

Chapter 1

First Encounters

On a hill beside Berrywood Lane stood a tree that wished above all else to see the world and explore its many natural wonders.

Which was unfortunate.

It was a tree.

But despite the tree's nature as a stationary being, Tree—for that was their name—held to the hope that they would, one day, achieve their dream. Other creatures could move, after all. Why should Tree be any different?

And though there are numerous perfectly reasonable answers to that question, in the cozy days of Tree's fiftieth summer, that wish took its first bold step toward reality.

Then it took several more steps, picked up the pace, and started to get away from itself.

It began with a boy named Gilbert.

Gilbert was on the prowl for a decent spot to crack into the long-overdue sixth rereading of his favorite fantasy trilogy, complete with elves, dwarves, wizards, rings, and frightening copyright implications. Only a few weeks remained of summer, and he hoped to finish all three books before his senior year.

It had been a warm few months, but today's breeze was ample and cool, and Gilbert was happy to take advantage of Tree's shade. With his back to

Tree's bark and his book in hand, he savored the weather before digging in to the story.

Then the world began to shake.

For quite some time, all Gilbert could manage was a weak, confused mutter. Then, after standing up and failing to identify the source of the growing rumble, he asked a question to no one in particular.

"What on earth is happening?"

Tree had a similar question and was pleased to hear Gilbert was on the same page.

Gilbert scanned the ground for clues but found none. After one particularly zealous quake, he dropped his book, bent to pick it up, and—

Crack!

The sound was almost an echo, disguised among the splintering tremors of the atmosphere, but it had power. It wrenched Gilbert up and forced him to stand, arms raised, tense and horribly rigid. His feet touched the ground but held far less weight than usual. By the feel of things, his fingers were picking up the slack, stretched, pulling him upward.

Crack!

This one was louder, piercing the air like thunder. Gilbert's hair stood on end, ready to tear out entirely. A twisting pain crept through the bottom of his feet into his ankles and legs. Gilbert remained impossibly, unwillingly still. There was nobody nearby, but he cried for help nonetheless.

The third crack came with vigor. It smashed against the inside of Gilbert's skull like a war hammer. Again and again, the sound returned, each pulse louder and harder than before, until finally, Gilbert collapsed.

He found no ground to land on.

His body writhed in a tortured blur as pain turned to panic. The world he knew melted away, an endless torrent of dripping color. Then there was darkness.

He joined it.

Gilbert's body crumbled, and all sensation fled into the emptiness around him. Soon, nothing remained but his unseeing consciousness, and even that seemed at risk of dissolving into the soulless black.

And then it was over, and Gilbert was sitting perfectly still on a cold metal floor, completely unharmed, in a round room he had never seen before in his life.

He had several important questions at that moment but no satisfactory way to articulate a single one of them.

"Woo-hoo!" came the voice of an old man.

Gilbert looked up. The speaker was one of the two figures standing on a stage by the opposite wall. He had dark skin, white hair, and a gray beard that brushed the floor. His nose hooked downward and came to a point just above the excited grin that dominated most of his face. He wore white gloves, turquoise shoes, and a lengthy robe that looked, for all intents and purposes, like a rainbow turned dressing gown. "Can you believe it?" He turned to his partner and jumped. "Only six tries!"

"Brilliant work, Professor!" said the second man. He was vaguely spherical, about half the height of his companion, and by the looks of it, half the age as well. His robe was dark blue with small flecks of white, and his gloves were murky gray. He had wavy black hair, which he had done his best to comb, and a pair of massive glasses only slightly larger than the rest of his face. "Where did the tree come from?"

Gilbert looked up.

Tree had come along too.

"I don't know," said the elder man, curious. "It certainly isn't a wodowood. Seems more like an ash to me. But never mind that. Look at the boy! The Hero! We've done it!"

