

Moon Charlie's Christmas Surprise

By Robert Bee



It was the Christmas after Charlie Angler and the Plato Parrots won the Under 11s Inter-dome netball competition (see "Moon Charlie Shoots for Goal")...

Charlie was bursting with so much excitement, her safety belt on the inter-dome shuttle could barely hold her down in her seat. Her friend Gemma in the seat beside her was excited too but managed not to show it. At least not as much as Charlie.

In the seat across the aisle, opposite Gemma, Charlie's new friend, Skyler, looked just like her surname, Snow. Super cool. How she actually felt inside may have been a different matter. Sadly, Mandy Peabody, Skyler's best friend, was not in the seat beside her. Poor Mandy had come down with a bug so had to cancel at the last moment. Not happy, Mandy!

Instead, Zac Watt, Charlie's nerdy friend, sat there, his neck craned, checking out every detail of the shuttle. He was probably preparing to take over the controls if there was an emergency, Skyler thought, laughing inwardly. You never know, the shuttle's pilot and co-pilot could disappear suddenly, beamed out by some passing alien spacecraft, and Zac would have to save the shuttle and its passengers from crashing.

Yeah, as if.

Zac wasn't meant to be on this trip but, after Mandy suddenly fell ill, there was a spare seat. Zac jumped at the chance. He had always wanted to visit Dome Kepler to visit his equally nerdy pen-friend Albert. To compare rocket designs and boy stuff like that. The fact that Freda from the Under 11s Kepler Kites netball team lived there was just a coincidence.

Yeah, as if.

Also on the shuttle were both of Charlie's and Gemma's parents and Skyler's mum. Mr Snow had volunteered to stay behind at Dome Plato. "Someone has to keep the machines going," he explained to Skyler. Skyler wasn't that upset really. Now she could have more 'girl time' with her mum.

Jacob, or make that Lunar Big Chief Spotter Jacob, was also on the shuttle. He had wanted his best friend, Toby, to come along too to keep him company but since Toby's parents had no pressing reason to visit Dome Kepler, Toby couldn't go. So Jacob was the only five year old on the flight. He felt small amongst all the grown-ups in this

fancy craft and also a bit lonely. Then, by chance he caught Skyler's eye. She winked at him. He winked back. He didn't feel that lonely now.

The shuttle was like a small passenger aeroplane, but with rocket thrusters, not jets. It was designed for travelling long distances above the surface of the Moon. It would travel just high enough to clear the tops of the Moon's mountain ranges. It wasn't meant for leaving the Moon to go out into space.

In essence, the shuttle was like a short chunky aeroplane without wings or a tail. More like a long box with seats and small windows, cargo space in the rear and the pilot's controls at the front. Most importantly, at least for the passengers, it had a small kitchenette at the back of the passenger's section. And a toilet.

There were rockets underneath to lift it up and a smaller rocket in its rear to push it forward and one in its bow to slow it down.

Most important of all, unlike its surface shuttle cousins named after the Three Stooges, this shuttle's cabin was sealed and pressurised. That meant the passengers didn't need to wear their space suits while on board.

The Moon's fleet of inter-dome shuttles also had their nick-names. The shuttle that Charlie and the others were on was designated IDS -1, but it had the name 'Groucho' painted on its side. Charlie had quickly checked and discovered that there had been another group of old time comedians called The Marx Brothers, of which Groucho Marx was a famous member.

"Please ensure your seat belts are on and secure folks," the pilot said over the intercom, which was a bit silly, Charlie thought. He and his co-pilot didn't have a separate cabin. They just sat at the shuttle's controls in the front two seats. He could just as easily turned his head and used a loud voice. Charlie checked her seatbelt, gave her watching dad a 'thumbs up' sign, then settled back into her seat.

This is going to be so much fun, she thought. Spending Christmas Day on Dome Kepler with her family and her new netball friends Freda and Jenny. The invitation from her Dome Kepler friends had come as a real surprise and it was an even bigger surprise when her parents not only agreed that she could go but suggested they all go and enjoy Christmas in Kepler. That then snowballed (Charlie giggled silently when she remembered saying that, considering Skyler's surname) when the Mrs Snow suggested they all go with to Kepler too, then Gemma's parents did the same.

Skyler had insisted that if she went, Mandy should go too and had gotten her way, except... well, the bug put paid to that.

