

The Madagascar Tree

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The Madagascar Tree

by [Kingtide](#)

Summary

This is a sequel to my story, “The Second Star to the Right.”

Will is back on Earth, with no memory of who he is, while his family is trying to figure out if there is way to reunite with him. And in a story within a story, I put a slightly darker twist on the infamous (or famous, depending on how you like your sci-fi) S3 episode, The Great Vegetable Rebellion.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Chapter 1

“Nights through dreams, tell the myths forgotten by the day.”

- Carl Jung

The Robinsons were gathered around the console on the flight deck, watching the Space Pod disappear into the wormhole, carrying Will away.

“Hang on!” Don shouted. “We’re being pulled in.”

“Hitting full thrusters!” John yelled.

The family was thrown to the rear of the flight deck as the Jupiter fought the gravity of the wormhole. Robot rolled back into the astrogator, spun off and crashed into Dr. Smith who screamed in a high pitched voice. Smith had found the best way to quickly slip back into character was with a panic stricken scream. And after his calm, decisive instructions they all had witnessed as he directed Will in the steps the boy needed to take to save his life, not to mention telling Don to shut the fuck up and sit back down, Smith thought he might need to re-balance the foundation of their relationship. Be the coward. Always the coward. This was his mantra. This was his secret to survival.

Maureen was holding on to Penny while gripping the semi-circular railing of the elevator. Judy was holding on to the ladder rungs with both hands as John and Don struggled with the spaceship.

Finally, the Jupiter 2 circled the outer edge of the wormhole, the ship turning around and around as the centrifugal force spun it counter clockwise. John looked through the glass into the center of the vortex as they spun by. The Space Pod was gone, and inside it looked as if it were the center of a cyclone, sucking up anything close enough to be caught into the gravitational pull. For half a heartbeat, the scientist overtook the protective father in him, and he wondered at the technology they had designed to do what he thought was impossible.

Finally the ship was on the other side and leveling out. Doctor Smith made the mistake of being the first to talk. “I commend your piloting skills, Major West,” he said.

John was out of his seat and on Smith before anyone knew what was happening. His first punch glanced off Smith’s head as the Doctor turned to deflect the power of it. Smith slipped a left hook then realized he was showing his cards. Something he could never do. He steeled himself and took the next one between the eyes and was lifted in the air and knocked a meter

across the deck. The last thing he thought before blacking out was, this job never paid enough.

Don and Maureen and the girls pulled John off Doctor Smith before any significant damage could be done. John's face was red, his fists doubled up as he stood over the unconscious doctor. "John, it's okay," Maureen said. "It's okay."

Don was holding his arms, as Maureen and Judy pushed on his chest. John looked around at his family. He was embarrassed for just a second. He seldom lost it. But he could still hear his son's final words, "Goodbye everyone," as the boy choked on tears while he was pulled into the wormhole, leaving his family behind. For all his comforting words to Will, telling him they would find a way to get him back, John was certain he would never see his son again. And he knew he would never forget those final words, "Goodbye everyone." And for just a few seconds, for everything they had put up with from Smith for the last four years, nothing felt better than his fist hitting the man between the eyes.

But now he knew it was time to control himself. There were decisions to be made. "I'm fine," he said, "I'm fine." They could feel him calm down as his shoulders relaxed.

John turned and looked out the window at the empty space ahead of them.

"What do you think, Doc?" Don asked.

John stood for a few seconds without answering. He had no idea how to go about getting Will back. The Jupiter 2 would never make it through the wormhole, and he didn't understand the science behind it anyway. He couldn't risk taking the rest of the family into it, even if there was a way.

"We have to go back to the planet," Penny said.

They all turned and looked at her. "It's our only chance to get Will back," She added. "They created this. They have to help us."

"But Penny, they caused this," Don said. "Everything that happened."

"Yes. But they aren't bad people," She replied. "They're just...lost...like Will said."

"Lost?" Judy asked.

"Yes. Will said we had been lost for four years, but we're lucky because we have each other. I knew what he meant. We're going to Alpha Centauri. Starting a new life. Even just looking for Alpha Centauri gives us a purpose. But what do they have? They live forever. They have nowhere to go. The only thing keeping them going is the hope that someday they can be normal. They have to help us figure out a way to get Will back. Marti will help. She likes Will. They like each other. She's a good person."

"I don't know if Penny's right," John said, "But we don't have many choices. Let's turn around Don. But first let's get Smith to his room. And he's not leaving it." He turned and looked at Robot. "You're to be on guard outside his door at all times."

“Yes, Professor Robinson,” Robot said.

While John and Don dragged Dr. Smith to the elevator, Judy watched Penny turn and walk to the ladder and climb down it without another word. She waited a while, then went down to the lower deck and stopped outside her sister’s room. She started to knock, but then she heard Penny crying.

She paused, thought about giving her some time, then called, “Penny?”

She heard Penny’s cries stop. Then her voice, “yes.”

“You okay?” Judy asked.

When there was no answer, Judy pushed the folding door open a crack and said, “Can I come in Penny?”

There were a few seconds of silence, then Penny said, “Yes.”

Judy walked in and saw Penny was lying face down on her bed, her face in her pillow. Judy walked over and sat on the bed beside her sister and put her hand on her shoulder. Penny had started crying again and Judy didn’t say anything for a few minutes, she just kept her hand on her and gave her time.

Neither girl heard Maureen when she came to the door. Their mother started to go in the room, but when she saw Judy there, sitting next to Penny with her hand on her sister’s shoulder, Maureen stopped and backed away. They’re getting older, she thought. And they will be able to take care of each other if they need to. She walked back to her room where she knew John was.

Finally Penny had stopped crying. Her head was still in her pillow and she was sniffing. She turned over slowly and looked up at her sister. “He told me I was his best friend.”

Judy just looked at her for a second. “You are his best friend, Penny.”

“No. I haven’t been. I’ve been horrible to him.”

“Penny...”

“It’s true, Judy. When we were younger we were so close. We did everything together. But not lately. Not for a few years.”

“But Penny, it’s normal. Kids go through changes and drift apart.”

“But I know what happened. I got older. I thought of boys and all of that before he was thinking of girls and things other than playing chess and stuff. And we started getting further apart. But when I started going through that, you were there. And we became close. But then when Will started getting older, I noticed he was different. He was changing. It was just little things at first. Like if he was going to the galley he asked if I wanted anything. And he would just ask me what I was reading sometimes. Even if he wasn’t interested, he just wanted to talk to me. Be friends, I guess. But I always blew him off. I didn’t really need that, because I had you. To me he was still an eleven year old boy. Kind of annoying. But he wasn’t anymore. He was thirteen and then fourteen, dealing with all the shit I went through at that age.”

“Penny...”

“I just need you to listen to me right now, okay?”

“Okay, Penny.” Judy knew she was right. She needed to talk.

“I wanted to stay on the planet, Judy. It wasn’t like you, when whatever they gave you made you forget us completely. I knew who you were. Who my family was. Who Will was. I mean, my mind wasn’t completely clear, but I still knew who everyone was. And still I would have stayed. But Will came and found me. And when I told him I wasn’t leaving he said he would stay with me. That eventually, when all the new wore off, I would need my family, and they would be gone. But he would be there. Even if it was just the two of us.”

Now she started crying again, and Judy almost lost it too. She rubbed Penny’s arm to comfort her, but she didn’t say anything. She knew Penny wasn’t done talking.

“He did that, Judy. He came after me, knowing that you were leaving and he might be left behind, and then when I refused to go, he said he was going to stay. If he hadn’t done that he would be here safe with his family. And I would still be on the planet. But he would be right. Eventually I would have wanted my family and they wouldn’t be there. But Will stopped all that. When we were there and I was refusing to leave, he told me I was his best friend. And all I could think was, I hadn’t been his friend at all in a long, long time.”

She paused and wiped her eyes and Judy took a tissue from a box on the bed stand and handed it to her.

“But to Will I was still his best friend. He never forgot how we were when we were younger, even though I did. And he said he missed that. I was so terrible to him, Judy.” She looked up at the ceiling. “And now he’s gone.” Then she was crying again.

After a while she stopped and just looked at the ceiling.

Judy finally felt her sister had gotten enough of it off her chest. “Penny, its normal to regret things, but I haven’t been a good sister either. We’re girls...with everything that goes with that. So it’s a little harder for us to think about what Will was going through, but now as you talk about it, I can think of so many things I could have done better. I mean, I had so many friends when I was his age. And we talked about everything. Me and my friends. Everyone mentions *the talk* you’re supposed to have with your parents, but is that even a thing

anymore? I mean, I heard everything from my friends. And you have always had me. But Will had Doctor Smith and Robot.

