

## Chapter 1 - Coming of Age

Tilda had come of age. Like all newly minted adults of Arborea it was therefore her duty to report to the Head Villager. However, also like all newly minted young adults she had spent the night before her coming of age in merriment and was, well... a little hung over.

Tilda was a sweaty mess under her purple cape, and her temples felt as though rail workers were striking pins into them every few seconds. Just as the head pain would subside, a bout of nausea would rise in her stomach and she cursed herself thinking, "you can be the life of the party without getting drunk... ugggghhh."



With the most recent bout of nausea gone, Tilda sluggishly pushed through the doors to the great hall of the village elders. The hall was little more than an oversized cabin, but it was much prized by all the villagers and the only building with metal doors in the whole village. The doors were laden with metalwork wrought into the creatures of Arborea. Their coolness was soothing to the touch, but Tilda had little time to contemplate their beauty. As soon as the doors opened, Tilda was greeted by the scolding voice of the head villager - "You're late." she said.

The head villager was seated at the raised head of a large wooden table carved similarly to the door.

Tilda was particularly fond of the Goja bear napping near the closest corner of the table and, even today, it's sleepy face gave her comfort and she smiled as she stared down at the cuddly bear.

"Your attention Tilda," said the head villager sternly but also with clear boredom and annoyance. She couldn't believe that she had to deal with yet another hung-over twenty something.

"Yes, head villager," said Tilda throwing on a smile she wasn't sure how long she could keep.

"Right." said the head villager, "so you've come of age. Now you must complete your deed of service to the village. What you do after the deed is of no importance to us, but you must first earn your freedom through service."

"Service?" asked Tilda. She was more than a little unsure of her belief in this ridiculous practice, but her brain was far too broken at the moment to mount any more thoughtful questions about it.

“Yes. Service.” said the head villager, “You should take pride in the fact that you even get to serve. Every person who comes of age in Arborea gets a chance to prove him or herself. Don’t you want to prove yourself?”

Now, you might think that the head villager made the above statements with some sort of exuberance or pride, but true to her deepest self, it was all stated in dry, matter of fact tones.

“Oh...” said Tilda, “okay...” but really she was just confused and it wasn’t the hangover. You see, Tilda didn’t think life was that simple. You don’t just complete some task and therefore come of age and “prove yourself” ... whatever that meant. She had seen plenty of people come home from their “service” after coming of age and all they did was go back and work on the family farm or whatever.

Being from a family of metal crafters Tilda dreaded completing her task and returning home just to continue the family business. Not that she didn’t think her parents and brother were great at metal work - really they turned it into a work of art, but she just didn’t get any joy out of it.

Unfortunately, Tilda didn’t have time to express all of this.

“Great.” said the Head Villager curtly, “Now for your task.”

The Head Villager began mumbling as she read down a piece of paper in front of her.

“Ah. Your task is one of the most prestigious in all of Arborea.”

“Errr Cool?” said Tilda, another wave of nausea streaming over her.

“You, Tilda, will find 3 Goja berries and return them to Arborea.”

“Um... right,” said Tilda a perplexed look on her face.

“Of course,” said the head villager, “we want you to be prepared. Please ask any questions you might have.”



“Right, soooo, what’s a Goja berry and also... why?” asked Tilda, her stomach churning.

“Easy questions.” said the Head Villager. “Goja berries are the only thing known to keep the Goja monster asleep. Why? Because if the Goja monster wakes up, he’ll destroy the village.”

At the conclusion of the above statements, the chorus of pain in Tilda’s head swelled to its raucous climax and she could do little more than say thank you and slump out of the room desperate to rest her head on something cool.

Tilda could feel the Head Villager’s eyes rolling as she said, “Get some sleep and we’ll send a map with more details to your cabin.”

As Tilda was leaving the hall, her friend Granite entered. His coming of age had coincided with her own and he was part of the reason Tilda was in so much pain today. Though great friends with Granite, she couldn’t stand to let the brute outshine her at any party.

Tilda rested her head against the ice cold metal of the great hall’s door as Granite was given the details of his own coming of age task. The doors were her father’s work and, by all accounts, outshone the handiwork of the table. Tilda looked down and to the right, scanning for her beloved Goja bear. As she was searching, she distinctly heard the Head Villager speaking to Granite, “Your task is one of the most prestigious in all of Arborea. You will find 3 Goja berries and return them to Arborea.”

At the close of this statement, Tilda’s eyes found the region where the Goja bear should have been. Strangely, the Goja bear had been replaced with an enormous catfish.

## **Chapter 2 - Penguin with Balloon**

After a good night’s sleep, a few cups of coffee, hydration, and much filtration through her still young liver, Tilda was finally able to really focus on her task.