Since they would be spending Christmas Day at Dome Kepler, the Anglers, Stones, Snows and Zac had all packed their Christmas presents, for each other and also for Jenny and Freda. The storage area in the back of the shuttle was loaded with goodies.

It was going to be a real Kepler Kris Kringle Day, that's for sure.

The shuttle had lifted off and they were on their way. As they were travelling in the vacuum of space, there was no sound from the shuttles rockets. The only hint that they were moving was the slow passage of the Moon's surface, including the odd small crater, below them outside their windows.

However, it wasn't quiet inside the shuttle. There was the low excited chatter of the children and the more serious but subdued conversations of the adults. Plus a bit of background music over the speakers. At the moment, it was playing music from 'The Planets', by Holst.

The trip from Dome Plato to Dome Kepler was over 1,600 km, a very long way. It would take them close to eight hours to get there. First they had to cross the entire width of the Mare Imbrium, a huge flat circular plain that, from Earth, looked like a dark sea. That's why it had its name 'mare', meaning 'sea'. At the far side of the Mare, they had to cross the high mountains of Montes Carpatius and travel a further 300 km to Dome Kepler.

To help pass the time the three girls, with the pilot's permission, had undone their seat belts and gathered together to talk about the recent Inter-Domes Netball competition, with their Under 11s Plato Parrots team. They relived the highlights of the games, overlooking Skyler's less than helpful moments and had to be asked, more than once, to cut down the noise after they got more and more excited as each game approached the grand final.

Which they had won. Yea!

Eventually, they were all told to put their seat belts back on as they had gotten so excited, in the one-sixth Earth gravity in the shuttle, they had started to bounce around the cabin, bumping into the ceiling and walls. And adults.

As far away from the girls as they could get, up near the pilots, Zac and Jacob peered out of one of the windows, trying to spot and name the craters that passed below them. Actually, as Lunar Big Chief Spotter, Jacob did the spotting while Zac did the naming. So far they had seen Craters Helicon, Caroline Herschel (the only female astronomer to have a crater on the Moon named after her, Zac proudly told Jacob) and Euler.

"I can see the mountains, I can see the mountains," Jacob suddenly cried out, excited. "Up ahead. Look Zac. I saw them first," he said proudly.

"Yes, I can see them too," Zac said. "Go...lly, they are high. But don't worry Jacob, we'll get over them. I promise."

"Thank goodness for that," laughed the pilot who had overheard Zac. "I was beginning to worry, but if young Einstein here is sure we'll get over those mountains, I can relax. Eh Ralph?"

"Right Greg," the co-pilot replied. "Nothing to worry about."

Unfortunately he was wrong because it was then that the unthinkable happened.

The lifting rockets failed.

The pilot and co-pilot shared a puzzled look, then started playing with the controls, checking the instruments. At last, they shook their heads, frowning.

"I think there's a problem with the shuttle," Zac whispered to Jacob. He was right.

"Attention everyone," the pilot said over the intercom. "We have an emergency."

Charlie and her friends stopped their chatter mid-sentences. The adults looked up, alert for the coming news.

"For reasons unknown, our lifting rockets have shut down. We cannot restart them." The pilot took a deep breath. "That means we have to make an emergency landing."

During the stunned silence from the others, Jacob nudged Zac. "There's no air out there to slow us down. Won't we just keep going?"

Zac shook his head. "No, gravity will still bring us down to the ground. Better to have a controlled emergency landing than an uncontrolled crash."

"Oh," Jacob said. Suddenly he was scared.

"Don't worry, Jacob," Zac said. "These pilots are the best. They'll get us down safely."

The pilot looked at his co-pilot. "Hear that Ralph? Looks like we have something to live up to. So, let's do it." He switched on the intercom again. "We'll be coming down slowly under gravity. We'll use our forward retro-rocket to slow us down." He turned and winked at Zac and Jacob. "It will help but not enough. We'll still be moving forward when we land. This could be a little bumpy folks. So seat belts on and when I say, assume the crash position. Here we go."

Zac moved back to his seat beside Skyler who was now looking even whiter than snow. He clicked on his seat belt and took a last look out the window before bending over to hold his ankles. The crash position. What he saw worried him. The mountains were closer now. A lot closer. They seemed to be rushing towards the shuttle. Would they get down and stop in time? He suddenly realised he was glad he wasn't piloting the ship.

Charlie and Gemma looked at each other. They were very nervous. They had never heard of this happening to a shuttle before. Would they all come out of this OK?

