up a bit.

The only one to appreciate the effort was Brian. He lay on his belly beneath the tree with a satisfied smile, gorging on a first class banquet of high quality footwear.

Above him, Caspian sat on a branch, staring out across the dismally short length of the planet's surface. He was convinced that if he looked hard enough he would probably catch sight of the back of his own head.

'Door!' he hollered.

Jellybean waggled a finger in his ear. 'Eh?'

Caspian gestured towards the portal illuminating Jellybean from behind. 'Unless you want demons to pull off your face and wear it as a hairnet, my liege, I'd advise you close the door.'

'Oh.' Jellybean jabbed a finger in his bellybutton. The portal vanished.

‘Interesting choice of destination for our first adventure,’ Caspian said, his voice tinged with doubt. ‘Seems to be a little bit lacking in excitement and perilous situations, if you want my professional opinion. Still, at least we won’t be left wanting for shoes, eh?’

‘I’m just here for my goat.’ Jellybean scratched Brian affectionately behind the ears. ‘Come on, boy.’

Brian let out a disapproving bleat, slightly muffled by a size twelve loafer.

‘Yes, you’re quite right.’ Caspian leapt nimbly down from the tree, his robe flaring out around him. ‘I think we’ve already exhausted this planet’s potential. Let’s forge ahead to pastures new. Might I recommend as a stop-off point the fabled golden planet of Teltamarok? Imagine that! An entire planet made of solid gold! Or perhaps the sun-kissed virginal shores of Roserrica. Rumour has it the women there wear naught to cover their modesty but really, really large hats.’ A leer spread across Caspian’s roguish features. ‘We could do a lot of good deeds on a planet such as that. A lot of good deeds!’

‘I think I’m just going to go home, actually,’ Jellybean said, the idea of a planet full of scantily clad women holding little appeal for him. After all, the only woman he’d ever known in his life was his Ma, and she was a stick.

‘Oh, I see,’ Caspian smirked, his feeble moustache twitching away in amusement. ‘Too young for women, too grubby for riches eh?’

‘Grubby?’ Jellybean attempted to smooth down the creases in his pyjama top. A button pinged off, shortly followed by another, leaving one solitary button holding the defensive line.

‘Don’t fret, I have the perfect remedy for that sort of thing.’ Caspian delved a hand into his robe and rummaged around. He drew out a handful of sweets in brightly

coloured wrappers. 'Tailors' Toffees!' he declared, thrusting them under Jellybean's nose. 'Best in the land. All you need do is suck away, and a snug-fitting outfit will instantly form around you.'

Jellybean reached out a tentative hand, and then stopped as one of the rare pieces of advice his father had given him took root in his mind. 'Don't take sweets from strangers, boy!' Kleetus had warned one hooch-addled evening. 'Or they'll steal yer pigs! It happened to Cousin Henry and it could happen to you. Worst part is them strangers didn't even give Henry no sweets. They jest took 'is pigs! Take heed, young Gator Bait. Take heed and be warned, yessir!'

'They come in a whole variety of fashions and flavours,' Caspian continued, oblivious to the red flush of hillbilly rage spreading across Jellybean's face. 'There's the traditional Navigator's outfit, or if you fancy something a bit more flamboyant perhaps you'd care to try Urban Pirate or Aquatic Ninja?'

'Get yore thieving hands off my pigs!' Jellybean hollered suddenly, bunching his hands into fists.

Caspian's thin lips stammered open and shut, as his brain tried to process this somewhat extreme reaction to toffees. Slowly, he put the sweets away. 'There, the nasty old sweets have gone. Your goat-pig's safe.'

'Come on, Brian. We're leaving!' Jellybean poked a finger into his bellybutton and opened up a portal. Brian trotted towards him with a quintet of shoes clutched in his teeth by the laces.

'That's just charming that is!' Caspian roared. 'You're going to leave me here? Just like that?' He threw his head back and swooned theatrically. 'Whilst there's adventuring to be done? Damsels to be rescued? Villains to be smited?'

‘Yes,’ Jellybean said. ‘I don’t actually know you.’

‘Of course you do! Everyone knows the great Caspian Thrall.’ He thrust out his chest, and flashed a well-practised grin. ‘Where I’m from, children sing songs about my exploits!’

‘Well they don’t where I’m from,’ Jellybean replied. ‘Where I’m from, children sing songs about other children bein’ ate by gators.’ He took a step towards the portal.