At first she was at a bit of a loss due to the incredibly small amount of information the head villager had given her, but she soon noticed a small envelope that he been slid under her cabin’s door. “FOR TILDA” was written on the front of the envelope in the Head Villager’s unmistakable all caps handwriting. “Always so precise,” thought Tilda a little admiringly.

Tilda tore the envelope open with as little precision as possible and found a note and a map inside. “INSTRUCTIONS FOR GOJA BERRY QUEST” the note read.

“Of course,” thought Tilda, “the Head Villager would never leave me so high and dry.”

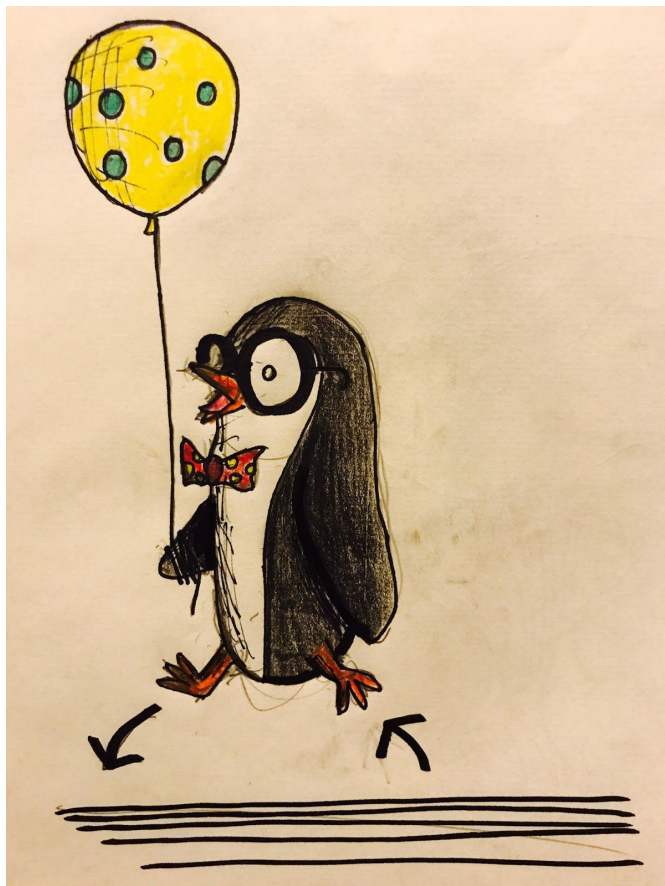
The note stipulated that Tilda simply needed to follow the map out of the Arborea forest, through the Goja desert, and to the Goja tree in the Goja Oasis. Once there she would pick 3 berries, return them to town hall, and hand feed them to the Goja monster.

The map was quite detailed and must have been drawn by the Head Villager who often surveyed Arborea and the surrounding regions in her private hot air balloon. Tilda had only been able to up in the balloon once, but she was amazed by everything she saw. The map brought back memories of her maiden balloon voyage.

The Head Villager indicated that the trip would take 3 days and “NO MORE” and that she “MUST LEAVE IMMEDIATELY” ... somehow these last two bits seemed more capitalized than the rest of the note.

Shocked, but energized by the challenge, Tilda began throwing some provisions, toiletries, and clothes into her many pouched sack. After triple-checking to make sure she had everything she needed, Tilda left the cabin, locked the gate, and began down the path indicated on the map.

Tilda loved to travel but she'd never gone more than a half-day's journey from her cabin - it was beginning to dawn on her how awesome this opportunity was... even if she still didn't really get why she was doing it.



As the sun began to set on the first day, Tilda came across an adorable little penguin seated on a tree stump in a small clearing. Tied to his wing and surrounding the penguin were a large number of inflated balloons but all of them were resting in the dirt. Though rather vibrantly colored and full of polka dots and other patterns the balloons had a somber look about them.

The penguin himself was far from somber and wore a yellow bow tie with red polka dots that complemented his over-sized spectacles quite nicely. The spectacles magnified his eyes to a rather comical degree as the penguin sat on the stump and determinedly inflated yet another balloon.

Once inflated, the penguin tied the balloon to a string, held the opposite end of the

string and tossed the balloon into the air with a smile. The penguins let out a squeak of hope as a slight breeze pushed the balloon a few centimeters upward but his happiness turned to frustration as the balloon sank to join the others.

“Drat!” said the Penguin, “I really thought that would be the one.”

Coming upon this scene, Tilda interrupted the penguin, “Excuse me,” she said. “My name is Tilda. I was just wondering, what did you hope that balloon would be?”

With a blank face, the penguin looked over at Tilda, scrunched up his eyebrows, pushed up his glasses, and said in a somewhat childish but hopeful voice, “I thought it would be the balloon that finally sent me skyward and helped me fly like the other birds.”

Tilda gave the penguin a tender look and said “Oh my poor little penguin friend. You don’t need to fly through the air, you can fly through the water!”