"Crash positions everyone," the pilot said. "Hold on."

There was a sudden bump and Charlie felt the seat belt strain against her waist as her whole body jumped forward. There was another bump and she bounced upwards off her seat, only to be pulled back down by her belt. She could hear a noise of dragging coming through the floor of the shuttle. The cabin rocked from side to side with smaller bounces in between.

With her hands gripping her ankles and her head between her knees, she could hear shouts of fear, surprise, even pain. She realised that some of those noises were hers.

Suddenly the shaking and bumping stopped. There was a spooky silence as everyone stayed in the crash position, waiting for what would happen next. Was the hull broken? Would their air all escape out into the vacuum?

Thankfully, due to the solidness of the shuttle, none of those things happened.

They were down on the Moon's surface. Safely.

But where exactly were they?

"It's alright. We made it in one piece," the pilot announced. "You can start breathing again."

This brought a burst of laughter from the passengers, followed by a round of hand clapping. The pilot and co-pilot gave each other a high-five, obviously relieved.

Charlie and Gemma peered out through their window and gasped. The face of a mountain wall was just outside the shuttle. Another fifty metres of sliding and they would have crashed nose-first into the rocky cliff. They looked upwards and could not see the top of the cliff. They looked at each other and gulped.

"This isn't what I wished for Christmas," Charlie said.

"Me neither," Gemma said, close to tears. "What's going to happen to us?"

Charlie, Gemma and Skyler undid the seat belts and slowly bounced down the aisle to join their parents. Everyone talked quietly among themselves while the pilot radioed to Dome Kepler to report their emergency landing and requested assistance.

"I suppose we all just stay here and wait for help to arrive," Mr Angler told Charlie. "It shouldn't be long. There's nothing else we can..."

"Hey, I can see a cave in the cliff." It was Jacob, pointing out the window, all excited. "Can we go and explore? It'll be fun."

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Charlie, Gemma, Skyler, Zac and Jacob stood outside the gaping cave entrance. Mr Angler and Mr Stone were with them for safety. Their yellow, pink, white and pale blue space suits stood out against the bland brown and grey rocks and dust of the Moon's surface.

Groucho, their shuttle, stood less than fifty metres away. Its underbelly looked a bit battered and bruised but, thankfully, not broken or holed. They could see the long gauge marks behind the shuttle where it had skidded and skidded after it landed. They seemed to Charlie to go for a long way. Wow, she thought, we were lucky. An early Christmas present, she thought.

Unknown to her, her dad and Mr Stone had said the same thing on their private radio link.

"So let's go in," Jacob said. "What are we all waiting for?" He started to bounce towards the cave entrance.

"Wait," Mr Angler called out. "Let me check it out first."

"Aw Dad," Jacob said, "you're no fun."

"It could be dangerous," his dad said.

Charlie chipped in. "Dad, it's the Moon. There won't be any mountain lions..."

"... or bears..." Gemma added.

"... or giant spiders..." Charlie said.

"No, but there could be trolls," Skyler suggested.

Jacob stepped back quickly, suddenly nervous. "Trolls?"

"Oh Jacob... my hero," Skyler teased. "You're not afraid of a silly moon troll... are you?"

"M...m...moon troll?" Jacob took another step back.

Zac burst out laughing. "Jacob, Skyler's tricking you. There won't be any moon trolls in that cave."

"Oh... " Jacob started forward again. "I knew that," he lied.

"Yeah," Zac continued. "The moon dragons ate them all."

Jacob turned with a yelp and hid behind his father. "You first, Dad."

"Might be a good idea. I'm too big for a dragon to swallow." He walked towards the cave. "Stay there... just in case."

Mr Angler reached the large arch of the cave entrance. It was about three metre high and the same wide. It was very dark inside the cave. He turned on a torch and, after a quick look around, entered the darkness. After taking a few steps in, the torch went out. There was total blackness and Mr Angler was lost from the others' sight. Suddenly he cried out. "Aaahhh, a dragon. He's got me."

Jacob and the girls all screamed while Zac and Mr Stone laughed.

Mr Angler appeared at the cave entrance... in one piece. "It's alright. I scared it off." He waved them forward. "You can come in now. But don't tread on any dragon droppings. They'll stink the shuttle out."

"Very funny, Dad," Charlie said as she reached the cave's entrance. "Ha ha."

"I told you your dad was cool," Skyler said.