‘Fine!’ Caspian hurriedly changed tactics. ‘Far be it for me to stand in the path of a child’s destiny, even if said destiny happens to be something as trivial as beddy-byes time.’ He turned his back on Jellybean and marched haughtily off into the bleak grey nothingness of the planet. ‘I guess I’ll just have to teach all these *fabulous magic tricks* of mine to someone else,’ he called loudly as he walked. ‘I was going to take you under my wing, show you the works, tricks of the trade, but no. I guess it simply wasn’t meant to be. I guess I was wrong about you. I guess –’ Caspian broke off suddenly when he realised he’d marched full circle around the planet, and was back where he’d started. He turned around. The portal had vanished.

Brian and Jellybean remained.

‘You know magic?’ Jellybean breathed.

Ever since Shawney had shown him the ‘got your nose’ trick at a young age, he’d been desperate to learn more about the mystic arts. Even though it had turned out to be someone else’s nose that Shawney had found in the swamp earlier that day, it had still left a lasting impression.

‘Do I know magic?’ Caspian leant against the tree and beamed. ‘Do the triple-buttocked Wingnut people of the Metakula Plains wear Raboolian Hiking Trousers?’

Jellybean blinked in confusion. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘Do they?’

The Techno Mage shrugged. 'Not sure. Never met them myself. Now, let's do some magic!' He rolled up his sleeves and wiggled his fingers in a mysterious fashion. 'Think of number. Any number. It can be any number at all. Six. Three. Nine. Twelve. Anything.'

'Seven,' said Jellybean.

The mage frowned. 'Don't tell me the number. It's not going to be much of a trick if you tell me the number, is it?'

'Oh. Sorry.' Jellybean's eyes drifted away from the mage, and settled on the tree. It was an incredibly tall tree. He began to wonder what might be at the top.

Caspian waved his hands at the sides of Jellybean's head. 'I'm in your mind...' he declared. 'I'm prowling around...I'm crossing the garden path of your subconscious...' He paced around the tree with his eyes closed, taking mighty strides.

Jellybean grabbed hold of a low-hanging branch, and pulled himself up. If his Pa's bedtime stories about Lumber Jack the logger's son were to be believed, he'd find a giant's kingdom at the top, where he'd be able to acquire the priceless egg of a golden moose.

'I'm at the gate to your brain...' Caspian hollered from the ground. 'I've unbolted its door...I'm sneaking inside...'

Up Jellybean climbed, past loafers, brogues, sandals, clogs, wedges, pixie boots, stilettos, flip flops, pumps, slippers, mules and court shoes.

A solitary pair of faded blue trainers caught his eye, and he sidled across the branch towards them. Although discoloured and sticky, like overripe fruit, he plucked them and slipped them on.

Perfect fit! He let his slippers fall to the ground and continued upwards, marvelling at the comfort of his new footwear.

‘Sneaking...sneaking...’ Caspian’s voice was a whisper, carried on the wind.

The higher Jellybean went, the smaller the shoes around him got, until eventually they were little more than well-polished buds sprouting from dangerously thin branches.

Just as he began to consider going back down, a shrill rasping from above caught his attention. He dug his thin fingertips into the bark, and continued onwards. As he climbed, he became aware of hundreds of tiny little notches carved into the tree trunk, like someone had been patiently counting the days as they passed.

Pushing upwards through a canopy of green wellies, he discovered the culprit; a weathered old stork, clad in a scarf, hat and leather flight goggles. It was perched on the topmost branch, a thin trickle of drool dangling from the end of its beak as it snored noisily away.

The poor creature looked like it had been half-plucked, then cast aside in favour of a healthier meal. Jellybean had seen more promising specimens in Shawney’s taxidermy collection, and most of them were missing their heads.

One thing was certain; it didn’t look the sort of bird to lay a golden egg.

With a sigh, Jellybean began his descent.

Caspian was still taking purposeful strides around the trunk. ‘The number’s there! I’m approaching it from behind...sneaking... sneaking...’

Jellybean dropped the last few metres to the ground, and watched as the mage covertly scrawled something on his palm.

‘Aha! Got you, you little rascal!’ Caspian launched his hand into the air and snatched at an invisible number. His eyes flickered open, and he thrust his palm forward until it

was inches away from Jellybean's startled face. 'Is *this* your number?' he cried boldly.

There was a number seven written on it.

'No,' Jellybean said.