“Sure that’d be enough if I were in my tropical ocean home,” said the penguin, “but I’ve been traveling for months now and have fallen in love with these woods. Without an ocean to swim in, I need to learn to fly!”

“I see,” said Tilda beginning to scrutinize the balloons. There were at least 100 balloons, each the size of the penguin and some even a little bigger. She couldn’t turn away from the little guy when he was clearly trying so hard.

“Well,” she said, “you’re not going to get to the sky this way. Your breath is no less dense than the air around it and won’t cause these balloons to float.”

“Dense?” inflected the penguin, “What do you mean? I’m not dense? I’m smart!”

Tilda laughed a little nervously and said, “oh no, not like that. What I mean is that, in order for a balloon to float, the gas inside it must weigh less than the air that would take up the same space. Your breath weighs about the same as the air around it and takes up the same space so it won’t float.”

“Huh?” said the squinting Penguin.

“Hmmm...” said Tilda, “think of the balloon like a little boat. The reason a boat floats is that its hull is shaped so that it takes up a lot of space pushes away a bunch of water. When a boat’s hull has pushed away so much water that the water’s weight equals the weight of the boat and everything in it, the boat will no longer sink, it will float!”

“That’s why you can even make boats out of metal. The hull pushes away so much water that its weight is equal to that of all the metal. My dad makes metal boats for our village.”

“That’s neat!” squeaked the penguin.

“Your balloons are like little boats except that the air they push away weighs less than your breath and the rubber they’re made out of. That’s why they sink.”

“I think I’m getting it” said the penguin, “I just need some way to make the gas in the balloon realllllly light.”

“Sure,” said Tilda, “but you’ve got an even bigger problem if you want to make yourself float using the balloon. In that case, the balloon has to push enough air out of the way that the air’s weight is equal to your’s and the balloon’s weight combined!”

“Oooooooh” said the Penguin “... so I just need to push a lot more air away and make my breath lighter... I need a bigger balloon with a super light gas!”

“Yes!” said Tilda, a little surprised that the penguin understood.

“But, how should we do that?” asked the penguin.

“Hmrrrrrr...” thought Tilda. “Well, one way to make air take up more space is to heat it up, but I think your balloons would pop if we expanded them to the size we need to make you float and we don’t have anything to heat up the air in the first place.”

“O, no, no, no,” said the penguin stamping his little feet, “we’re so close.... WAIT! I have a gas lamp that I use to heat up my tent! It gets so cold in this forest at night.”

The penguin waddled over to a tent just outside the clearing and returned carrying a gas lamp above his head.

“Can we use this?” asked the penguin.

“Welll, yes,” said Tilda, “but we also need to figure out a way to capture the hot air.... I know, I’ll give you my waterproof sleeping canvas to capture the hot air... I don’t think it’s going to rain before my journey is over so I shouldn’t need it.”

“Good thing he’s such a little guy,” thought Tilda, “otherwise I’m not sure the canvas would be big enough.”

Tilda fastened the canvas to the gas lamp and positioned it to capture the hot air. Next, she fashioned a little seat from one of her shirts so that the penguin could sit in flight.

"It'll be a little difficult for you to control," said Tilda, "But I don't think you'll be up there too long. Just turn up the gas to heat the air and go up. Turn down the gas to let the air cool and you'll sink BUT BE CAREFUL. Don't go too fast either way!"

"Alright!" squeaked the penguin as he excitedly nestled into his seat and jammed the lamp to full blast.

Sure enough, the canvas began to expand as it filled with hot air. In a matter of moments, the little penguin's feet were dangling above her head and, in seconds, he was clear of the trees.

"Be careful!" called Tilda, "and don't forget to lower yourself slowly and get some food later. Don't stay up there too long!"

"I will! Thanks Tilda!" yelled the penguin clearly not paying attention and soaring ever higher.

Unbeknownst to the penguin, Tilda tied a rope extending from the Penguin's seat to a nearby tree.

"That ought to keep him safe," she thought as she left the clearing and privately pledged to check up on him on her return journey.

### **Chapter 3 - The Goja Desert**

Tilda left the Penguin happily floating above the canopy and continued on her journey. To her surprise, the path to the Goja berry tree led straight out of the woods and, just as dusk began to settle, she reached the abrupt end of Arborea and its beautiful stands of trees.

Stretching before her was a not-so-vast desert, but Tilda figured it would take at least the next day to travel the distance of the road through the dunes. She considered trudging out into the darkness and thereby making some progress through the evening, but then she thought better of it, "far too cold and I'm apt to get lost without any moon tonight," she thought.

"Wait... no moon," a voice in the back of her head murmured, "wasn't the moon nearly full just last night?"