"Where are the dragon droppings?" Jacob said. "I don't see any."

"Hey, look at this," Charlie said. "It's great." She was standing near the cave's centre, slowly turning around with her arms wide. "It's like a big..."

"Cave?" Zac said.

"Very funny Zac. Yes, cave. But think about it. If this was closer to our Dome, it would make a great cubby house." Charlie pointed to the centre of the dusty floor where a large flat-top rock stood. "That would be our club table..."

"And what would this be?" Gemma was standing next to a rock in the cave's far corner. It was just under a metre long and half as wide and as high as Gemma's knee. In its middle was a large, smooth hollowed out section, like a bowl.

"That's weird," Zac said, crouching and running his gloved hand over the rock, feeling how smooth the hollow was. "Obviously volcanic," he said.

"Whatever," Skyler said. "Could be our cubby's bath tub," she suggested.

"What?" Gemma said. "Take a bath in your space suit? That would be fun."

"Couldn't do it," Zac said. "The water would boil off in the vacuum and..."

While the others ignored Zac and explored the rest of the cave, Charlie looked at the strange rock with the hollow centre. It reminded her of something. She just couldn't remember what. Maybe...

"Okay everyone, cave time is over. Back to the shuttle," Mr Angler announced.

"Aw dad," Jacob whined.

"Don't 'aw dad' me, young man. We have to find out how our rescue is coming along. Besides," Mr Angler, rubbed his tummy. "All that dragon fighting has given me an appetite."

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"What" Gemma said, open mouthed, stunned.

"You have got to be kidding me," Skyler said, hands on hips, her eyes rolling upwards in exasperation.

Charlie said nothing, but was close to tears and her bottom lip was slowly pushing out into 'Blip' mode.

Jacob just sat, bawling his eyes out.

Zac was the only one who didn't seem affected by the bad news. Not yet, anyway.

"I'm so sorry, kids," Greg, the pilot, said. "Domes Kepler and Plato confirm there are no spare shuttles available. The earliest that one can get here is around midday two days from now. Boxing Day."

"But... but..." Gemma said.

"Don't worry, we've got plenty of food and water to last till then," Ralph, the co-pilot, chipped in.

"It's not that," Gemma said. "If we stay here another day..."

"We'll miss Christmas," Skyler finished for her. "Tomorrow's Christmas Day." She turned to Mrs Snow who sat beside her, a sad look on her face. "Mummy, what will happen to Christmas dinner? We won't have the yummy turkey..."

“...or the scrumptious ham...” Gemma said.

“...or the delicious roast pork,” Charlie said.

“...and crackling...” Jacob said. Then he wailed “I want crackling.”

“... or the bonbons...” Gemma continued, ignoring Jacob

“...and the paper hats...” Skyler said.

“... and the terrible jokes...” Mr Angler added.

“... and the pudding... with custard...” Mr Stone joined in with a sigh. “Yum, pudding.”

“Now don’t you start,” Mrs Stone said, giving her husband a light punch on the shoulder. “As if the children aren’t bad enough.”

They all stopped and thought for a moment of the wonderful Christmas feast they had been going to enjoy with their friends at Dome Kepler. But not now.

Suddenly Charlie gasped. “Oh no. We won’t see Freda or Jenny for Christmas.”

There was a silent gasp from Zac as he realised the same thing. Now that was bad news.

The whole reason for going to Dome Kepler, to have Christmas with their new netball friends and families – dashed.

The children sat and sulked a while longer as their parents tried to cheer them up. But it was no good. So they did the next thing that parents do well. They sent the children to bed for a good night’s sleep. After all, Santa wouldn’t come if they all stayed awake, they said.

“But how is Santa going to find us here in this tiny shuttle hidden beside the mountains?” Jacob wailed, then started crying again.

“He’ll find us,” Mr Angler said, hugging Jacob. “He always does.”

So the children were all made comfortable in seats up near the front of the shuttle while the adults settled down the back. Near the storage area.

Soon, despite Charlie’s worries about Christmas Day, she and all her friends were asleep, dreaming of turkey... and ham... and pork... and crackling... and pudding ... and, of course, presents.

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Charlie squealed. “Look,” she called to her still sleepy friends. “A Christmas tree.”

“What’s that?” Gemma said, rubbing her eyes. “Did you say... oh, cool.” She had just seen the beautiful decorated tree at the end of the cabin, the star at the top just touching the ceiling.