“I mean, Dad is great, but I just can’t imagine Will wanting to discuss *feelings* with him.” Both girls laughed. “And Will could talk to mom about anything, but she’s still his mother, you know?”

“Yeah,” Penny said.

Judy was quiet for a few minutes. Finally she said, “You know, I thought I was going to come in here and cheer you up, but now I just feel guilty.” Penny could see the sadness in her eyes.

“I’m sorry Judy. You’re a great sister. I didn’t mean to drag you into my drama.”

“I think that’s the problem. I think we need to look at it differently. You’re worried about *your* drama. Like its your’s and your’s alone. But it isn’t. You and I have been going along like we are still back on Earth. But we aren’t. We need to take care of each other. You and me and Will. I think Will started seeing that the last couple years as he got older. Maybe he was actually maturing faster than either of us did at his age. Which makes sense. He was barely ten years old when we left Earth. He had to mature faster than either of us did at that age.”

“I did think Will had a problem with you the last year,” Penny said. “He didn’t seem to want to be around you much. And when he was he seemed like he was mad at you a lot. Did you notice that?”

“Yeah, but I understood. He’s getting older and dealing with growing pains. I think he was a little jealous that you and I got closer.”

Judy didn’t tell her what she really thought. That what had happened to her and Will on a strange planet they had landed on the year before had affected him deeply. And that her brother blamed himself and this was his way of dealing with it. “Let’s get him back then promise each other we will do better,” she said. “We’ll take care of each other. The three of us.”

She leaned over and hugged her sister. When she rose up, Penny smiled. “Thanks Judy. You really helped me.”

Judy stood. “I’m going up to the flight deck. You going to be Okay?”

“Yeah. We *are* going to find Will aren’t we?”

“Yes,” Judy said, firmly. She smiled and walked out.

“John, you alright?” Maureen asked, as she entered their cabin. Her husband was sitting at the desk. It looked like he was just thinking.

“Yeah, Maureen. I’m sorry. I kind of lost it there with Doctor Smith.”

“No need to apologize, he’s been asking for that. I think you surprised him.”

“You know Maureen, he sort of surprised me too. I’ve been in a few fights in my life, and I could swear Smith knew what he was doing.”

“Well, he didn’t know it very well, the way you knocked him out.”

“Maybe. But when I threw the first punch I was going to stop there, until it glanced off him. And for a second I thought it was just a bad punch, but he completely slipped the next one. I mean, he was standing there with his hands at his sides, not raising them to protect himself, and I threw two punches at him that didn’t even really touch him. I don’t remember that ever happening.”

“Well, three’s a charm,” Maureen said.

“Yeah...but. I could have sworn he just took it. He acted like he was so surprised the first two didn’t land that he just stood there looking at me half a second too long. But I saw him close his eyes, preparing to take the hit. I think maybe he knows a bit more about how to fight than we give him credit for. Maybe the good doctor is a little more than we think he is.”

“What would that mean, John?”

“If we spent almost four years completely convinced he is a coward, only to find out he isn’t...it would make him a very dangerous man.”

Chapter 2

“I just want to be left alone.” Will turned on his stomach and pulled the pillow over his head and squeezed it against his ears.

It didn’t work.

“You are misunderstood aren’t you?” The voice filled his cabin. A Deep, male voice, echoing as if the two of them were in a closet. “The others do not appreciate you, do they?”

“Go away!” Will yelled into his mattress.

“What do you want?” The voice boomed.

“I just want to be left alone!”

Now there was silence. Will loosened the grip on his pillow and listened quietly. He thought maybe it had gone away. But he also thought he could be dreaming. Usually he knew when he was dreaming these days, but this time he didn't.

“Very well,” the voice echoed. “Your wish is granted.” Then it grew silent.

Will waited. Waited. Nothing. He took the pillow from his head and rolled over. “What was that?” He said. He laid there in the dark, breathing hard. But whatever it was seemed to be gone. “It had to be a dream.” I better see if anyone else heard it, he thought. Just in case it wasn’t a dream.

He climbed out of bed and left his room. Penny’s cabin was a few meters away. He walked over, knocked quietly on the wall next to the folding door. “Penny,” he whispered. He didn’t want to wake everyone, though he wasn’t sure how late it was. He had been relegated to his room after dinner because he had failed his history test.

When Penny didn’t answer he opened her door a crack and peeked in, but the room was empty, and her bed had not been slept in. Guess it isn’t that late, he thought.

He walked to Dr. Smith’s room and called his name a few times and when there was no answer he pushed the door open and looked in. It was also empty.

None of the family were in their rooms. He walked down to the Galley. This is where he had seen everyone last, but it was empty too. Weird, he thought. He didn't think it had been that long since dinner and the adults normally hung out a while and drank coffee and talked after eating.

He walked over to the elevator and pressed the button. When it reached the flight deck he thought that was empty too, but then he saw the back of Judy’s head. She was sitting by herself in the co-pilot’s chair.

“Judy! Where is everyone?” he said as he stepped off the elevator. He hurried toward her. “I checked everyone’s room and they aren’t in the Galley or anywhere.”

He had walked up behind her now and she still hadn’t answered or even acknowledged his presence.

“Judy?”

Then she spun her chair around and was looking up at him. “Aren’t you supposed to be in your room?” She asked.

“Yeah but...”

Suddenly she stood and grabbed him by his biceps and leaned into his face, “Then get back there!”

“Judy! You’re hurting me.” He said.

She let his arms go and he rubbed his biceps where her thumbs had been pushing into them.

“Go back to your room. *Now!*” This time she yelled it. Her eyes were flashing red and she seemed furious.

Will sat straight up in bed. His heart was pounding. He was sweating. He just sat there shaking. What was that? He couldn’t remember what he had been dreaming. But something had frightened him. Terribly.

He looked around the room. The only light was from the alarm clock. Three AM. He glanced at the small window in the door. He couldn’t see anyone, but he knew there was a guard out there. Maybe more than one.

They had moved him here almost three weeks ago. He had been in the Naval hospital in San Diego for several days after they pulled him from the ocean where the Pod had splashed down. When they moved him, they had taken him downstairs to a parking garage, put him in a black SUV with a driver and an armed guard in the front seat, and a guard on his left and right. When the SUV backed out of its parking space, he saw a dozen vehicles just like it pull out. Several of them drove ahead of the one Will was in, the rest followed it.

He wasn’t sure why all of the security until the SUV drove up the ramp into the daylight. There were police cars everywhere, news vans, reporters with camera teams aligning both sides of the street leading into the hospital. And hundreds of people. Maybe thousands. A lot of them held homemade signs. He read some of them as they drove past the crowds.

Most were nice:

“Welcome Back Will Robinson!”

“There’s No Place Like Home!”

Some weren't:

"Will Robinson is an alien!"

"What did you do to your family???"

And at least one was clever, he thought:

"Free-Will!"

"How does it feel to be a celebrity?" The guard to his right asked. Will didn't answer. He didn't know how it felt. The woman had told him what had happened to him, but he couldn't remember anything, so this was all just part of the same lucid dream he was stuck in as far as he could tell.

He was put on a private plane that was in the air for four hours, and when he landed, another black SUV was waiting for him with another convoy. This time there were no crowds. No one knew where they had taken him.

When he was first admitted to the hospital in San Diego they had spent days evaluating his physical and psychological condition. And in the new hospital they repeated the same tests at first. But now they mainly tried to get him to talk. He had spoken briefly when the woman first came to see him. Dr. Gaston. But then he stopped. He didn't trust her. He didn't trust any of them. So he just stopped talking.

He could remember how he got to Earth. The Space Pod and the containment device that had kept him alive. He could remember the people on the planet where he had come from. Not everything. He couldn't remember their names. But he remembered there was a girl there. He liked her. She was pretty and she was nice to him. He remembered that. And something told him if he told Dr. Gaston about her, about the planet, she might harm the girl. He didn't know why, but he believed that. So for three weeks he had just stopped talking.

He laid back down. He was no longer shaking. Part of him wanted to forget his dream. Something had frightened him. But when he was dreaming, he remembered his family. He could tell because when he awoke, he was so close to seeing their faces. Though within seconds it was a blank slate. But he thought if he could just dream and keep dreaming long enough it would all come back. So it was worth the occasional nightmare. Because right now he was alone. And that was the worst feeling in the world.

He closed his eyes. Maybe if he went back to sleep he would dream again, and it would be better.

He breathed slowly, trying to remember what it was that had scared him. Then he remembered. It was Judy. His big sister. She had grabbed him and yelled at him and actually hurt him where she gripped his arms so tightly.

She had never done that before. She was always bossy and usually not very nice to him. Laughing and teasing him and talking about him with Penny. But never anything like that. She had never hurt him. In his dream she seemed furious. Enraged. He couldn't imagine what

he had done to anger her so. And it wasn't the first time he had had that dream. The voice speaking to him, then him running through the spaceship, trying to find his family, until he reached the flight deck with Judy there. And it always ended the same way.