The mage's triumphant grin faded. 'What? You said it was a moment ago.'

'I changed it.' Jellybean looked around for his goat. Brian was buried beneath a pile of footwear, attempting to eat his way out.

'You can't just change it! The trick doesn't work if you keep changing it.'

'I only changed it the once.' Jellybean took his goat gently by the horns, and pulled him free.

'I've written seven now,' Caspian whined. 'That's indelible ink, that is. It won't come off easy.'

Jellybean shrugged. 'Sorry.'

The young mage stared thoughtfully at his hand. 'I suppose I could always turn it into an eight. Your numbers not eight, is it?'

'No.'

'How about seventeen?' The pen was out again and hovering over his palm. 'I could do a seventeen.'

'No.'

Caspian smiled hopefully. 'Seventy one?'

'You're not a very good magician are you?' Jellybean concluded.

He opened up a portal and led Brian through.

4

Bagoolah-Bagoon

STARS FLASHED BRIEFLY before Jellybean's eyes. He stepped out the portal, and plummeted.

Wind whistled through the numerous holes in his pyjamas as he attempted to work out why he was descending through the neon yellow sky of an alien planet at such an alarming rate.

When he looked up, the reason became clear; the portal had opened several thousand feet above the planet's surface. It shimmered and winked above him, like it was sharing a private joke with the universe. He couldn't reach it. There was no way back. The landscape was a distant speck, growing larger by the second.

'Meeeh!' said Brian, as he tumbled through the air.

'Sorry, Brian! I thought this was home.'

Caspian fell past, shuffling a deck of cards. 'All right, pick a card. Any card.' Wind whipped them from his hands, scattering fifty-two aces. 'Hey, where'd the ground go?'

Jellybean pointed a trembling finger below.

'Well what's it doing down there?' Caspian's puzzled frown gave way to a crafty smile. 'Oh, I see! This is a test isn't it, my liege? You want to see another demonstration of my wizardly worth.'

'I'm good, thanks,' Jellybean said. His words were drowned out by the roaring wind.

'Right, let's see what life-saving devices I've got in my pockets.' Caspian thrust a hand into the folds of his robe, and pulled out a miniature trumpet. His eyes widened. 'But first,' he said, attempting to conceal his surprise, 'perhaps a little mood music?'

Jellybean squeezed his eyes shut, and searched for the Navigator buried deep inside. After following the guiding light of a star across vast metaphorical mountains, deserts and oceans, he found him, sinking in the swamp of his subconscious.

His eyes snapped open, sparkling like a clear night's sky. 'Maybe I could try closing the portal above us, and opening one below us?' he suggested.

Caspian blew a victory note on the trumpet. 'Excellent plan, my liege.'

Jellybean stuck a finger in his bellybutton and twisted.

As the portal above closed, something raced through – a creature, moving at incredible speed, its wings a blur.

It was heading straight for him.

'Demon!' Jellybean cried. The sparkle faded in an instant.

'Terrific,' Caspian said, as he disappeared through a thin layer of clouds. 'I love a challenge!'

The creature's ragged wings beat vigorously as it closed the gap between itself and its prey. Its talons spread, and it let out a victorious cry.

'Chocks away! Pip pip! Tally-ho!'

Gnarled claws clamped around Jellybean's shoulders with a gentleness that surprised him. He looked up, expecting to glimpse the scaly red underside of a demon in flight. Instead there were hundreds of tatty grey feathers, attached to the withered body of a large stork.

'Erasimus T. Rigwiddle, at your service.' The stork snapped off a quick salute with the tip of a wing, and spiralled into a dive.

Wind tugged at Jellybean's pyjama bottoms with renewed vigour.

'Come on, wings! Keep up!' Erasimus wheezed. 'Just a...small...child...' His beak rose. Wings straightened.

‘You’ve...carried...a troll.’ Gradually, he drew level. ‘Ah, that’s better. Sorry about that. Bit out of practice.’ The stork stretched out its scrawny neck, and squinted at Jellybean through the brown leather flight goggles perched on top of its beak. ‘Item number 7769857. My, how you’ve grown!’

‘Most people call me Jellybean,’ said Jellybean. ‘Or Stink-face, but I prefer Jellybean.’

‘Well, dear fellow, as an expert courier for the Swift Wings Delivery Service, it’s my sworn duty to deliver you to your rightful owner, or die trying!’ The stork puffed out his fragile chest with pride.