“Wow, look at those lights,” Zac said, impressed by the flashing coloured globes hanging off the tree’s branches. “They must be drawing power from the shuttle’s...”

“Oh shut it, Einstein,” Skyler groaned. “Why can’t you just say ‘what beautiful lights?’”

“Well, okay, what beautiful lights.”

“Yes, they are,” Skyler agreed, “but I wonder where it’s getting the power from. Ouch,” she said, rubbing her shoulder where Zac had playfully punched her.

“Merry Christmas kids,” Mr and Mrs Angler said brightly, followed by the other parents and the pilots. The children all ran to their mums and dads and shared hugs and more ‘merry Christmas’ wishes.

It was then the Charlie and the others saw the wrapped presents sitting in a pile under the tree. “Wow,” she said. “Jacob, Santa did find us.”

“Yea,” Jacob cried and rushed to the pile to see which gift had his name on it.

“Not so fast,” Mrs Snow said. “First breakfast, then presents.”

“Aaaawww,” was the reply from all the kids.

“No aaawws,” Charlie’s mum said. “The faster you have breakfast, the faster we have presents.”

Breakfast was simply muesli bars and fruit juice squeezed from a tube, as the low gravity made it impossible to drink from a cup. Soon breakfast was done, teeth were cleaned and five giggling kids sat in front of the Christmas tree, eying off the brightly wrapped presents.

All the presents from Santa to Charlie, Gemma, Skyler, Jacob and Zac were under the tree. Also, the presents from the children to their parents. The giving and opening of all these wrapped parcels took a fun and thrill filled hour.

Charlie saw Greg and Ralph watching the goings on, then realised they hadn't got any anything. "Oh, you didn't get any presents from Santa?" she asked.

Greg, the pilot smiled. "Don't worry Charlie, I'm sure he dropped them off at Dome Kepler. We'll get them there tomorrow."

"Oh, good," Charlie said. Then she turned back to her lovely new toys. One included a beautiful life sized baby doll. It had such beautiful and realistic eyes. Though she was now ten years old, she still loved dolls.

She also got lots of books. Charlie loved to read and Santa must have read her hint list with books and more books on it.

Amongst his many toys, Jacob had got a 'Toy Story' action figures set. His favourite movie. Each figure was about twenty centimetres tall. There were over ten figures and Jacob was already setting them up to play a game with them.

Gemma, who liked to do craft work, had been given a new box of plasticine to help her practice her sculpture work.

Zac was very happy with his gifts and with one in particular. He reminded Charlie of a saying her dad sometimes used about people who were very happy with something. 'Like a pig in mud.' Charlie, living on the Moon, had never seen a pig in mud but she got the idea.

Zac's gift was an electronic robotics set. Lots of gadgets and widgets and wires and bits and pieces to let him make things that would move and do other things. Nerd heaven.

For the rest of the morning, the kids compared presents, played with each others' games and settled down quietly to read books or play with toys.

Then there was lunch. More shuttle rations – food bars and juices or water. No big Christmas feast that Christmas Day. Hopefully they would have that tomorrow at Dome Kepler.

After lunch, Greg arranged for a radio link to Dome Kepler so that Charlie and her friends could talk to Freda and Jenny to wish them a merry Christmas. Then Skyler was able to talk to her dad and Zac to his parents back in Dome Plato.

The pilot put some soft carol music on and they all settled back for a quiet Christmas afternoon... spent in a stranded moon shuttle in the shadow of a giant cliff in the Montes Carpatius.

Charlie was by herself for a while, reading one of her new books. These presents were very nice, and her parents had done everything they could, under the circumstances, to make it a happy Christmas. But something was missing, she thought. It just didn't ... feel... like Christmas. There should be something else, but she couldn't put her finger on it.

She looked out the window towards the mountain cliff and saw the dark maw of the cave they had explored earlier. She remembered the inside of the cave where her dad had pretended to be attacked by a dragon. Ha, as if.

In her mind, she re-explored the cave, picturing the pockmarked walls, the rough roof, the flat dusty floor, the large rocks on the floor... Then it struck her, so suddenly she sat upright like she'd been stung. The thing she had been trying to remember about that strange rock in the cave, the one with the bowl-like hollow on its top. It had reminded her of something but couldn't think of it at the time. But now she had it. Yes, she thought. That's it.

