



Galileo

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STELLA WAS ENJOYING a stroll across the schoolyard when she found the worm. She should have been in history with Avatar Barnett, but honestly, how much “War of Independence this” and “Battle for the Galaxy that” could a girl take?

The sun was out. Rainbow trees were flowering. With her mum gone, Stella had hacked into the virtual timetable and given herself an extended lunch break.

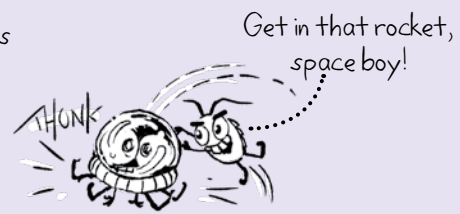
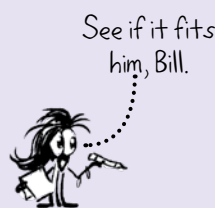
“Look, Galileo,” she called. “Here, boy! Come see.”

Galileo scampered over, stopping only once to leap at a passing butterfly.

“Moof, moof! Weow?”

“Check it out.” Stella kneeled down and brought her chin close to something shimmery and wriggling. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say that was a waste worm . . .”

“Moof!”



Galileo sprang forward, swatting at the worm. Sparks flew. Zap! He scrabbled away again.

“It is a waste worm!” Stella frowned. “Do you know what this means, Galileo?”

Galileo lay sprawled out, sunning his belly.

“It means there must be a wormhole on board. Oh, this is bad.”

“Weow?”

“A wormhole, Galileo.” She ruffled her fingers through his neck fur. “An unstable time tunnel connecting two different points in the universe. One end must have latched onto our ship.”

Galileo yawned. His tongue smacked briefly at his lips. Lolling his head to the side, he allowed one big ear to cover his eyes.

“Moof?”

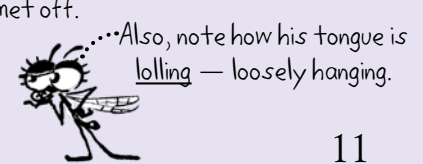
“No,” Stella agreed. She took out her handkerchief and scooped up the worm. “No, we can’t wait for Mum. Who knows what else might have wriggled through after this little critter.” She slapped her thigh.

“Up now, Galileo. Up, boy!”

“Moof!”

Galileo rolled left and right until he rocked over and came up with his stumpy legs beneath him. Stella held the worm out for him to sniff.

“Find the wormhole, Galileo!”



Galileo moofed and set off. Stella grinned. Her pet might be the most wonderfully ridiculous-looking creature in all the galaxies, but he never lost a scent.

“Weow!”

“No, Galileo. *Not* the butterflies. Focus, now. Focus!”

By breed, Galileo was the first ever tabby hound. (The result of Stella not being able to choose between an Old Earth basset hound and a tabby cat.) He was as fat as he was furry, with smiling whiskers and a low-hanging stomach.

He was easily distracted.

“Moof, moof!”

“No, Galileo. The worm! Follow the worm’s scent.” Stella rolled her eyes. “Oh, this is hopeless.”

Sighing, she detoured over to the school’s lone bottle tree. She twisted the hidden clasp to let the hatch on its trunk fall open. Her fingers skittered briefly on the keypad within. Virtual reality disappeared. The school building and Stella’s computer-generated classmates faded away to



reveal the familiar corridors of her mum’s home spaceship.

“Moof?”

“That’s right, Galileo. No more butterflies.” Stella held out the worm again. “Now, find that wormhole. Go, boy!”





“Weow!”

Nose to the metal floor, Galileo snuffled and trotted off, bouncing along like a tabby tumbleweed. Stella jogged to keep up.

“That’s it! Good boy!”

They came to a high crawlspace

Spider is, but using virtual reality — a fake interactive environment created by a computer where sights and sounds seem real.



You’ll fly the rocket from the ground like it’s a video game.



Harrumph. You’ve got to be kidding.



Note: Spider did not approve and snuffled — loudly sniffed many times — at this awesome idea.



up near the ceiling between decks. Galileo leaped for it with a cat’s instincts but a basset’s stunted agility.

“Weow?”

Stella gave him a boost and then followed. If the worm had made it this far, then the wormhole had to have opened up hours ago, probably just after her mum was called in to work.

“Keep going, Galileo,” Stella urged.

No sooner had she spoken than she heard a frantic scratching of claws and then a muffled thunk. That was Galileo dropping down at the other end of the crawlspace.

“Hold on, Galileo! I’m coming!”

Stella tumbled after him and found herself in the engine room, staring up at the wormhole. It hung spinning above the deck like some impossible hula hoop, all fizzing edges and pulsating blue energy.

Wormhole, she thought. Check.

The only reason Stella took it so calmly was because she’d spotted something even more worrying:



a glassy black eye as big as a boulder glaring at her from within the burning circle!

Star sparrow, she winced. Double check.

“Galileo, we’re in trouble.”

“Moof! Weow!”

The tabby hound darted forward and then skipped back, growling and hissing. The sparrow was enormous! It flapped its star-white feathers and tore hungrily at the edges of the hole, thrusting its arrowhead beak through. It was hunting for food, Stella realized. It must have sniffed

out the nuclear trash lying half-digested inside the waste worm. But it was getting too close to the ship’s engines! If it broke through the shielding . . . Meltdown! Doomsday-level *kaboom!*

Horrified, Stella lost her grip on the handkerchief. The worm slipped out and fell to the floor.

To her delighted relief, Galileo pounced on it. He swiped it playfully from paw to paw, closer and closer to the wormhole. Suddenly, the star sparrow stabbed down and pecked the worm up.

I’m not so hot at video games.



True. I always run you down flat in Big Bad Bug Race.



This will be easy. It’s just like flying the rocket in real reality.



“Oh, good boy!” Stella exclaimed.
“Well done, Galileo!”

The hula hoop began spinning in reverse. Sparks flew from its rim, and it gurgled like a fast-emptying bathtub, sucking the sparrow back through. When the wormhole collapsed, it left nothing behind but a faint after-rain smell.

No worm, no wormhole, Stella mused.

She turned to Galileo, but the tabby hound had moved beyond petting range. He sniffed about some more, then flopped down alongside the main engine and went to sleep.

Shaking her head, Stella reached instead for the nearest control panel and restarted her virtual school. Even as the building ghosted back into existence, a frowning hologram of her mother appeared above the schoolyard, hunched forward in her pilot’s seat of her little space-hopper.

“Stella, have you been messing with the virtual reality again? If I can’t trust you alone in homeschool—”

“Sorry, Mum. Bit of an emergency.



Actually, we came within a whisker of total destruction. But everything’s fine now!” Stella smiled fondly at Galileo. The tabby hound was pawing quietly at the air, shedding fur everywhere as he chased after dream butterflies. “Well, nothing a quick vacuum clean won’t sort out!” 🐜

Only it’s fake reality.



But, in reality, it’s still a real rocket.



In reality, now I’m real dizzy.