Gilbert turned away. Those two people definitely should not exist. This whole *place* should not exist. Doing his best to ignore that fact, he tried to figure out where he was. He was supposed to be on a hill. He knew

that much. This room...this room was strange. The floor was red metal, laced with concentric golden circles that sparkled in the sunlight from two windows near the ceiling. The walls were made of brick. The impossible people, on their impossible stage, stood before a mahogany podium, which held a massive brown tome. Behind them, a bookshelf overflowed with loose papers and parchment.

None of it made any sense. Gilbert didn't feel as though he'd lost his mind. He felt as if he'd shredded it, then lost whatever pieces remained.

"He's very quiet," said the old man. "Do you think he can understand us?"

The younger man shrugged and turned to Gilbert. "HELLO! CAN. YOU. HEAR. WHAT. I. AM. SAYING?"

Gilbert, who was still trying to re-collect his metaphorical brain matter, didn't respond.

"I suppose not," the younger concluded.

"Such a shame," said the elder. "Just imagine what wisdom, what magnificent intellect, must be trapped deep in that brilliant mind."

Gilbert blinked.

"A surprising oversight, I must say," continued the elder. "What language do they speak in Land Turmentarp?"

"The same as us, I thought, but I've never been. We'll have to ask Toddleposter."

"Perhaps tomorrow, then. In the meantime, maybe hand gestures?"

Both of them looked at their gloved hands, evidently considering how to proceed, until finally, despite his considerable bafflement, Gilbert spoke.

"Um..." he said, and then, after a pause, "Who are you? And where am I?"

The two men jumped back.

"Would you look at that!" The elder beamed.

The younger wiggled his glasses. “He cannot understand our language, yet he speaks it so fluently!”

“What? No. I was...I can...uh...” Gilbert paused. With every word he spoke, the old man leaned farther and farther forward. His beard now dangled off the edge of the stage and brushed the ground below.

“Well”—the elder stood up again—“*fluent* may be a strong word, but all the same, it is a fascinating phenomenon. I wonder if—”

“I can understand you,” said Gilbert.

The elder stopped. “Oh? Why didn’t you say so earlier?”

“I was confused. I still am. Where am I? And who are you?”

“Ah, yes. Introductions! I am Mardulo Vot Ponterous the Brilliant.” The old man flourished and bowed. “The young man next to me is my pupil, Bundersquash Borum Balbagoose the Studious.”

Gilbert shook his head. It was still a little fuzzy. “Come again?”

“I am Mardulo Vot Ponterous the Brilliant,” he said more loudly. “The young man next to me is my pupil, Bundersquash Borum Balbagoose the Studious. And you,” he continued, “must be Pottleswee Plugg Thudigarde the Brave!”

Tree, had anyone bothered to ask, would have gladly introduced themselves as “Tree.”

“I’m Pottle...huh?” Gilbert was beginning to think he should call for help, but he’d left his phone at home.

“Goodness me, you are a tad hard of hearing, aren’t you?” said Mardulo.

“Indeed, that would seem to be the case,” Bundersquash agreed.

Gilbert stood. “My name is Gilbert.”

Mardulo hesitated. “Come again?”

“My name is Gilbert Betters. Where am I?”

“Blast!” Mardulo huffed poignantly. “So, it hasn’t worked after all.”

“Excuse me?” said Gilbert.

“We’ll have to try again, I suppose.” Mardulo riffled through the tome on the podium.

“We’ll need more worm tusks,” said Bundersquash. “Maybell closed early for the festival. Perhaps tomorrow?”

Mardulo sighed. “Yes, all right. I suppose one evening’s delay won’t kill anyone. Well, probably not...what do we do with him?” He waved at Gilbert.

“I suppose we’ll have to send him home,” said Bundersquash. “And the tree, for that matter. Workshop maintenance won’t be happy about that.”

“Where are you from, Giggiebrit?”

“Gilbert,” Gilbert corrected.

The old man scrunched his brow. “You’re from Gilbert?”

“No. My *name* is Gilbert.”