Tilda's head jerked toward the sky and sure enough, dark clouds covered all that she could see. As the first rain drops began to fall, she deeply regretted giving the Penguin her canvas and took shelter under the final tree where the forest met the desert.

Despite the rain, Tilda was able to get a few uncomfortable winks and woke up to find her clothes and pack soaked. She rang out as much as she could and stuck her hand in the pack for her breakfast, but quickly jerked it out. The bread and sandwiches she packed for the journey were disgusting piles of mush lining the inside of her pack.

She looked around her makeshift camp for anything to eat but could only find two acorns.

Just as she was about to head back into the forest (Tilda was far too smart to head into the desert without any food) Tilda heard a scratchy voice yelling “Get your nice warm breakfast here!”

It seemed to be coming from just over the first dune not more than 200 meters away, and so Tilda decided to try her luck.

Tilda followed the well-kempt path around the dune and, sure enough, she came upon a lizard selling brown, roasted masses on sticks. Between yelling about his wares, the lizard swept the path leading to his little stone shelter with more varieties of roasted... something on display.

As she got closer, Tilda called out, “excuse me Mr. Lizard, but can you tell me what you’re selling?”

“Oh! A customer... and from the forest!” exclaimed the Lizard. “I usually sell my flies to other reptiles coming in and out of the dunes. What brings you here from the lush forest?”

“Nevermind that,” said Tilda, a little groggy and with a rumbling stomach. “What have you got for me?”

“Well,” said the Lizard, “I’ve got the finest roasted flies this side of the Goja desert.”

“Roasted... flies...?” asked Tilda.

“Yes, my dear mammalian friend,” said the lizard, “The most tasty, most crunchy, most nutritious flies you’ll ever eat.” We’ve got all varieties. Chubby, curly wings, stubbly hair, and, of course, our prized CRAZY BIG FLY ... not a very original name, I know, but come over here and you’ll see. It’s apt.”





The lizard brought Tilda over to a stone countertop where, true to his word, there were at least 10 different types of fly and even one fly that was bigger than Tilda's hand. This piqued Tilda's interest more than her appetite.

"Why only one big fly?" asked Tilda.

"That's CRAZY BIG FLY!" said the Lizard, "Always gotta stay on brand you know. I normally keep that a secret, but you're not salivating like the others... you seem more intellectually interested. A fly breeder yourself?"

"Well, no," said Tilda a little nervously, "I just..."

"Nahhhhhh. Don't be modest!" interrupted the Lizard. "I know a fellow fly enthusiast when I meet one. You see, to make all of these varieties, we take a few live flies from our farm just on the edge of the forest and bring them out into the desert where we let them bake until just moments before they perish. We then snatch them out of the death grip of the sun and breed them with others on the farm. Sure enough, we always find a few children with unusual traits."

"Now, for most of these traits, if we breed the children with other normal flies, at least some of their children hatch with the trait themselves. We separate these out and throw the normal ones back. We keep breeding the flies with the traits together until they produce no more normal children and then we can sell all we want!"

"The CRAZY BIG FLIES though... they're rare and, when we breed them back with the normal population, they never have CRAZY BIG children... hence the hefty price tag on this one. It's a total mystery."

Tilda, however, didn't think this was a mystery at all. While, she hadn't bred many flies, she did breed loads of flowers on her uncle's farm and had seen this type of thing happen many times. Her uncle called traits like the "CRAZY BIG" trait "recessive." She therefore saw an opportunity not only to teach the lizard but also to get a free breakfast.

"Actually..." said Tilda, "what you've probably got is a recessive trait."

"Beg your pardon?" asked the lizard as his wide grin turned into a perplexed frown.

"It's a little complicated and doesn't allways work this way," said Tilda, "but if you promise to offer me some food, I can tell you how to breed more CRAZY BIG FLIES."

"How bout you tell me first and then I'll decide on the food," countered the Lizard.

"Hrrmph... alright..." said Tilda. "The next time you get a CRAZY BIG fly, breed it's children with each other even if they aren't CRAZY BIG. You'll probably end up with more CRAZY BIG flies

anyway. Breed these CRAZY BIG grandchildren together and there's a chance they'll only make CRAZY BIG great grandchildren.

The lizard stared at her blank faced saying "ummmmm..."

"Look," said Tilda a little irritated and getting annoyed with her own impatience, "I could draw you a diagram of how it works, but I don't have time right now. Just give it a try and I bet you'll have more CRAZY BIG flies than you know what to do with."

"Really?!?" said the lizard getting excited.

"Yes." said Tilda matter of factly. "... though there's definitely a chance it won't work..." she mumbled.

"Well then..." said the Lizard thinking and apparently having missed the mumbled bit, "I think you've made me one rich reptile! I'll need to exchange my fly cart for a safe to protect all my gold. What kind of fly enthusiast would I be if I didn't offer you some grub for such useful advice. You know what? Take a couple handfuls of whatever type of fly you'd like... all except CRAZY BIG of course."