He realized he was sleeping again. That was one of the weird things about his dreams now. He was present in them most of the time. Like he was observing them from a distance. He knew they were dreams as soon as he began remembering the names and faces of his family. And this one about Judy was so real. He wondered why she wasn't very nice to him anymore. Why she made fun of him so much. Why she never seemed like she wanted to talk to him about anything important.

When he was young, she was always there. For both him and Penny. It seemed like she loved to hang out with them. But not anymore. At least with him.

But now as his dreams mingled with his memories, until he couldn't tell which was which, he thought of something else. Something that happened to him. That happened to him and Judy both. And he wondered if he was remembering everything correctly about his oldest sister. If he was judging her too harshly. If he was forgetting who she really was and how she always watched out for him and Penny.

It was on a planet they had landed on for a few weeks to make some minor repairs. He felt as if it had happened the previous year. He was never sure if what he was dreaming was something that *had* happened, or *could* happen, but in this dream he was thirteen, and he knew now he was fourteen.

When they had first entered the planet's orbit, it seemed promising. It had one sun and the atmosphere was almost identical to Earth. Eighty percent nitrogen and twenty percent oxygen, similar gravity, at 9.2 m/s. The only issue was that its proximity to its sun made it colder. Readings indicated an average temperature of twenty eight degrees Fahrenheit.

They had been approaching the planet when Robot gave his analysis that there was an abundance of life. The family gathered around the console looking at the planet as they grew closer.

"Must be Eskimos," John said, sitting next to Don at the console. "Until we know what we're dealing with, everyone needs to stay in the protective perimeter."

But as they entered the planet's atmosphere something was wrong. There were no discernible habitable zones. Much of it seemed to be covered in ice or permafrost. It looked like the surface of a barren planet. "Robot, you want to run your analysis again?" John said.

"I have Professor, and my readings are correct. There is an abundance of organic life on this planet."

"Dad, he's always right about these things," Will said. "I think we need to believe him."

"Alright. It's not like we have a choice. We need to land anyway, though I don't know where all this life is. Let's look for a place in the temperate zone, Don. Temperatures are showing thirty eight degrees F. We can get set up and should be relatively safe."

Once on the ground they established their perimeter, then John gathered the family. “Don and I are taking the Chariot out to scout around.”

“Dad, can I go?” Will asked.

“No,” Maureen said, before John could answer. “I want everyone to stay inside the perimeter until they get back, just in case.”

“But Mom...” Will started to argue.

“Listen to your mother, Will,” John said. “I need you and Doctor Smith to start unloading the weather station. We’ll find a place for it when we’re out. If we don’t think there’s any danger, you can help us get it set up.”

“Alright.” Will didn’t try to hide his disappointment. Maureen just smiled at John as the boy walked away.

“Be careful John.” She kissed him.

“Don’t worry. We’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

John and Don drove toward the nearest rocky ridge a few kilometers from the Jupiter, got out and climbed to the top and scanned the area. It was almost all large rocks, some highlands, and frozen ground.

“Out there,” Don said. He was scanning the horizon.

John pointed his binoculars the direction Don was looking. “Ice?” He asked.

“I think so. We may be on the edge of a frozen sea. Want to check it out?”

“No, I would rather get back,” John answered.

“Look, John.” Don had kneeled down, and was examining several rocks that looked to be broken and split open. “There’s been some extreme weather event here. Rain water filled these cracks then it must have froze quickly, expanding and breaking them.”

“I think this planet suffers from severe climate variances,” John said. “There are dunes out there past the rocks. There can be some strong wind storms. But there are also signs of flooding. And it’s been recent.”

“The extreme changes would certainly explain the lack of organic life,” Don agreed. “Maybe the Robot’s still picking up readings of recent life that was destroyed in whatever this was.”

“I think the priority is to get the weather station installed,” John said. “And two relays.”

“You don’t think that’s overkill?” Don asked.

“Not on this planet. Too many things we don’t understand. But there is certainly evidence for extreme and sudden weather changes. We want to know when that’s happening.”

Chapter 3

The next day they divided into three teams. Maureen and John were to set up the main weather station while Doctor Smith and Don installed a relay station several kilometers to the South, and Will and Judy would install a third relay station several kilometers to the West. Penny stayed at the Jupiter 2 with Robot.

Will and Judy were working on their station near a rocky outcropping. This was their assignment because John and Don had discovered a cave in the rocks they could use for cover in an emergency. It was vital that the stations were installed as soon as possible, but it was dangerous being this far from the ship. But the cave's natural thermal insulation should protect them if the weather changed quickly.

John and Maureen had dropped supplies off by the cave, then took Will and Judy out to a slightly elevated area on the flat plain where the station was to be erected, two hundred meters away. Judy would help Will get the tower installed, then, as he was getting the components connected, she was to get the supplies in the cave. If all went well, none of it would be needed. John and Maureen would have their tower functioning, then they would pick up Don and Doctor Smith, who had no shelter, drop them off at the Jupiter 2, and get back in the Chariot to pick up Judy and Will and the whole thing would be done by dinner.

As Will dreamed, he remembered how hot he was. The temperature on the plain had climbed to forty seven degrees when they arrived at the location that morning. Perfect for working outside, but the sun was bright. He had started out wearing his parka, but after an hour lying on the sandy surface, the sun rising higher in the sky, he had taken his coat off. He was on his back, under the weather station.

"Could you hand me the C clamp, Judy?"

"Here you go," she was kneeling next to him. She slid the clamp across the sand until he was able to grab it.

"Thanks."

He had the mind for electronics, but she was there to help in any way she could. Doctor Smith had volunteered to go with him, but this planet was too dangerous. They needed Will out here, but they weren't going to trust him with Doctor Smith. Besides, they knew Smith would be little help, and volunteered to go with Will because the boy couldn't force him to work, and they needed to get this done as quickly as possible.

Judy wiped sweat from her face. "It's nice for working," She said, "But that sun is hot."

"They always are," Will joked. His upper body was under the weather station. Judy playfully punched him in the leg.

She took her coat off and drank from a canteen. "Will, here. You need water."

“Just a sec.” She heard the clamp click then he started to slide out. She grabbed his ankles and pulled him from under the unit. He smiled up at her.

“Thanks Judy.” He sat and she handed him the canteen. He drank, then wiped sweat from his brow.

“Okay?” Judy asked. He was dirty and sweaty.

He smiled. “Yeah. You worried about me?”

“Always, Will.”

Then he was embarrassed. “Thanks Judy. But I’m good. I think about an hour maybe to stabilize the tower, then if I can get the feed, I’ll calibrate the sensors and we’re good to go.”

“Okay, well I’m going to get the supplies in the cave and get the synthetic logs set up in case we need to light the fire.” They had found the cave had a natural opening somewhere in the roof, so a fire in the main cavern would warm them, though it would only be necessary if temperatures dropped to subarctic levels.

“But I think we’ll be done before anything can happen,” Will said.

“We might be, but it could be hours before Dad is back with the Chariot. We don’t want to drag sleeping bags and food supplies around in the middle of an ice storm or something.” She placed a hand on his arm. “I’ll be back in less than an hour.”

She stood and Will laid down and started to slide back under the weather station.

“Will,” Judy said.

“Yeah,” he looked up at her.

“Keep the radio in reach, Okay.”

“I will Judy.”

“And your parka.”

“Judy it’s like fifty degrees.”

“Come on Will, you know better than that.”

He smiled at her. “Okay. Thanks Judy.”

She turned and walked toward the rocky outcropping in the distance. Will slid back under the weather station, pulling his radio with him so he could reach it. Yeah, Judy might act like Mom, sometimes, he thought. But it’s kind of nice too. I like this dream. I hope it stays like this.

Dr. Gaston paused the video on the sleeping boy.

There were three women and four men in the room. Supposedly, it was a subcommittee of the National Security Agency. But it wasn't. None of them had congressional approval, nor congressional oversight. They had no oversight whatsoever. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs was not aware of the meeting. Nor was the President or any other elected official. The group had been buried within the machinations of government for so long no one even remembered their party affiliation nor their political ideology. They were beyond that.

Sometime after World War II, when the Soviet Union acquired nuclear weapons, a few heads of industry, along with some of their political friends, decided that continuity of government was dependent upon a few men and women who would not be influenced by the pesky entanglements of democracy. Profits must flow. So they appointed seven members to a committee. Two each from the legislative, executive, and judicial branch and one Intelligence Czar.

When it came to matters of National Security, nothing moved unless this committee gave it its stamp of approval.