Mardulo chuckled sympathetically. “The poor fellow thinks we’re still on introductions.”

Gilbert decided there were more pressing issues at hand—like getting home and, with any luck, far away from these two. He rolled his eyes and answered their question.

“Maystown, Nebraska.”

Mardulo and Bundersquash looked at him patiently. Gilbert frowned, unsure how much more information they needed. “Um...the United States?” No response. “Earth?” he finished lamely.

“Who is that?” asked Mardulo.

“What?”

“Earth. Who is Earth?” Mardulo spoke up.

“It’s a place. My home.”

“Your who, now?”

“Where I am from. Earth. You know, the Milky Way?”

“Never heard of Earth,” said Bundersquash.

“Perhaps he means Evreth? Do you mean Evreth?”

“No! I mean Earth! Maystown, Nebraska—just outside of Lincoln.”

“Who is Maystown?”

“I have a friend named Maistowne,” said Bundersquash. “Perhaps her?”

“What does she have to do with anything?” Mardulo scratched his head.

“Maybe she knows who Earth is. Would you like me to fetch Maistowne for you, Gigglebrit?”

Gilbert opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. He was at a total loss. Was this some kind of dream? It had to be. More than likely, he’d simply fallen asleep atop that hill. He pinched himself. Nothing happened.

“Gigglebrit?” said Bundersquash. “Would you like me to fetch Maistowne?”

“Er, no...” said Gilbert, and then, “Where’s the exit?”

“It’s the hatch, just over there.” Bundersquash pointed to a small handle in the floor, next to a bunch of Tree’s roots. “Careful on the way down. It can be tricky.”

Gilbert lifted the handle. A wooden ladder dropped almost twenty stories straight down into a bare stone tunnel. The air below was cool and still. A pale light illuminated the colorless landing. It smelled musty.

With a flicker of doubt, Gilbert looked at the two men onstage, then the unbalanced ladder below. He did a quick calculation of risk...and began his descent.

“Now hold on just one minute, Gigglebrit,” said Mardulo. It was a kind request, not forceful, but Gilbert obeyed.

“Yes?” he inquired, his head poking up from the floor.

“We have to get you home!” Mardulo turned to the bookcase. “I’m sure we have a spell in here somewhere.”

Bundersquash came down from the stage and helped Gilbert back up.

“Returning to Evreth, yes?”

“No, Earth. Preferably Nebraska, please. But hang on a second...” Curiosity was beginning to get the better of him. As ridiculous as these people

were, there *was* a certain element of magic about them, and something must have brought him to this room.

Gilbert had always wished for a real world of magic and wizardry. If there was ever a time to believe, this may as well be it.

He faced Mardulo. "Did you say *spell*?"

"Yes. Spell. Don't worry, nothing too painful...well, I suppose I can't promise that, but people generally survive these things." He thought for a moment. "This one shouldn't kill anything, anyway." He continued with reinvigorated confidence. "Now, here we are! Third-Party Teleport to Evreth! Come, come, Gigglebrit. You'll have to hold my hand. Bunder-squash can say the words. Mind the branches."

"I am not from Evreth." Gilbert enunciated as clearly as possible. "I am from *Earth*."

Bundersquash looked at him. "And where is Earth?"

A wave of relief washed over Gilbert. It was a small victory, but he had to take what he could get.

Of course, he also had to answer the question.

"Um," he hesitated. "In space?"

Gilbert grimaced at the absurdity of his own answer, but the others didn't seem fazed. In fact, they came alight with excitement and headed to the bookshelf, blabbering away. They scanned through book after book, tossing them aside one by one.

"Does the interplanar void count as space?" Bundersquash held up a book four sizes too big and several shades blacker than darkness.

"Hmm..." Mardulo stroked his beard. "That is a good question. Do take note of it. I think it could make an exciting paper. A good candidate for the Sugwater Symposium next year! Assuming we can wrap up this Hobblebosh business."