Quickly, Charlie got all the kids to come up with her to the front. "I have an idea of how to really make this a better Christmas," she whispered to them. She looked over Gemma's shoulder and saw hers and Gemma's mum looking at them with a 'what are you lot up to?' look on their faces. Charlie just smiled, waved to them, and put her head down again. "But we have to keep it a secret. Are you with me?"

The others all looked at each other, then shrugged. Anything to do something different, they thought. "What's your idea Charlie," Skyler asked.

So, leaning in closer, in a whisper, Charlie told them what she had in mind. When she had finished, she turned to Zac. "Do you think you can do it?"

Zac thought about it for a few seconds, then nodded. "Yes, I can. I know I can." He looked a bit smug. "In fact, after lunch, I was mucking about with my things and I think I've got the bit you want almost ready."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Skyler said, shaking her head.

"Great," Charlie said. "Zac, you go and do your thing. The rest, start getting your stuff together. I have to talk to my dad and the pilot." Charlie started down the aisle way. "Daddy, can I talk to you please?"

"Daddy? Uh oh, here's trouble," Mr Angler said to his wife. "What have you done, Charlie?"

Charlie put on her best hurt look. "Done? Nothing. No, really. We were just wondering if we'd be allowed to go back out into that cave."

"What? Out there? Why?"

"It's so boring stuck inside this silly shuttle Dad," Charlie said, then saw that the pilot had heard her. "No offense, Mr Thompson."

Greg Thompson smiled. "None taken, Miss Angler."

Charlie continued. "We thought we could take some of our Christmas presents out to the cave and play with them there. It would be fun... and different. And make up for the shuttle breaking down and not being at Dome Kepler with Jenny and Freda." She smiled at the pilot. "No offense again, Mr Thompson."

"None taken again," he replied, a huge grin on his face.

Charlie's dad looked closely at her, saw the other kids gathering some of their new toys, saw Zac busying himself with something behind the Christmas tree, then looked at Charlie's mum. "What do you think, dear?"

Mrs Angler turned to the pilot. "Would they be safe out there Greg?"

The pilot thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "I don't see why not. The cave is stable enough."

Charlie jumped a bit at Greg's words. Had he guessed? Then he gave her another shock. "Of course, an adult will have to go with them... just for safety."

"Okay, Charlie, you can go, but Mr Stone or myself will go with you," her dad said.

No, no, that will spoil everything, Charlie thought. Then she had an idea. "Can Mr Thompson go with us? He can fight off any trolls or dragons," she smiled.

"Trolls? Dragons?" The pilot scratched his head.

"It's a long story Greg," Mr Angler said. "Would you mind?"

The pilot laughed again. "Not at all. I'd like a chance to get out of this silly shuttle myself." He winked at Charlie, who blushed. "Just tell me when you're ready, okay?" He strolled up the aisle to chat with the co-pilot and collect his space suit while he waited.

"Thanks Dad," Charlie said, giving her father a big hug. "We'll be fine."

Mr Angler watched Charlie rejoin her friends after picking up her lovely new doll. He shook his head. "I don't know what they are up to, Lorna, but they're up to something."

Thirty minutes later, the parents and co-pilot watched as the five space suited children and pilot bounced their way from the shuttle's air lock across the short distance to the cave. Each of them was carrying a box of toys and a torch and the beams bounced around the inside of the cave until the small group was out of site.

"All okay, Greg?" the co-pilot asked over the radio.

"Everything fine, Ralph. No dragons. Tell the parents they can relax. Suggest they play a game or two of cards. We may be a while here. Out."

Inside the cave, Charlie signalled Mr Thompson to switch to a private line only he and the kids could hear. When he did, Charlie asked him if he could keep a secret.

"Is the Moon round?" he asked.

Then she told him what they planned to do and what they would like him to do.

When she had finished, he smiled. "I love it. Get to it."

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It was an hour later. The parents were starting to get a bit worried with their children out alone... well, not really alone as Greg Thompson was with them... on the Moon's surface inside that dark cave. Then the intercom crackled.

"Ralph, Greg here. Can you ask the parents if they can suit up and join us in the cave. Sorry, you'll have to stay there on duty and miss the fun."

"The parents?" Ralph replied. "What, all of them? What's up? Is everything okay?" He was watching the parents' concerned faces as they listened to the conversation.

"Like I said, everything is fine. The kids would just like their mums and dads over here. It's a surprise."