Their nickname within government was UT. No one really remembered what it was supposed to mean, but everyone said it stood for Untouchable.

If there ever was a Deep State, they were it.

Dr. Gaston had been the Intelligence Czar for almost fifteen years. She knew where the bodies were buried.

"This is par for the course," she said, addressing the others around the table. She looked back at the screen and the image of the sleeping boy.

"Normally his dreams are peaceful, like now," The woman explained. "But his demons are lurking close, and three or four times a week he has one that causes the reaction you witnessed earlier."

"Still not talking?" One of the women asked.

"No. He spoke those few words to me, and nothing since. So we know he can talk, he just refuses to."

"But you called this meeting, so there must be a development." This was one of the men who represented the Executive Branch. A former colonel in the Air Force, now a low level staffer in the Office of Science and Technology. For twenty years he had flown beneath the radar in a job that no one would notice. Everyone still called him Colonel.

"There *is* a development," Dr. Gaston replied. "He's begun talking in his sleep."

She picked up the remote and pressed a button. The live feed of Will was replaced by a recording of him. He was asleep, lying on his right side, facing the camera. The date stamp indicated it had occurred a week earlier. Dr Gaston pressed the play button and they could see the boy was restless. His legs kicked a couple times, he put his arms above his head, then he whispered something.

Dr. Gaston paused the recording, turned up the volume, played it again. "They never die," the boy mumbled. But it was clear enough for them all to hear.

"They never die?" One of the women around the table said. "What does he mean?"

"Nothing," Doctor Gaston replied. "Just the dreams of a traumatized boy who doesn't know who he is. Unless there are more recordings."

She picked up the remote again and the image changed to Will asleep in bed five nights earlier. When she pressed the play button this time he was more animated. Tossing and turning and mumbling continuously. When she turned up the volume, they heard him say, "It's in the water. They can't grow up. They can't die."

Gaston paused the recording, then went back to the live feed of Will who was once again sleeping peacefully.

"Still, this would mean nothing," she said. "But I started putting the pieces together. After missing for four years, the boy returned to Earth through an Einstein-Rosen Bridge."

"A what?" One of the men asked.

"A wormhole," She explained. "Einstein and a Physicist named Nathan Rosen proposed that there could be wormholes, or tunnels, connecting two points of space time, allowing travel between these two points."

"We have never been able to prove the existence of wormholes, let alone figure out how to open one or...most importantly...how to keep one open long enough to send even a particle through it if we did manage to find one. But after almost a month, this one is still there. Still stable, just outside our atmosphere. And a space pod with a fourteen year old boy apparently traveled through it."

"Obviously advanced technology. Alien technology. Except, in the few words the boy spoke to me, he said humans built it. And when I suggested it was from the future, he said it was the opposite of that. The opposite of the future is..."

"The past," one of the other women said. "I'm still not clear what you are proposing."

"The other thing our Will Robinson said to me when I asked him where the container was from that he traveled in, was 'the second star to the right. Straight on till morning."

"This is a quote from Peter Pan. Peter is telling Wendy where to find Never Never Land."

"Where The Lost Boys live," another of the men said. "Who never grow up."

“Where they don’t age,” Dr. Gaston agreed. “Now, none of this might mean anything at all. The boy has had an experience that he can’t even begin to understand. He is all alone in the world. He has no idea who he is. He’s bound to have trauma and there is no way to know what reactions that will cause in him. He could hallucinate. He could fantasize. He could just make things up. Still, that doesn’t explain the physical evidence. The wormhole. The unit that he was contained in that kept him alive.

“And we have more,” she added after a pause.

“What more?” One of the other men asked.

“We have the death bed confession of one, Walter Wright Shoemaker.”

“Who?” One of the women asked.

“Walter Wright Shoemaker,” Dr. Gaston replied. She pressed the button on the remote and the image of an old man sitting at a desk covered with colored pencils and large sheets of white paper appeared. The man was staring into the camera, with hardly a smile. The papers on his desk were covered with drawings of some type, though in the photo it was hard to tell what they were.

“Mr. Shoemaker was an early illustrator of Science Fiction. Comic books, magazines, cinema posters in the golden age of Hollywood.” She pressed the remote and beautiful photos of otherworldly images flashed across the screen. There was a planet surrounded with colorful rings and gaseous formations. There were images of bizarre desert landscapes, wide oceans and brilliant, futuristic cities, complete with flying vehicles and shiny, silver buildings of various shapes and sizes. The planet was surrounded by six moons.

“They’re beautiful,” One of the women said.

“Mr. Shoemaker was born in eighteen eighty in Aurora Texas, and died in nineteen sixty seven in San Louis Obispo, California,” Dr. Gaston said. “When he was in his last days of life, he called his granddaughter, Margaret Snelling, to his room and asked everyone else to leave. And he told her a story. She kept the story to herself for many years, not really sure what to think, until she contacted her son in law, who was a government liaison in the Air Force. In nineteen seventy nine she told him the story. She had developed cancer and decided she didn’t want her grandfather’s story to die with her.

“The story was pushed up the line, then back down the line, then under a rug somewhere until it was forgotten. But I remembered it.”

“How did you know about it?” The Lieutenant asked.

“That’s what I do,” She answered.

She pressed the button on the remote again, and an image of an old weathered newspaper article appeared. She zoomed until they could all read it. It was from the Dallas Morning News, dated April 19, 1897. The article described a UFO incident in which the craft struck a windmill and crashed on the property of a farmer. The article stated that a pilot, who seemed

to be from another planet, had been in the ship and died in the crash and was buried at a local cemetery.

“I’ve heard of this,” One of the men at the table said. “It wasn’t Roswell material though.”

“No,” Dr. Gaston said. “It wasn’t. Maybe because it was fifty years earlier. The story goes, they ended up taking the remnants of the ship this pilot was in and dumping it down a well. Which tells me the craft was small.”

“You don’t think there’s something to this do you, Doctor?” One of the women asked.

“I don’t take anything lightly, but I never gave this much thought. I had watched a video of Mr. Shoemaker’s granddaughter, Margaret Snelling, reading his death bed confession seven or eight years ago, and I remembered it after watching Will Robinson talk in his sleep.” Gaston pressed the button on the remote and a video appeared of an elderly woman, sharply dressed, sitting at a table, holding a few sheets of faded notebook paper.

Chapter 4

The Deathbed Confession of Walter Wright Shoemaker.

I was born on May Seventeenth, Eighteen Eighty, in Aurora Texas, and led an uneventful life until I was seventeen years old. My uncle, John Wright Shoemaker, was the constable at the town jail, and I had a job cleaning the small office and the four holding cells that were used to keep prisoners. I worked nights after school. My main job was to keep the place clean, but when there were prisoners, though there seldom were, my other duty was to take their dinner order, walk across the street to Joyce's Cafe, and bring it back and make sure they were fed.

Most of the prisoners were local town drunks, or the occasional vagrant on his way to Ft. Worth, who thought he could get by without paying for something out at Marshall's General. So that job was pretty uneventful too. But that all changed on April 19, 1897. That morning, the famous Aurora UFO crash occurred. Well I guess it was famous for us. It made the Dallas paper and even Houston and New Orleans, I was told. And according to the newspapers, there was a pilot who died in the crash and was buried. Which wasn't true.

On the evening of April 19, I was sweeping out the cells when my Uncle John, and his deputy, Clifford Harris, brought a boy in. He was about my age, maybe younger. He wasn't hurt, though he had been banged up it looked like, and had some bandages on his head and arms. He was dressed kind of strange, with a blue coverall of some kind. His skin was kind of pale, and he had brown hair and bright blue eyes. They put him in one of the cells, then my Uncle said he wanted to talk to me. He had the only private office in the building, and I followed him back to it.

"This boy in here was in that thing that crashed this morning," He said.

"I thought the pilot died," I answered.

"Yeah, that's what we said and that's what the paper will print. We need to figure this out and it seemed like it made sense to just let everyone think he died in the crash. We don't want to turn the jail into a zoo. Hell you should see all the people out there at the farm where it crashed."

My uncle told me the boy didn't speak English, or any language that they could recognize. He told me to just treat him like any other prisoner, but I was probably just going to have to guess what he wanted for dinner. I was usually alone there for several hours in the evening while the second shift deputy made his rounds, and I was told to stay away from the boy. My uncle said they had put a call in to the Army over at Camp Mabry in Austin, and was just waiting for someone to show up and tell them what to do.

The first day the boy didn't speak. He would watch me move around the room, dusting, sweeping, taking out trash. He was just sitting there. They had already fed him over at Doc Northwick's office when they patched him up. On the second day, I saw him get up from the

small bed he was on and walk to the bars and stand there looking out at me. Finally I turned to him and said, "Hi." But he just kept staring.