A distant funeral dirge played on the trumpet, to the accompaniment of mournful bleating.

Jellybean glanced down at the tiny figures tumbling towards the landscape. ‘What about my friends?’

‘Sorry. Not part of the order.’

‘But they’ll die!’

‘Nothing wrong with a heroic death,’ Erasmus enthused. ‘Would’ve had one myself, if I hadn’t got caught in your portal’s backwash and marooned in a shoetree for thirteen years.’

‘I’d rather live, if it’s all the same to you,’ Caspian’s voice yelled as the ground drew closer.

‘In that case,’ Erasmus hollered back, ‘you might want to look out for that –’

A mountain struck Caspian with astonishing force, and catapulted him into the air. He sailed upwards past Jellybean, Erasmus, and Brian, without so much as a scratch on him.

‘Meeeh!’ said Brian, as he crashed into the ground, and bounced into the air.

‘Evasive manoeuvres! Incoming goat! Mayday! Mayday!’ Erasmus banked left as Brian whizzed past.

Caspian dropped down screaming, and then flew upwards doing a pirouette.

‘What’s going on?’ Jellybean asked, watching his two companions bounce up and down on the planet’s surface, giggling and bleating like maniacs.

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ Erasimus asked. ‘This must be Bagoolah-Bagoon!’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘A giant inflatable planet.’

As the stork drifted closer to the landscape, Jellybean noticed the hills and mountains had a distinctly plastic shine. Closer inspection revealed a flock of inflatable sheep scattering across the hills, as they were pursued by a vicious pack of inflatable wolves.

‘Safest place in the solar system,’ Erasimus said. ‘Though its inhabitants live by a rather strange mantra. What was it now? Ah, yes: “No somersaults, no shoes.”’

‘Brian!’ Jellybean hollered. ‘No shoes, mate.’

‘Meeeh!’ grumbled Brian, as he let the last remaining shoe slip from his mouth. It bounced up past him, and he gave chase.

‘If this place is inhabited, where is everyone?’ Jellybean scanned his surroundings, eager to see a real live inflatable alien.

‘It’s not so much inhabited as occasionally in use. The Navigators use it as a training ground for their young.’ The stork’s aged eyes flitted between the deserted landscape below, and the equally sparse sky above. ‘Come to think of it, the place should be teeming. Most unusual!’

Brian flipped past, pulling a face. Jellybean squirmed around in Erasimus’ tight grip.

Erasimus sighed. ‘You want me to let go, don’t you lad?’

Jellybean smiled sheepishly. ‘If you wouldn’t mind.’

Erasimus released his grip on Jellybean's shoulders. 'Go have your five minutes of fun then. And take those bally shoes off!'

'Wheee!' yelled Jellybean as he plummeted towards the planet's surface.

Erasimus tucked in his wings and dived after him. 'As the saying goes: "When in Bagoolah-Bagoon, do as the Bagoolahs' do!"' He rocketed down past Jellybean, twisted nimbly round Brian, loop-de-looped past Caspian, and thumped face-first into the side of a hill.

Where he stuck, like a dart.

Erasimus awkwardly withdrew his beak, accompanied by the unsettling 'hssssss!' of air escaping. 'Ah yes, I remember the rest of that sacred mantra now,' he said, as the landscape started to deflate around him. "No somersaults, no shoes, no sharp objects." That's how it went.'

Caspian thumped into the ground, and this time failed to bounce. Instead, he started to sink. 'Nice going, birdbrain! You've punctured the planet!'

Mountains drooped and hills folded in on themselves.

'Perhaps now would be a jolly marvellous time to return to Hotchpotch?' Erasimus said as Jellybean and Brian thudded down beside him. 'If you'd be so good as to plot a course.'

Jellybean attempted to get to his feet. It was like trying to stand on top of a plate of jelly, during an earthquake. 'Plot a what?'

'A course, dear boy! Plot a course.'

Jellybean stared blankly at the stork. An inflatable cow flew past, mooing in alarm as it was sucked up into the sky.

'The planet's starting to lose its atmosphere!' Caspian screeched. 'If you don't act fast we're going to start falling

upwards.'

'Come on, lad,' Erasimus encouraged. 'Use that star chart in your head. Mind map our way to victory!'

'Eh?' Jellybean's frown deepened.

'Look, it's just a simple matter of correlating the stars position with the data on the navigation chart stored in your brain, calculating the distance, velocity and party weight ratio, and we're homeward bound.'