"Thank you SOOOO much!" exclaimed Tilda a little over-expressively.

Tilda sidled over to the red-eyed flies. "Here goes..." she said grabbing a handful and plunging the flies into her mouth.

To Tilda's surprise, the flies were well salted, had just the right amount of crunch, and had a delightfully savory aftertaste. With four more quick handfuls, two more for her pack, and an eyebrow raise from the lizard, Tilda bid the lizard farewell and continued on her journey.

As she turned the corner around the next dune, Tilda could hear the Lizard exclaiming to his next batch of customers: "You'll never believe it, soon we'll have enough CRAZY BIG flies for everyone!"

"Ooo boy," thought Tilda, "I really hope it's that simple..."

#### **Chapter 4 The Goja Oasis**

With her belly full of delicious flies, Tilda made short work of the Goja desert and quickly sifted her way through the dunes on a path trampled by hundreds of lizardy feet. Just as the sun was setting on a dry, but mostly uneventful day, she spotted the top of a gigantic tree peeking out over the summit of a particularly large dune.

When she was at the top of the dune, the enormous tree loomed over her with a gorgeous grassy plain below it. Just beside the base of the tree lay a large pond with a small village along its rim. Tilda saw many tiny figures scurrying between acorn-shaped homes of the village.

“At last!” thought Tilda, “This must be the Goja berry tree. Before I get to the berries, I’ve gotta get some water. This thing’s been empty for hours.” She shook her canteen and was greeted only by the dry rattle of a few grains of sand.

Tilda ran down the side of the dune, across the field and began pounding on the door of the first house she could get to.

“Yeeeeesss?” asked the occupant opening the door slowly.

“Excuse my manners but ohhhh!...” said Tilda surprised by the occupant’s appearance. The occupant of the house was what looked like a man-sized caterpillar or centipede with a human face on its head and human arms on its second segment

Shaken, but resolute Tilda continued, “Can I bother you for a glass of water and... maybe... could you tell me where I can find a Goja berry?”

“Glass? No glass here, but I can certainly get you a wooden cup of water,” chuckled the occupant opening the door wider. “Goja berries will be a bit more difficult, but we can talk about that more once ... maybe... you’ve told me your name.”

Upon closer inspection, Tilda decided that the occupant had a matronly and kind face. Tilda followed the occupant as she wandered off into the house. The occupant grabbed a wooden cup, scooped some water out of a large basin and handed it to Tilda.

“THANK YOU!” Tilda exclaimed sincerely before gulping down the whole cup and carelessly dribbling a bit of water down her shirt.”

“Have a seat” said the occupant gesturing to a large, but comfy looking bench in what appeared to be the living quarters, “I’ll grab you some more.”

Tilda sat down and said “my apologies, I’m just so thirsty after crossing that desert. My name is Tilda. I’m from Arborea - the forest across the desert. I’m here to fetch 3 Goja berries for my village.”

“My, that’s quite the journey,” said the creature, “My name is Madeline and you’ve come to the right place. This is the village of the Goja berry tree. I’m the local historian/librarian.”

Only then did Tilda noticed that the back of the house was filled with books. Some were shelved but most lay unshelved and strewn about the floor.

“Hello,” said Tilda smiling happily and putting out a hand, “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Madeline grasped her hand, shook firmly and chuckled saying, “You won’t be so happy when I tell you a little more about the Goja berries. I’m afraid the only Goja berries available are at the very top of the tree.

“You see, we Goja berry beasts love Goja berries... you might say we go a little crazy for them... hence the name. We pluck all the low-hanging Goja berries as soon as they grow.”

“And the upper berries?” asked Tilda.

“Well,” said Madeline, “Occasionally some beasts climb to the upper branches of the tree, but, more often than not, they fall to their doom in the process. Even when they do make it to the top... things don’t go so well.”

“What do you mean?” asked Tilda.

“It’s kind of a sensitive issue in town,” said Madeline, “but the last group of beasts to make it to the top became so obsessed with the Goja berries that they never wanted to come down. Unfortunately for them, we Goja berry beasts aren’t the only ones who love the taste of the Goja berries.”

“Oh?” said Tilda.

“The Goja berry monsters,” continued Madeline, “enormous, horrifying in appearance but actually quite nice to talk to if you can get in earshot without being crushed by them - they occasionally come in from the south and forage the upper branches.



“Like us, the monsters get a little too excited once they start eating the berries and, wouldn’t you know it, one of the monsters mistook that last beasts who went to the top of the tree for some berries. That monster swallowed a whole bunch of berries and Goja beasts whole and continued eating without skipping a beat. When there were no more ripe berries left, he stumbled off to the east, never realizing what he’d done.