When it was time to get his dinner, I walked toward the cell and asked him what he wanted to eat, making a motion with my hand to demonstrate eating. He still didn't say anything. I left and went to the cafe and brought us both fried chicken and mashed potatoes with a piece of apple pie. I walked to his cell and pushed his plate through the feed tray opening.

Then I sat at one of the three desks in the room and began to eat while watching him. He just sat for a long time, then got up and picked up the plate. He stood there watching me eat for a few minutes, then sat back down and slowly started eating. When he was finished he took his plate back to the opening and sat it down and stood there with his hands holding the bars and looking out at me. I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

I know I was told not to go near him, but so far he had seemed harmless. More curious than anything. I stood up and slowly walked to the cell and stood in front of him. I reached my hand in to get his plate, watching him carefully. But he didn't move. Once I had the plate, I said, "Was it good?"

He answered me but of course I had no idea what he said. I stood there for a minute. I asked him how he felt, if he needed anything, or if there was anything else I could do. He said a few more words, but made no motions with his hands or anything. Finally I walked away, thinking nothing of it.

The next day when I returned, he was lying on his bed. The deputy was still there, but when he left to complete his rounds an hour later, the boy got up and walked over to the cell and stood looking at me again. He said some words, so I walked over to his cell and tried talking to him, but of course there was no way for us to communicate. When I brought his dinner that night, he smiled. It was the first emotion I had seen in him. I smiled back and when I did he laughed slightly. It wasn't deep or anything, just a quick laugh. I got the feeling he was just surprised and pleased that we had communicated somehow. With the smile.

The next day when the deputy left, the boy quickly walked to the cell and said something to me. I walked over to him and asked him what he wanted. For the first time he reacted physically to my question, as if he suddenly understood what I was asking him.

He made a motion as if he wanted something to write with. Thinking maybe we could communicate somehow by writing; I walked over to a desk and got a pencil and a piece of paper and pushed it through the opening. He took it and smiled again. But instead of writing anything, he walked back to his bed and sat down. I watched him for a while and could tell he was drawing on the paper, but I couldn't tell what it was. He didn't seem interested in showing me.

The next night when the deputy left, he made the same motion. He had kept the pencil. I didn't think he was dangerous at all, and didn't worry about leaving it with him, even though my uncle would have been very upset with me had I told him. But when the boy acted as if he wanted something to write on again, I pointed over to the piece of paper he had drawn on the previous night, now lying on his bed, and then at my eyes. He understood what I wanted and walked over and picked the paper up and slid it in the opening to me.

I held it up but couldn't understand what I was seeing. It was beautiful. He had sketched a planet. It was surrounded by six moons. There was a ring around it. He had drawn other stars and suns and moons near the large planet, which was the centerpiece of his work. Some of them were larger than others, some shaded more to show which ones were less bright I believe. I looked up at the boy. "It's amazing," I said.

He just stared back at me without saying anything. I walked over and picked up a whole pad of paper this time and slid it through the opening. He smiled and took his treasure and walked back to his bed.

The next day the boy waited until the deputy left again, then walked over to the cell door. This time he had the pad with him. He slid it through the opening to me. I looked at his face. There was no emotion, but he seemed to be expectant. Waiting for me to look at them. I took the pad and quickly flipped through it. He had used every page.

The drawings were incredible. Dozens and dozens of planets. Vast forests populated with trees I had never seen before, nor even seen pictures of. And cities. Page after page of futuristic cities. Round buildings and towers with walkways connecting the buildings high above the ground, though the people in them didn't seem to be walking and I had the feeling these connected sidewalks were automatic, taking the people from one destination to the next with them standing motionless.

They were so beautiful I was speechless. I looked up at him and smiled and he smiled back. Though this time his smile turned into a broad grin. It made me grin as well. That evening, after I brought his dinner, I sat and looked through the sketches. This time slowly. The sheer volume of the work was amazing. There were one hundred twenty seven drawings. One on each page that had been left in the tablet. I walked back to the cell and pushed the drawings through the feed opening, but he pushed them back and pointed to me. He had drawn them for me. A gift. I smiled and thanked him over and over again while nodding.

I took them home and that night, I looked at them again and thought, these would be beautiful in color.

My sister had a child's paint set at home, with several colors and small brushes. So the next day, I sneaked them into the jail and as soon as the deputy left for his rounds, I brought the paper bag out that held the small brushes and containers of paint and a drawing pad. There were only three colors. Blue, red, and yellow. Before sliding them through the bars, I took the lid off one of the jars of paint, picked up a brush and made hand motions to demonstrate how they were used. He smiled at me and I knew he understood.

The next morning was Saturday and I was eating breakfast when my Uncle John drove up in his wagon. When he walked in the door my mother asked if he wanted breakfast or coffee, but he told her he was in a hurry and they had a problem at the jail and needed me there.

When we were in his wagon I asked him what the problem was, and he said he didn't want to talk about it until he showed me something. When we arrived at the jail, I saw both deputies were already there, which was unusual, as they staggered their shifts. But then I saw why.

Much of the back wall of the boy's cell was covered in blue and red and yellow. Some of it looked the same as his sketches he had drawn on the pad of paper. But the details were much more defined. There were planets and landscapes and flora and fauna that none of us had ever seen before.

Needless to say, my Uncle was displeased. First he admonished me for the danger I put myself in, communicating with the boy. But he was angry that this had been going for almost a week and I hadn't said anything to him. He was also under a lot of stress because the army had not responded to his inquiry about the boy, and he was in a quandary about what he should do with him. He told me he needed me to stay at the jail that day, as the deputies were working later, and he had to meet with several of the town leaders to discuss the boy. As far as any of them knew, the pilot of the crashed spacecraft had died and been buried. When a few people in town discovered they were holding a boy at the jail, my uncle had explained he was a vagrant who was deaf and mute and had been caught stealing chickens from some of the farms in the surrounding area.

Once the deputies and my uncle left, I walked over to the cell. The boy had been quietly sitting on his bed until the others had left, but now he stood and walked over to the bars. I pointed to the wall and then smiled at him. He smiled back.

I stood in amazement, studying his artwork. But the more I looked at it the more I realized these weren't just diagrams of a different galaxy. At first I hadn't noticed because it was drawn from right to left. He was telling a story.

On the far right was the largest planet. It was beautiful. Drawn with yellow and blue. But then he drew it again. I could tell it was the same planet, because he had drawn the outlines of what I recognized as continents. But on the second drawing the planet was smaller and there was more red. He had drawn it a third time. This time it was almost completely red and even smaller. I don't think the diminished size indicated the planet was shrinking, instead it demonstrated a change. As did the red paint.

Once the planet was red, there were vessels that seemed to be leaving it. I counted twenty of them, all traveling in different directions. And then I noticed there were even smaller vessels emerging from the larger ones. As I traced these, I noticed they were drawn twice. They seemed to enter a small tunnel, where you could see the rear disappearing, and at the other end of this tunnel it looked as if the front of the vessel was emerging. It seemed as if it was demonstrating a method of getting from one point in the galaxy to another, though to my seventeen year old eyes, I had no idea what it meant.

Then the boy walked over and pointed at one of the images. It showed one of the larger vessels, near a planet. There were people on the planet. It looked as if he was distinguishing between adults and children, as some of them were twice the height as the others. But to the left of that was a pool of blue water, surrounded by beautiful flowers. There was a figure on its knees drinking from the pool.

The next drawing showed the same planet, though this time, the taller people were prone, and the shorter ones were still standing. I didn't understand what this meant.

The next image showed one of the small vessels again, near the planet with the children on it, and emerging from it near another planet. The continents were drawn in close detail, and were obviously showing North and South America. He had drawn Earth. As I stared at the boy, he pointed to the emerging vessel near Earth, then to himself. He smiled.

And then I knew. He was telling me his story. I looked back to the right where the large planet was blue and yellow and beautiful, and slowly panned my gaze toward the left. Something had happened to his planet and they had left in spaceships to go to other parts of the universe. Eventually he came to Earth alone.

I never understood what he was indicating with the pool of water and the person drinking, then what were apparently bodies lying around. I decided he was saying that this water was poison and it killed many of the people, leaving the children to fend for themselves. Though I am not sure if it was a proper interpretation.

I looked at the boy and smiled and nodded my head. He smiled back. We were together all day and all afternoon. I spent much of it looking at the drawings on the cell wall. He seemed pleased that I was so interested in it.

That evening, after it was dark, my Uncle returned with the two deputies and several men from town. The Mayor was there and a few business leaders. They walked in and stood silently looking at the paintings. My uncle said, "You sure?"

Mr. Kelly, the banker looked back at him, glanced at the others and I saw some of them nodding. My Uncle and the two deputies entered the cell, and my uncle turned the boy around and cuffed his hands behind his back.