"Oh, that would be lovely!" Bundersquash bounced to his feet, grabbed a feather quill from inside his robe, then scribbled in the air. A parchment

materialized in front of him. The quill strokes grazed its surface in gentle, fire-red streaks that glowed hot for a moment before fading to an ashen gray.

Gilbert jumped, jaw unhinged. Magic! That was *actual magic*! He'd seen it with his own two eyes.

Tree panicked. Fire! That was fire!

"Excuse me," Gilbert blurted. "How did you do that?"

"Do what?" Bundersquash stopped writing and faced Gilbert. The parchment disappeared as he turned away.

Tree relaxed.

"The thing. With the quill. The magic!"

"Oh, this?" He held it up, grinning, clearly eager to discuss his work. "It's my own creation, actually! I use a tethering spell to link it to some parchment in my workspace, then use the writing motion as an activation sequence. Not complicated once you sort out the appropriate application of Balsog's Association Mechanism."

The elder wizard looked at his student with a touch of pride. "It was the very project that allowed him to graduate from Advanced Wizardry Intelligence Training and become my very own pupil."

Bundersquash blushed.

"Can I try?" asked Gilbert.

The two looked at him, then each other, then shrugged.

"I don't see why not..." said Bundersquash, offering the quill.

In a motion to rival that of an off-balance kangaroo, Gilbert tripped over several roots, floundered onto the stage, and almost rammed full speed into the wizards. His hand jittered as he grabbed the quill and started to write.

"Okay. It may be a little difficult to get—" Bundersquash stopped short. Gilbert was already scribbling away. In seconds, the parchment materialized. The quill's strokes released the same fiery figures Gilbert had seen before.

“Or not...” Bundersquash recovered.

“A true natural!” said Mardulo.

But Gilbert wasn’t listening. Up close, he saw lavender sparks sear the page as the quill passed across its surface, leaving red-hot streaks in its wake.

Hello. Hi. Words and stuff. Oh wow it’s actually working! This is so cool! I’m doing magic! Real magic! No one is ever going to believe this back home! But who even cares?! Wow! THIS IS AMAZING!!

And then, as the letters cooled, Gilbert noticed they were shifting. The enchantment was attempting to correct his words, make his handwriting neater, and enforce a rigorous spelling-and-grammar-correction scheme! It even inserted a comma.

“How do you do the letter-shift thing?!” Gilbert shouted at Bundersquash.

“That is a fantastic question!” Bundersquash’s voice rose to match Gilbert’s. If he wasn’t excited before, he certainly was now. “It’s actually unrelated to the quill. It’s on the parchment! One of Mardulo’s enchantments. He calls it the Writing Auto-Intelligence Charm. Brilliant, brilliant work, if I do say so myself—and I do. I’ve been studying the topic and hope to apply a similar principle in my own project, improving the speech-interpretation module of my real-time voice-to-illustration device.”

Mardulo shook his head. “I keep telling Bundersquash my charm isn’t sophisticated enough to handle the structural variations common in vocal input, but he refuses to listen.”

“Nonsense, Professor. You underestimate your own spellwork. The initial trials were hopeful! Here, Giggiebrit, read this if you’re interested. It’s truly fascinating stuff.”

He handed Gilbert a book with a solid forest-green cover and a title written in silver letters: *From the Ablative to Zeugma: A Complete Dissection of Language and Literacy*.

Gilbert, who knew nothing of ablatives nor zeugmas, thanked Bunder-squash, nonetheless. He had never been one for studying languages, but perhaps he could make an exception, just this once.

The wizards turned back to the bookshelf.

“You know,” said Gilbert, “I don’t have to return home straightaway. I don’t want to be a burden, and if there are spells and things here...well, I’d be happy to stay for a while.”

“Not to worry,” said Mardulo. “We can’t summon Pottleswee until tomorrow anyway. We’ll have you home in a jiffy. Now, where were we? Ah, yes. Portal to Evreth! Tell me, are you particularly attached to those clothes?”