“No Goja berry beast has dared climb to the top of the tree since that particular incident. We’ve learned to control ourselves and avoid such... accidents.”

“My! That’s awful!” said Tilda consolingly (and not to mention a little disturbed), “but I’ve got to get up that tree.”

“The tree climbing routes haven’t been used in years,” said Madeline, “So I’m afraid I wouldn’t recommend going up today. The sun is already setting and I’m sure you’ll lose your footing on that old path. We Goja berry beasts have feet that are especially designed for climbing, but I’m not even sure you’ll make it.”

“But I’ve got to!” said Tilda, “... I’m running a little late.”

“My dear,” said Madeline, “few things are ever as serious as they seem. Why don’t you spend the night here and we’ll see what we can do tomorrow morning.”

Tilda was put at ease by Madeline’s calm and soothing tone. “I guess that’s probably a good idea” said Tilda yawning.

“Good,” said Madeline, “I’ll put you up in the library. I’ve got plenty of blankets and cushions you can sleep on.”

“Thank you” said Tilda, “I really could use a good rest.”

Tilda and Madeline chatted for a few hours more and had a light dinner before each went off to bed. In the middle of the night, a great storm sent wind blowing through the house and the pages of many books ruffled wildly. Tilda heard a few great cracks as branches of the Goja berry tree snapped.

She nearly ran out of the house thinking she could probably find some fallen berries, but weird scurrying noises outside paralyzed her with fear and she decided to stay in bed. She swore she could hear a chorus of chewing just outside her windows.

Luckily the storm only lasted an hour or so and Tilda drifted back into a long, comfortable sleep. She woke to the sun streaming into the library.

Madeline, who had what looked to be red-lipstick on her mouth, offered Tilda some breakfast, but Tilda just grabbed a handful of flies, thanked her gracious host and began her search for some fallen berries.

Despite the ferociousness of the previous night’s storm, Tilda couldn’t find a single berry on the ground outside. She couldn’t even find any fallen branches, but she did see patches of crimson-stained dirt.

“Weird...” thought Tilda, “I guess I’ll have to try climb the tree after all.” Try as she might, however, Tilda couldn’t get a good foothold on the tree. She asked many Goja berry beasts for help, but none seemed willing. The villagers, all of whom were wearing the same red lipstick as Madeline, looked away shamefully whenever Tilda asked if they would help her venture up the

tree. Afraid to cause offense, Tilda quickly gave up on that front and plopped down on the ground hoping to think her way to a solution.

“I could throw something up there maybe?” she thought, “orrrr maybe If I give myself a running start I could jump and get a handhold. Orrrrr maybe ....”

“TILDA!” a far off voice interrupted Tilda’s thought.

“TILDA!” repeated the voice, this time a little louder.

“TILDA!” came the voice a final time.

Tilda looked up toward the voice’s source just in time to spot the little penguin, his rope apparently snapped in the night’s storm, slam straight into a bunch of berries about halfway up the tree.

The collision knocked the poor Penguin from his seat and down he came with not 1, not 2, not 3, but FIVE whole berries. 3 of them were roughly the size of the penguin, but two were the size of small cars.

At first, Tilda was elated. “Finally,” she thought, “I’ll have the berries and I’ll make it back only a day or so late.” Her elation slowly turned to fear as she realized the Penguin was falling to what could very well be his death.

Tilda dashed into position to catch the Penguin, but she couldn’t get under him - the larger berries had dislodged from the tree first and the penguin was more or less directly above them, just a few meters higher. Before she could fully wrap her brain around the problem, the first large berry hit the ground with a SPLAT, then came the second with a SPLURSH, then came the Penguin with the smaller berries and a plurp, plurp, plurp, glurp.

Tilda closed her eyes as the smaller berries hit and couldn’t bear to open them until she heard the little penguin giggling and saying “Hey Tilda! You should try this mush, it tastes great!”

Wiping away tears, Tilda ran over and hugged the strangely amused Penguin - his glasses only a bit dislodged in the fall and his body covered in Goja berry mush.

Caught in the embrace and completely distracted by her relief, Tilda didn’t notice the swarm of Goja berry beasts that had assembled around the hugging friends. Soon, however, not even her immense happiness could mask the sound of the beasts feasting on the Goja berry mush.

The slurping, smacking, sucking noises surrounded Tilda and the Penguin. As Tilda looked toward the beasts, she noticed that something strange was happening to them. Their eyes has become dark red swirls and they seemed to be more ferocious than she remembered. Pushing,

shoving, and sometimes even snapping at one another to get a bit of Goja berry mush down their gullets.

Just before she slid into the frenzy herself, Madeline looked straight into Tilda's eyes and mouthed "RUN"

For the first time, Tilda noticed that the "lipstick" on Madeline's mouth was the same color as the berry mush and she understood. Tilda reached down, put a smaller berry under each arm, convinced the penguin to grab the third, and together they ran all the way to the dune leading out of the village.