"Hey, where are you taking him?" I asked.

"To Fort Worth," My Uncle responded. "The army didn't have time to come and get him, so I'm going to let the State decide what to do with him."

They led the boy from the cell. He didn't make any attempt to resist, but at the door, he stopped and turned to me and smiled. I smiled back at him and he grinned a wide grin and I returned it. They pushed him through the door and I followed.

They put him in the back of the one wagon the town owned to transport prisoners. My Uncle climbed up to the front and took the reins and the other townsmen got into another wagon and two of them climbed on their horses and followed the others. The boy turned around and smiled at me as they rode off down the dark street. I smiled back at him and lifted my hand.

I walked back inside the jail and looked at the painted wall again.

"Do you ever think you remember something exactly the way it happened, then find out later it was all a dream?" These were the words I heard of someone speaking behind me. Seventy years later I still remember them. I turned and it was the Mayor.

He was looking at the drawings. "That's what this was Walt. Just a dream."

I started to respond, but he said, "Come on. My wagon's outside. I'll take you home." The Mayor owned the first automobile in Aurora, a Duryea Motor Wagon, and I have to profess, I was excited to ride in it.

I followed him to the door, then stopped and looked at the painted wall for the last time until the Mayor pulled the door shut.

The next morning I woke early and rode my horse to town, in a hurry to see my uncle and find out how the trip to Ft. Worth had gone and what was going to happen to the boy. When I pushed the door to the jail open I stopped. The painted wall had been white washed. There was no sign that anyone had ever been there.

My uncle came out of the office and saw me standing there looking at the wall. "Walter, let's talk," he said, and led me into his office.

Before I was even seated I asked him if the boy was okay.

"Walter, it's best we all forget about the boy and this last week."

"What are they going to do with him in Fort Worth?" I asked.

"Well, he got scared and jumped out of the wagon before we got there and took off in the woods. My guess is he's on his way to Mexico as we speak."

"Mexico? He doesn't know anything about Mexico. He's not from here," I said.

"Yeah, I think I told you wrong," my uncle said. "There really was a pilot who died in the crash and this boy was a vagrant. And we kept him for a while then he escaped on the way to Ft. Worth. End of story."

I stood up from my chair. "What did you do to him?" I asked harshly.

"Now Walter..." my Uncle was trying to calm me down.

"He wasn't from here!" I yelled. "You saw the drawings on the wall!"

"There are no drawings on the wall. It didn't happen."

I was backing toward the door.

"Walter, sometimes we run into people who really don't belong. They're from over there. It's not their fault, it's just where life put them. But most of the time they need to just stay over there. Because it doesn't help anyone when they try to go someplace they don't belong. Someplace they aren't wanted."

Then he tried to speak to me in a kind voice. "That boy wasn't doing himself any good. Or me. Or you. You want to be the laughing stock of the town? Of the whole state of Texas? We're getting people up here from all over the state since that article ran last week. Can you imagine if we said we captured one of them alive?"

“One of them?” I yelled. “He’s just like us! He just came from a different place! And you didn’t capture anyone. He was just lying there in that bag. You told me so yourself!”

“He was. And he was dead. And we buried him in the bag. Last week. The next day we picked up a vagrant and held him for a week then he got away. That’s the story we’re telling. And that’s what happened. And if you say anything other than that you’re going to be laughed out of town. But it won’t matter because no one is going to believe you.”

I left his office and never went back. I graduated from high school in May of that year and the day after I took the money I had saved working for my uncle and bought a train ticket to California. I’ve never been back to Aurora. Not even for funerals. I think part of me died that day. The part I had always been told about small town values and hometown pride. In the end, the people I knew, the ones who raised me, the ones I looked up to...took a boy out in the woods and murdered him because he was different, and they didn’t know how to explain him. They were too afraid of being laughed at to stand up for someone who was different than they were.

And so was I.

I never forgot the boy. Everything I’ve done since then with my art and illustrations is just my attempt to tell his story. I haven’t drawn one thing, or illustrated one book or magazine that wasn’t done for him. My work is a sad attempt to imitate the beautiful art that he created.

I’ve asked myself many times over the years, why? Why did he paint the wall? Why did he befriend me? Because he did. I was his friend. You didn’t have to speak the same language or come from the same world to know that.

I’ve often wondered if, in his last minutes before they killed him, if he knew what was going to happen. And if he looked for me. Somewhere out in the dark woods. Wondering if I would come through the trees and rescue him. At first I used to think that’s what he did. He looked for me and hoped I would come and save him. His one friend. His only friend in a hostile place that had imprisoned him and then took him out to shoot him like a rabid dog. I agonized over that for years.

But as I grew older I changed my mind. Maybe it was to comfort me in my old age, soothe my guilt. But I remember him stopping at the door to the jailhouse and looking back at me. They had come in, seven or eight men, most of them he had never seen before, handcuffed him and walked him out. I think he knew what was going to happen to him. But still he smiled. He smiled at his friend. Because he was done. He had painted the wall and found a friend who would remember him and what he had painted.

He taught me what art was. Any art. Whether it is a best selling novel, a million dollar painting, the Pyramids of Egypt, or some silly little piece of writing that a few people will read. It’s just a way to say...we were here. We lived. We felt something.

That’s why he put his story on the back wall of a tiny cell in a small town in Texas. Because he wanted to tell his story. To his friend. And maybe his friend would tell it to someone else.

I've not been a good friend to the boy. Yes I've told his story for sixty years in my illustrations. But no one ever knew it was his story. Until now. I hope my friend is at peace. And I'm sorry I didn't do anything to help him when I could have. But maybe I'll meet him again when this life is over. And maybe we'll be able to talk to each other. But if we aren't it won't matter. We'll still be friends. Of that I'm certain.

Dr. Gaston turned the video off. No one spoke for several minutes. They were all lost in their own thoughts. Finally Dr. Gaston said, "I've had my staff get us some samplings of Mr. Shoemaker's artwork." She pressed a button on the remote. An image of a blue and yellow planet came on the screen. Dr. Gaston waited several seconds before changing the image. For almost an hour she moved through magazine and book illustrations, comic book covers, posters, drawings and full sized paintings. No one in the room spoke the entire time. It was like they all knew: they were glimpsing a different world.

Finally, she stopped on one last illustration. It was from inside a room. There were seven or eight people in the drawing, but they were all shaded, save one. The image of a boy who appeared to be in his late teens, looking toward the artist. He was light skinned and had brown hair and blue eyes and was smiling. To his left was a jail cell with the door open, and at its rear, most of the wall was painted. There was the dying planet with the vessels leaving it. There was another planet with the pool of water, and someone kneeled before it, drinking. Then the image of the taller people lying about the ground while the shorter ones were standing. Finally the image of the tiny vessel disappearing into a small opening and emerging near a planet that was obviously Earth.

"Mr. Shoemaker painted this in nineteen thirty seven," Gaston said. "Thirty years before his death. There is such detail, we believe he used some of the drawings the boy had given him to spark his memory. I think it haunted him his entire life. Trying to understand it. And I don't think he ever did. He thought the boy was just telling the story of a dying planet and how he came to Earth.

"But we took it to a cryptologist who works for intel. He agreed with Mr. Shoemaker. He thinks that it is autobiographical in nature."

She clicked the remote. The next photo showed an enhanced image of the original planet. There were several people on it, boarding the large spacecraft. She zoomed in to one. "This is a boy. Smaller than many of the others. Most of them are just outlines, but a close look shows this person's features. He has blue eyes and brown hair."

She changed the image. Now there was an enhanced image of the person drinking from the pool. Again, this image had brown hair, and the one visible eye was blue.

She changed the image and now the boy with brown hair and blue eyes was standing among the other children, as the taller people were scattered on the ground.

The final image was of the boy with brown hair and blue eyes entering the small spacecraft.

“He was telling the story of a particular individual,” Dr. Gaston explained. “Himself. But our cryptologist found something else. Each drawing has a symbol just to the outside. Not part of the picture he’s trying to draw, but just to the upper left of it. And each picture has the same symbol only slightly different.”

She quickly flipped through each frame, zooming in on the image. “Math is the universal language,” She explained. “And the cryptologist believed these were geometrical symbols, indicating the passage of time. He ran hundreds of computer simulations and couldn’t crack it. So he called me and asked me a question. He asked me to give him a date. Of course he didn’t know what this project was. Even though he had top secret clearance, there are very few people who know exactly what we are doing. But he said he was working on a theory and asked if I had a date for when the final event was supposed to have taken place. I told him to go with the date of the turn of the twentieth century. That would get him close enough to eighteen ninety seven.

“He called me a week later and told me he had cracked it. Or he thought he had. Using the final date I gave him, and an approximate starting period of two hundred fifty thousand years ago, he had his beginning and end, and was able to determine that these symbols were what he thought they were. A type of calendar.”