"A surprise?" Mrs Snow asked over Ralph's shoulder. "What kind of surprise?"

"Well, if I told you, Betty, it wouldn't be a surprise," Greg chuckled. "Would it?"

The parents all put their heads together for a moment, then they nodded.

"Ralph here, Greg. The mummies and daddies are coming out to play." He smiled at the others. "Have fun." Then he received a call on the pilot's private link. "It's me again Greg. What gives?" He listened for a while as Greg gave him some more instructions. "Well, that's different. Yes, I can do that. I'll get onto it and await your signal. Out."

Fifteen minutes later, the shuttle's external airlock opened and the five parents trooped down the steps onto the Moon's surface. Single file, they bounced their way over to the cave's entrance. They were met by the pilot.

"Can you put your radio links to public so everyone here can hear everyone else? OK? Thanks." He made an exaggerated welcoming gesture, ushering them into the cave. "Behold," he announced.

The parents stepped deep inside the cave until they reached the flat rock in the centre. Then they stopped and stared. What is this?

Charlie and Jacob were standing against the wall on the left, while Gemma, Skyler and Zac stood against the wall on the right. They were all smiling but said nothing.

What held the parents' stare was the funny hollowed rock snuggled against the back wall. Gathered around the rock were three small groups of dolls. Each group had a stick near them, wedged in the ground and each stick had a small handwritten sign.

Fascinated, the parents moved closer to read the signs.

On one side they saw Jacob's Toy Story action figures facing towards the rock: Buzz Lightyear, Mr Potato Head and Rocky Gibraltar with the sign saying 'Three Wise Men.'

On the other side they saw more action figures: Hamm, Rex the dinosaur and Slinky Dog with the sign 'The Sheep.' Besides them was Little Bo Peep, as the shepherd. The parents chuckled. Funny sheep.

Behind the rock stood two more action figures with a sign. It was Jessie and Woody, who were supposed to be Mary and Joseph.

As they read all this, the parents smiled and pointed. Then they looked more closely at what was in the middle of the rock, lying on straw (which was actually shredded gift wrapping paper). It was Charlie's new baby doll, wrapped in a checked tea towel but with its arms free. However, there was something different about the baby's head.

It wasn't the same face that Santa had given the doll. It seemed bigger, with larger eyes and a slightly larger mouth. Mrs Angler knew that because ... she had helped Santa pick it out. And it had a sort of soft smooth pink skin, almost like... plasticine.

The baby lay there, its eyes and mouth closed, as if asleep.

Mrs Angler took it all in and nodded. She turned to Charlie who pointed up. All the parents followed her pointing hand and saw, hanging from the ceiling by a wire, the silver star that Mrs Snow had noticed missing from the tree earlier in the afternoon.

Then Charlie nodded to Mr Thompson who whispered something over his private link. On cue, over the public link, came the music of an organ and a small choir, singing:

Silent night, holy night
all is calm, all is bright,
round yon virgin mother and child,
holy infant so tender and mild,
sleep in heavenly peace,
sleep in heavenly peace.

At that moment, the tiny chest of the baby under the tea towel started to move up and down, as if breathing. The mothers' eyes popped open wide. The singing continued.

Silent night, holy night:

Shepherds quake at the sight;

Little Bo peep started wobbling at this point and Mrs Snow oohed.

Glories stream from heaven afar,

Heavenly hosts sing, 'Alleluia!

Christ the Saviour is born,

Christ the Saviour is born.'

Silent night, holy night:

Wondrous star, lend us your light:

The suspended star suddenly lit up, to a gasp of delight from the parents.

With the angels let us sing

Alleluia to our King;

Christ our Saviour is born,

Christ our Saviour is born.

As the song, being played by Ralph on the shuttle, started again, Charlie and Jacob moved to join their parents, Gemma went to hers, Skyler to her mum and they held their hands. Zac strolled across to Mr Thompson who patted him on the shoulder, then nodded.

As the group gazed at the miraculous nativity scene the children had created, Zac pressed one last button on his robotics controller. To the parents' amazement, the baby doll opened its bright blue eyes, raised both its arms towards them, then opened and closed its mouth as if talking. On cue, Ralph's voice came over the radio link:

"Merry Christmas to all, and God bless us, everyone."

Charlie snuck a look at her parents' faces. They both had tears in their eyes as they gripped their childrens' hands harder.

Charlie smiled, knowing they had done a good thing.

Now it really felt like Christmas.

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