Tilda and the Penguin didn't look back until they nearly collapsed at the Lizard's Fly Hut.

## **Chapter 5 - The Return to Arborea**

"Why, if it isn't Tilda," said the Lizard staring down at Tilda with a grin as wide as the Cheshire cat's. "Boy do I have have something to for you."

"Oh no," said Tilda nervously, "The trait wasn't as simple as I thought."

"What!?" said the Lizard, "Not at all! I wanted you to have one of my newest CRAZY BIG flies! I have hundreds of them now! All thanks to you!"

"O thank god!" said Tilda, "Actually, if you could just give me and my friend here some water that would be..." but the Penguin was already feasting on one of the CRAZY BIG flies.

"This is delicious!" squeaked the Penguin.

"And there's plenty more where that came from!" said the Lizard.

Tilda gave in and ate a fly, but also got the Lizard to refill her canteen. Even stuffed to the brim, Tilda wasn't sure she could carry the berries all the way back to the village and the little Penguin certainly couldn't either so she began looking around the fly hut for something that could help.

"Anything else I can do for you? You look exhausted... I don't think you've tried my curly-winged flies." proffered the Lizard as he pulled over a cart covered in flies with their wings curled upward.

"Well..." thought Tilda, "I'm okay on flies... I think for a while... but that cart would be super useful!"

"Anything Tilda, anything!" said the Lizard.



With the cart in front of her, the penguin and berries resting happily on top, and one wealthy lizard behind her, Tilda made good time getting back to Arborea. In fact, she was only a day and half behind schedule.

“You’re late.” said the head Villager looking a little more worried and a little less stern than usual (but still plenty stern). “Hurry. We may still have time to get the berries to the monster.”

The Head Villager lead Tilda to a previously unseen door behind the Village Council chambers. This door lead to a well-manicured but rocky path behind the building. The path ended in a high outcropping that overlooked a deep crevasse.

Tilda, the Penguin, and the Head Villager were running down this path when a groggy, enormous, and horned head appeared at the end of the outcropping.

The head smacked it’s lips a few times, blinked its eyes, yawned a deep yawn, and twitched backwards when it noticed the trio standing frozen in horror on the edge of the outcropping. Tilda was poised to throw a berry straight into his yawning mouth.

“Wait... don’t” whined the monster in low but petulant tones. “I don’t want any more berries.”

“But, but... you’re the Goja Berry Monster! You’ll destroy the village!” yelled Tilda.

“No, no no,” whined the Goja monster, “I’m a good Monster, and I used to love those berries, but, after my last visit to the Goja berry tree, they started making me go crayyyyyzy.

“I musta, I dunno, eaten something else hidden among the berries. After that, I couldn’t control myself. I craved nothing but the berries.”

“But you crushed many villages in your search for more berries. We cannot ignore that.” said the Head Villager.

“I admit it, I got a little angry when some towns and villages couldn’t give me berries, but I wasn’t in control! I ate so many berries that I’ve been passed out for years for goodness sake! That’s not the real me!”

“He does have a point,” said Tilda.

“Now I finally feel like the berries have been purged from my system. Who knows what will happen if I eat them again! I don’t wanna go back to being a Scary Monster. I’m a friendly Goja Monster!”

The monster began sobbing as he finished his little speech and Tilda exchanged a sullen look with the head villager.

Yelling to be heard over his sobs, the head villager said, "Well. I guess your tardiness has actually solved a problem."

Unfortunately, as the Goja Monster was letting out a particularly throaty sob, a Goja Berry sailed over Tilda and into the Monster's mouth.

"I'll save you!" yelled Granite sprinting the last couple of the steps down the rock path. Before anyone could stop him, he lobbed a second berry in the Monster's gaping mouth.

Tilda tackled Granite as he was getting ready to throw his third berry. All was quiet for a few moments as the monster struggled but ultimately failed to prevent himself from swallowing the berries.

"...monster?" asked Tilda.

The monster stared for a moment but slowly, his pupils became the spirals of the Goja berry beasts. He jumped up to his full height and yelled, "MORE BERRIES!"

The monster looked down at the berries beside Tilda and, with one clumsy swipe, scooped up Tilda and the berries. He dropped them straight down his throat without a single chew.

....

After a brief, slippery tumble down the Monster's esophagus, Tilda found herself in a stringent but apparently not quite deadly fluid. The 3 floating Goja berries were beside her, and to her surprise, there was also a stick. At the other end of the stick - a two-legged creature with a shark head and dorsal fin, but muscular, human arms.

"Quick, get out of there before you dissolve!" gurgled the shark. "Or worse still, before the beasts come back!"

"Beasts?" asked Tilda as she accepted the shark's aid.