“Why did he use two hundred fifty thousand years ago as a start date?” One of the men asked.

“Because the first image of when these people left their planet showed one of these large ships traveling to Earth. Long before the boy’s small craft did. Modern Humans appeared on Earth between two hundred and three hundred thousand years ago. Basically, he guessed what we were looking for. He's been...reassigned.”

“What exactly are you saying, Doctor?” One of the other men asked.

“Our cryptologist believes this drawing is depicting the life of one boy. The boy who left his home planet and crashed on Earth in eighteen ninety seven. He believes these people left their planet two hundred and fifty thousand years ago, give or take a few thousand years. So I asked him to look again at the drawings where the boy is drinking from the water. I asked him if there was another way to interpret it.

“He immediately responded that the only other thing he felt it could indicate was that, rather than the water poisoning the people who drank it, it kept them alive. The children anyway.

“If this is true, the story seems to be that they found water on a planet that stopped the aging process. The only ones dead in the picture are the adults. The children survived. Otherwise, why send a child to Earth? Confirming what Will Robinson has said in his sleep. They never die.”

“So you think he wasn’t really a child,” The Lieutenant said. “He was one of these children who drank this water and stopped aging?”

“I don’t know. But myths of the Fountain of Youth have been around since Herodotus. If an advanced civilization discovered it thousands of years ago and had the technology to send a

boy to Earth in eighteen ninety seven, who's to say they didn't send someone in the fifth century B.C.? Or to Florida in the fifteenth Century, when Ponce de Leon spent years looking for it. Someone looking for their own people who had come here hundreds of thousands of years before. What if they are *we*?"

"I think you're grasping at straws," one of the men around the table said, "Myths are myths. And you're using the old man's painting. *He* may have put this boy in all of them. Besides, there's no way to prove any of it."

"I'm not sure about that," Doctor Gaston said. "The cemetery where the alien pilot was supposedly buried is still there. They refused requests twice from UFO nuts to exhume the body over the years."

"You think they will say yes to you?" The Lieutenant asked.

She looked up at the screen, which once again showed the live feed of Will. "If this story is true, the boy in that bed might be more important than we ever imagined. I'm not asking their permission."

They all looked up at the monitor. Will's eyes were closed, and he was breathing softly. If he was still dreaming, at least it was peaceful.

Chapter 5

“Will, come in,” Judy called.

He paused, put his wrench down and picked up his radio. “Here, Judy.”

“You okay?” She asked.

“Yeah. I think the temperature is dropping a little, but nothing to worry about.”

“How long before you’re done?”

“Maybe thirty minutes. Just stay there and I will call you back as soon as I’m on my way, okay?”

“Okay Will. But hurry. If the temperature’s dropping, there could be a sudden change coming.”

“I will.”

Judy looked around the cave. She had stacked the synthetic logs toward the rear of the main cavern. It was a small space, ten meters by twenty, with a ceiling about three meters high. Some past civilization had used it, as there were four ancient steps carved into the side of the rock formation leading up to the opening to enter. They had a store of food and water that would last for five days, in case it took a while for them to be retrieved. The Chariot could travel in most conditions, but since they weren’t sure what the weather could do here, they weren’t taking any chances. If all went well, none of the precautions were necessary anyway.

There was a path at the rear of the chamber that her father said he and Don had followed for an hour, but when they found no signs of recent life, they had decided the cave was safe and could act as an emergency shelter in case they had to escape the weather.

“Judy, I’m almost done,” Will called over the radio. “I’m having an issue with the feed, but Penny is watching the weather monitor and as soon as she tells me she has a sustained visual, I’ll be there.”

“Okay, Will. But call me when you’re leaving.”

“Alright, Judy.”

Will smiled. She was really worried about him. But the weather hadn’t changed much, and he was almost done, and it was only two hundred meters to the cave. He wasn’t concerned.

Penny was sitting at the console, watching the monitor. Once the three feeds were established on the towers, radar would show any events and they would have time to take shelter, wherever they were. The others had established a feed and John and Maureen had just picked up Don and Doctor Smith and were on their way to the Jupiter 2. Then Her father and Don would go get Judy and Will and help them if Will still hadn't been able to establish a feed.

"Penny," Will's voice came over the intercom. "I think I'll have it in a few seconds. You still in front of the monitor?"

"No, I'm in the shower."

"Funny," Will responded, but thought jeez, a simple yes or no would work.

"Okay, Penny. Do you have a visual?"

"Yes. No. It was there for a second, but it's gone. It wasn't right anyway. Half the screen was dark."

Will paused. "Dark? What do you mean?"

"Just black. It wasn't working."

Will quickly slid out from under the tower and looked to the sky. It looks the same, he thought. But then he turned to the West and he got goose bumps. He looked at his parka, lying on the ground a meter away, then back to the sky. The problem was the feed wire was loose, and they needed the tower if they were going to be able to monitor the extreme weather patterns. He felt the wind pick up now. He looked toward the rocks. I have time he thought. He quickly slid back under the weather station.

A few minutes went by and Penny called him again. "It was there for a second but it's out again. It still wasn't working because more of the screen was dark."

Will heard his sister and knew that what she was seeing was the storm moving in, but the feed wasn't secure. He didn't answer.

A minute went by. Then Penny's voice came back. "Will. Something's wrong. The feed is holding but the dark screen is bigger. Will. I think you need to get out of there."

"I will. I'm almost done."

Judy was in the rear of the cave, making sure their food supplies were secure when she heard a noise outside. She stopped. It was the wind. She ran to the cave entrance and down the four steps until she was standing at the edge of the rocks. "Shit," she said. She called her brother's radio. "Will! Get out of there. Now!"

"I'm almost done! It won't hold if I leave it."

It had started raining. But Judy saw the rain was hitting the hard surface and already freezing. She ran back inside the cave to grab her parka.

Back at the Jupiter 2, the others had arrived in the Chariot. “Dad!” Penny yelled. “Will’s going to get caught in the storm!”

“Danger,” Robot announced. “Temperature drop is thirty six degrees Fahrenheit in five minutes and will continue to fall.”

They rushed over to the monitor. It looked like Will had secured the feed, as the view was now holding, but the dark mass was covering half the screen, including the weather station. “Will! Will! Come in!” John called.

His voice came back but it was unintelligible. John called Judy. “Judy, where are you?”

“I’m in the cave but I’m going after Will!” She called. She had zipped her parka and was just at the cave opening ready to go get her brother.

“Wait!” John said. “How’s visibility?”

“One meter, maybe two!”

“Stay where you are, you’ll never find him.”

“But Dad, he’s out there...”

“Judy. Listen to me. Light the fire. You’re going to need to warm the cave. Temperature is going to drop to subarctic in minutes. Once you have it going, take your flashlight and stand at the cave and hold it high for Will to see.”

“But...”

“Judy! Listen to your father,” Don said. “If you’re both lost in this you’re going to die. Will’s going to need you. “

“Oh dear,” Doctor Smith said. He looked at the robot. “Do something you nitwit! What good is it to have an environmental control robot that can’t control the environment!”

“My function...” Robot started to respond.

“Quiet you two!” John said. “We have to concentrate.”

“Mom!” Penny rushed to Maureen and her mother hugged her.

Once Will saw the feed was holding he slid out from under the weather station and realized he was in trouble. There was a hard steady rain and he was soaked, but it was already turning to ice. As he stood he was pushed sideways by the wind, fought against it, and reached for his parka. It was gone. The wind had carried it away. He heard his father’s voice over the radio, but it was buried under static. He tried to call him back but didn’t know if his father could

hear him. He tried Judy but got the same result. He had no choice but to just try to make it to the cave. He looked toward the rocks, but could see nothing. He was already shivering. He only had one choice. He started toward where he thought the cave would be.

He could barely stand as he bent into the storm, head down and forward, fighting the wind with every step. The problem was, he wasn't sure where the cave opening was and if he missed it by even a meter he could die out here.

Judy stood at the top step at the cave opening, waving the flashlight back and forth, trying to see her brother. But there was nothing but ice and sand, driven by the powerful wind.

"Judy! Judy!" Her dad's voice was barely audible over the wind. She stepped inside the cave and spoke into her radio.

"I'm here Dad! The fire's going, but there's no sign of Will!"

"Stay by the cave door and watch for him. You're going to have to treat him for hypothermia."

"I know what to do Dad, but he's out there in it. I don't think he can make it on his own!"

"Judy! The temperature is minus three degrees and dropping. If you go out in it you'll die. And if he gets to the cave and you're not there he might die anyway. Stay where you are!"