Jellybean's lips moved silently, as he tried to work out what 'correlating' meant.

The ground wobbled dangerously beneath them.

'Just poke a finger in your bellybutton and get us the hell out of here!' Caspian yelled.

'Oh, right.' Jellybean followed Caspian's directions to the letter. A portal whummed open. Caspian leapt through, propelled by one final bounce. Jellybean went for a somersault, Brian a triple flip.

'Now hold on a moment!' Erasimus cried. 'You can't just —'

He was already talking to thin air.

5

Giant Freezer

JELLYBEAN BRUSHED HIMSELF down and looked around at his new surroundings. Solid ground beneath him, blue skies above, and nothing but rolling hills and countryside stretched out in every direction.

‘Booooring!’ Caspian said, stifling a yawn. ‘Off to the next planet.’

After waiting a moment for Brian and Erasimus to emerge, Jellybean closed the portal and opened up a new one.

‘Stop, stop, stop!’ Erasimus snapped. ‘What in Hotchpotch’s name do you think you’re doing?’

‘Navigating,’ Jellybean said, closing the portal again.

‘That’s not navigating! That’s just poking a finger in your bellybutton and hoping for the best.’

‘There’s a difference?’ Jellybean and Caspian said together.

Erasimus clacked his beak in annoyance. ‘Of course there’s a difference! If you don’t take time to plot a course first we could end up anywhere in the entire universe.’

‘Isn’t that rather the point?’ Caspian said. ‘We’re on an adventure. Last one to kill a goblin horde’s a rotten egg. Wehey!’ He powered up his staff and swished it through the air, beheading a patch of particularly menacing-looking daffodils.

‘Aside from the fact that some of my best friends are goblins,’ Erasimus said, scowling at Caspian, ‘I’d rather not adventure straight into the middle of a black hole. If we’re to arrive on Hotchpotch in one piece, I must insist that proper safety precautions are exercised.’

‘You’re the one who just popped a planet,’ Caspian mumbled under his breath.

‘That’s beside the point. Now, start plotting that course!’

‘How?’ Jellybean asked.

‘It’s perfectly simple.’ Erasmus unfurled a wing towards the sky. ‘Look to the stars and find the one that resembles Hotchpotch.’

‘Oh brilliant, we’ll be here for hours.’ Caspian slumped down on a tree stump and crossed his arms. ‘In case you haven’t noticed, it’s daytime. If we’re going to have to wait for the stars whenever we leave, we’re not going to get f—’

‘That one,’ Jellybean said, pointing without a moment’s hesitation towards a star no one else could see.

Caspian switched his glasses to their highest magnification and squinted up at the sky. ‘Which one? It’s just clouds.’

‘Good show, dear boy,’ Erasmus said. ‘Take us to that one then.’

Fixing his eyes on the distant star, Jellybean opened a portal. An icy wind rushed through from the planet that lay beyond, sending a shiver down his spine and up his pyjama legs.

‘Feels more like planet of the Chilly Willy’s to me,’ Caspian muttered, drawing his robe around himself for warmth. ‘You sure the kid’s going to be all right in just his jammies?’

‘He’ll be fine,’ Erasmus assured him. ‘The Weather Wizards maintain a nice even temperature over the planet. At this time of the year we should be in for sunny spells with the occasional light shower.’

They stepped through into a raging blizzard.

Fierce winds whipped at them from all sides. Jellybean clung to Brian, afraid of being swept away across the desolate white landscape, never to be seen again.

‘Guess those Weather Wizards must be on strike, eh?’ Caspian switched his glasses to ‘defrost’ mode and searched for the nearest available cover. His eyes settled on a cluster of snow-encrusted mounds, and he made towards them.

Jellybean trudged along behind, sinking deeper into the snow. ‘Do you want me to c-c-close the portal?’

‘No point,’ Caspian yelled, pitching his voice above the howling wind. ‘I doubt we’ll be staying long.’

‘I’ve never known it to be so cold!’ Erasimus puffed out his feathers. ‘Something terrible must’ve happened.’

‘P-p-perhaps it’s that global freezing my Pa’s always on about,’ Jellybean suggested. “Sling more tyres on the bonfire, lad!” he always used to s-s-say. “Do your bit for the planet now!””

Caspian stopped suddenly, and squinted at the unusual mounds they were approaching. ‘Is it my imagination,’ he said, ‘or does that hill have a face?’