"Yeah," gurgled the shark twitching nervously, "we tummy pescas used to live here in happy solitude before the the beasts came. Don't get me wrong, we love Goja berries just like the beasts, but those guys get so rowdy and kinda dangerous after they've had even a single bite. They start snapping at people and fighting with everything, even the walls!"

"For a while we thought that the only way to keep them at bay was to feed them more berries, but recently the berries stopped coming and the beasts were kinda nice for a change. Dang it though, as soon as those last two berries came sailing into the acid pool, they started going crazy again."

“Wait,” said Tilda, “Are these beasts green?”

“Yeah”

“With long bodies?”

“Yeah”

“And pointy legs?”

“Yeah”

“And their eyes go all spirally when they eat a berry?”

“Yes!” yelled the Tumma Pesca, how do you know all of this?

“I’ve met the beasts before,” said Tilda, “and you’re right, they should not be eating berries ... I’ve seen what they can do but ...”

“Oh my god!” yelled Tilda, “The beasts must be causing the Monster to go crazy!”

“The Monster?” asked the Tummy Pesca.

“Errrrr... that’s a bit too much to explain,” said Tilda, “for now, all you need to know is that my name is Tilda and I’m here to help you get the beasts out of your home.”

“Really!?” asked the Tummy Pesca. “How are you going to do that?”

“With this!” said Tilda hoisting up a Goja berry she’d rescued from the acid pool - “We’ll use their love of the berries against them.”

“Can you get me back up there?” she asked pointing to the esophagus.

“To the great light hole?” asked the Tummy Pesca, “Hmmm... I’ve never thought to try, but if I dive deep enough into the acid pool, I may be able to leap out and reach the hole.”

“With me on your back?” asked Tilda.

“Sure...” thought the Tummy Pesca eyeing her, “You look light enough.”



“Great, now where are the beasts?” asked Tilda.

“They went down that hall,” said the Tummy Pesca Pointing down a nearby corridor. “Or at least that’s where I last saw one of them running with one of those dang berries.”

Tilda looked toward the dark and fleshy hall and gave a start - about a dozen spiral eyes were looking back at her.

“Ummmmm,” said Tilda, “Looks like we better get the plan started NOW!”

“Now?!” exclaimed the Tummy Pesca as he looked down the corridor. When he saw the spirals, he gave a little jump himself and then grabbed Tilda and pulled her into the acid pool.

“They don’t like it in here,” said the Tummy Pesca, “so we should have at least a little time before they swarm us. Hold on tight!”

The beasts began streaming out of the hallway, their spiral eyes directed toward the one undissolved Goja berry under Tilda’s arm. The Tummy Pesca dove deep and shot out of the acid pool, but Tilda couldn’t quite get a hold on the Monster’s Esophagus, so the Tummy Pesca dove back down.

Again he exploded out of the acid, but now the Goja Berry beasts were crawling up the sides of the chamber trying to grab Tilda as she ascended. The beasts couldn’t quite reach her, but she failed to grab the walls of the esophagus a second time.

On the third leap, Tilda noticed a rope dangling from the esophagus and grabbed hold of it just as the leap reach its apex. As soon as the rope was in her hands, it began elevating her up the esophagus and out of the chamber. The Goja beasts, with their special climbing feet, were hot on her tail.

Tilda fastidiously climbed up the rope all the while clutching the Goja berry. Soon she found herself groping at the side of a wicker basket. Tilda’s surprise lasted only a moment as the penguin and the Head Villager pulled her into the Head Villager’s Hot Air Balloon.

Once in the basket, Tilda turned to see the Goja beasts scurrying out of the Monster’s mouth and jumping after her, but one by one they fell to their doom.

The purged monster collapsed with exhaustion but he seemed a lot more comfy and a lot less crazed.

“Well done.” said the Head Villager.

“Isn’t this balloon INCREDIBLE Tilda!” roared the Penguin.

“Yes,” said Tilda trying to wipe off the mild acid, “but how did you convince the monster to let you lower the rope into his mouth?”

“We told him it was made of Goja Berry licorice.” said the Head Villager. “Granite’s idea. He sends his apologies.”

The head villager nodded toward Granite who was nervously waving from the out cropping.

“I’m just glad I’m finally done,” said Tilda. “Does this mean I’ve come of age?”

“Well.” said the Head Villager in an uncharacteristically wishy-washy tone, “No one ever really comes of age. Just think, I’ve been sending people out to feed this Monster for years. I always thought I was doing the right thing but.... needless to say, you’ll always be learning.”

“Great...” said Tilda slumping into the basket, finally letting exhaustion overcome her.

“THIS BALLOON!” yelled the Penguin as he jumped into Tilda’s lap giggling.

“Yes,” said Tilda hugging the little Penguin, “This balloon.”