The rest of the party stopped and stared.

‘And kneecaps!’ Erasimus yelled, looking further down. ‘I definitely see kneecaps.’

‘Toes!’ Jellybean cried, pointing excitedly at the far end. ‘I can see toes.’

There were indeed toes: enormous blue ones, which poked through the snow’s crust like bizarrely formed icicles.

‘Me-e-e-e-eh!’ said Brian, attempting to draw attention to the most unusual sight of all – a colossal frost-covered arm that reached upwards out of a mound, clutching in its frozen fingers a large red plastic spade, like the sort a child might use on a daytrip to the beach.

Jellybean stood transfixed by this unusual spectacle. The creature was at least fifty metres long from head to toe. His nose was as big as a ski-slope, ears large enough

to park half a dozen Range Rovers inside, mouth drawn into a wide grin, exposing teeth the size of boulders and some truly atrocious dentistry. 'A giant!' he breathed.

Caspian shrugged. 'I've slain bigger.' The lens on his glasses extended, and his finger strayed towards a button as he lined up a photo.

Jellybean began to picture the creature when it was alive, taking mighty strides across the landscape, crushing buildings beneath its feet, scooping up livestock and devouring them whole whilst villagers scattered like ants.

Erasimus scowled at the giant, as if mystified by its existence.

Caspian snapped a quick photo of him. 'Someone you knew?'

'Of course not!' Erasimus said irritably. 'Hotchpotch doesn't have giants. Us storks couldn't deliver them. Would've broken all sorts of health and safety regulations.'

'Then what's it doing here?'

'The answer is simple, dear boy,' Erasimus sighed. 'We're on the wrong bally planet.'

'Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarrgh!' yelled Jellybean as he stomped past, waving his arms around wildly, in pursuit of Brian.

'Another fine piece of navigating, my liege,' Caspian commented. 'Let's head back before we become a frozen mystery for the next hapless bunch of explorers.' He span on his heel and marched off towards the portal, struggling against the wind like a deranged mime artist.

Erasimus hopped from one foot to the other. 'You don't seem to appreciate the gravity of the situation! Our young Navigator doesn't have a clue what he's doing. Without proper knowledge of his powers, we'll be left navigating blindly around the universe.'

‘So we take the scenic route,’ Caspian called back over his shoulder. ‘So what? Now come on, get a move on! We’ve only got twenty seconds.’

‘Twenty seconds?’ Erasmus beat his wings frantically in an attempt to catch up. ‘Twenty seconds until what?’

‘Until portal demons rush through and tear us all to shreds.’

Erasmus squawked in amusement. ‘Portal demons? Preposterous! There’s no such th—’ With the speed of a striking rattlesnake, a massive purple tongue lashed out from inside the portal, coiled around Erasmus and drew him back into its depths, leaving a scattered trail of feathers swirling in the air.

‘Meeeh!’ said Brian in alarm.

‘By the Great Wizard’s gizzards!’ Caspian screamed. ‘A Collywobble!’ He reached for the button on his glove, but the creature was too quick for him.

The tongue lashed out again, once, twice, three times.

Before Jellybean could react, he found himself being thrust headfirst into the enormous slavering jaws of a portal demon.

A Note From The Author

Thank you for reading The Last Of The Navel Navigators preview. I hope you enjoyed it!

Should you be interested in purchasing the full version, it is available in both print and digital format from a range of online stores, including Amazon, Kindle, iBooks, Kobo, and Nook. Please follow the link below to be taken to the main store page.

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Keep your eyes peeled for my next children's novel 'Grynbad And The Seven Soups' which will be fully illustrated by Brett Burbridge, and out soon. After that, more Navel Navigators lunacy awaits!

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About the Author

David Hailwood used to write whilst hanging upside-down by his legs from a tree. Now he's an adult he's apparently not supposed to do that sort of thing any more, so instead he sits at home in his office, cackling manically at the computer (occasionally he remembers to switch it on).

Over the past twenty years his brain-matter has leaked onto the pages of numerous comic anthologies, including Egmont's Toxic, Strip magazine, Bulletproof, Accent UK, Futurequake and 100% Biodegradable (which he also edits).

He's had comedy material broadcast on ITV and E4, been shortlisted for several BBC sitcom competitions, and his Alternative Facts book 'Not A Lot Of People Know That' (co-written with F.J.Riley) has had over a quarter of a million downloads.

Read more at [David Hailwood's site](#).