Judy had made her way back to the cave opening and looked out into the wind but there was no sign of her brother. She was waving the light back and forth, but she wasn't even sure he could see it in this. She didn't know what to do, but she knew there was little time. She dropped the radio on the cave floor and tightened her hood, looked out into the storm and tried to get her bearings. She thought she knew how to get back to the weather station, but if she was wrong she knew her brother would die, and she probably would too.

She headed out into the wind.

Solid ice was falling now, and Will felt it pelting him. He wondered if it could get big enough to kill him. The wind seemed to be even stronger. He pushed his way through it but he couldn't judge his speed, so he had no idea how far he had gone. Each step seemed to take more effort.

He was looking out into the storm, trying to see the cave or the rocks or anything when he tripped and fell. For the briefest second he wanted to stay where he was. He knew that thermal burrowing was a late stage of hypothermia, as a person would try to burrow under anything he could find. He wasn't there yet, but he certainly understood the emotion. He pushed himself to his feet, ducked his head into the wind, and tried to walk forward. He slipped and fell on the now ice covered ground. He tried to stand again, but stumbled. He couldn't feel his face. He tried to look toward the rocks but all he saw was a blanket of white as the ice was blown sideways. Suddenly he understood how it felt to know you are going to die. He grew deeply sad. They would find him here frozen solid, sometime after the storm.

He slipped again and landed on his hands and knees. He tried to push himself back up but hesitated. He felt it. He had given up. It would be easier to just stay where he was.

“Got you!” Judy was there in front of him on her knees now, pulling him to his feet.

He tried to talk but he was too cold.

“Will, come on!” She yelled. “You have to stand up!” She somehow got her hands under his arm pits and lifted him to his feet.

She put her arm around him and the two of them started back toward the rocks, where Judy hoped she could find the cave entrance. She wanted to stop and give him her coat, but she couldn’t afford to take the time and try and get it off herself and on him in the wind.

Will wasn’t trying to talk, he was just stepping with her, one foot in front of the other, bent forward against the powerful wind.

Then they were at the steps. Visibility was so bad they hadn’t even seen the rocks. But Judy guessed right on where the cave would be.

She pulled Will up to the cave opening and across the small chamber to the fire.

Her father’s voice was coming through the speaker of the radio, calling her name over and over, but she had no time to waste. She got Will’s frozen clothes off him, said, “You need to be as close to the fire as you can,” as she pushed him down next to it. He was sitting up, his arms wrapped around his legs as he shivered. She grabbed one of the sleeping bags and wrapped it around them both, knowing that her body heat would help warm him as much as anything. She threw the top of it over their heads, put her arm around him and her body against his. She left the front open facing the fire to let the warmth in.

His skin was so cold, and he just sat and shivered, but he was still conscious and if he didn’t have damage to his extremities she thought she had reached him in time. His hands and feet were covered so she didn’t try to rub them or anything, she knew that getting his core temperature up was the most important thing right now.

Her father’s voice was still coming through the radio. She knew the family needed to hear something from them. She ignored it as long as she thought she could, then she crawled out of the little tent she had made with the sleeping bag enough that she could stretch out a hand and reach it, then quickly got back next to Will.

“Dad, Mom, I’ve got him. But I have to get him warm.”

“Judy,” John said, “He’s suffering from hypothermia...you need to...”

“Jesus, Dad! I know what I’m doing. We’re in the cave. The fire’s lit and I’m trying to get him warm. The sleeping bag is around us both. Now I have to stop talking but I’ll keep you posted. Okay?”

She immediately felt bad. She knew the family was scared and just wanted to know they were safe, but she had put up with this her whole life. The pretty face. Someone else could do

the hard stuff, make the tough decisions. She was just there to look pretty and hand off tools. She didn't need it from her family right now. Still, she called them right back.

"I'm sorry. I'm doing all I can, but you need to trust me okay?"

"Yes. Sorry Judy," her Dad said. "I know you've got this."

"Judy, we're right here," Maureen said. "Take care of Will then let us know how you two are."

"We'll be out to get you as soon as the storm breaks enough we think the Chariot can make it," Don said.

"We love you, Judy," Penny said. "Take care of Will." Judy could tell her sister had been crying.

"I will, Penny," She replied. "We love you guys too. I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

She turned the radio off to conserve the battery and hugged Will tightly against her body again.

"I love you little brother," she whispered. He gave her a weak smile. She felt like crying. It had been so close and finding him was just pure luck. She had almost turned around, thinking she had misjudged the path to the weather station, but then she almost tripped over him.

The two of them sat like that for over two hours without talking. Judy had eventually stopped hugging him and started carefully taking his hands and massaging them, then his feet. He still hadn't said anything, but when she began to massage his feet he whispered, "They sting,"

She looked up at him. "Good, they're warming."

He watched her work on them without talking for a few minutes. Then he said, "I'm sorry, Judy."

She paused. "For what?"

"I should have left the weather station when you first told me to. I almost got you killed."

"You almost died yourself, Will. But you were trying to do the job Dad gave you to do. I understand."

"How did you find me?"

"It was luck. Mostly. I counted my steps back to the cave when I walked back, and when I came out to find you I counted them back. I was almost ready to turn around."

"Wow," He said, surprised. "I would never have thought of that."

"I don't know that it made any difference, Will. If I had been a meter off in either direction I would have walked right by you. It was luck."

He was quiet for a while, then he said, “You saved my life Judy. I was so stupid, and you saved my life. You could have died.”

“I didn’t die and neither did you and you are so far from stupid, Will. That’s why you’re out here working on the weather station.”

“I’m sorry,” He said again.

She could tell how much it bothered him. She stopped rubbing his feet and sat back beside him and put her arm back around him. “We survived Will. That’s all that matters. Now we just need to wait for the storm to break and Dad to come and get us.”

They sat in silence for a long time. Eventually Judy said, “I’m going to get up and get you some water, okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks. I’m real thirsty.”

She brought it back to him. “There’s sugar in it, it will help get your blood pumping a little. I’m going to call Mom and Dad and I’ll get us some food. You need to eat. But you need to stay covered up and keep warm.”

“Okay,” he said. “Thanks again Judy.” She kissed him on the cheek then got up and picked up the radio and turned it on.

“Mom, Dad?” She called into it. There was only static. She kept trying, but there was no answer.

Will said, “Judy, look out the opening and see what it looks like out there. Something is blocking the signal.”

She walked over to the steps. They wound down to the left slightly, and she couldn’t see the opening from where they had been sitting.

“Oh no,” She said.

“What?” Will asked.

“It’s ice. Solid ice. Covering the entire opening. And I think it’s really thick.”

“Freezing water vapor in the atmosphere might be blocking the radio waves,” He said. “But we should be okay. They know where we are and will come and get us.”

“Yes,” She agreed. “The problem is, we don’t know how long the storm will last. I thought it was over because I didn’t hear the wind. But maybe the ice is just blocking the sounds.”

Judy got some energy bars out of the survival kit and walked over and sat in front of her brother and handed him one. He stuck his hand out and took it and slowly started munching on it. She sat and watched him. “You had me really scared Will.”

He reached up and took her hand. "I'm sorry. I was stupid. And I'm really sorry I put you in danger, Judy."

"Stop apologizing. Ever since we've come to space everything has been about survival. You just...scared me." Tears had come to her eyes and that hurt him more than anything. He reached up and pulled her forward and hugged her.

Four days had passed, and they still couldn't get any signal on the radio, and the solid block of ice that covered the opening of the cave seemed to be just as thick as it was when they first noticed it.

"We have one more day of food left before we have to figure out what to do," Judy said, while they sat next to each other, eating survival rations from small plastic containers. "We're going to need to start rationing it, I think."

"I'm not sure that's smart," Will said. "We might have to try and find another way out, and we'll need our strength to do that. I'm not sure we shouldn't pack up the rest of the rations and see where the path leads that Dad followed into the cave system."

"But if we leave, Dad won't be able to find us. He knows we only have food for five days. He'll have to try soon."

"That's what has me worried," Will said. "Since there's no radio signal and it's been four days, I think he would have already been here if he thought the Chariot could make it. Maybe we should follow the tunnel for a few hours, past where Dad went, and see if there's another way out, or at least some place the radio will have reception. If we don't find anything by tomorrow, we can come back and try to wait for Dad."

"Do you think you're strong enough? Are your legs and feet alright?" He had complained about them for the last couple of days, but Judy had looked at them and saw no signs of frostbite or damaged tissue.

"I think so. And I think walking might help me too."

They made the decision to sleep until morning and head out. Not that time made any difference in the cave, but if they found a way out they didn't want to be traveling in the dark.

Maureen rode the elevator up to the bridge, carrying cups of coffee for her husband and Don. She found them where she knew she would. At the console looking out at the frozen landscape.

“When do you think it will be safe, John?” She asked, handing them the coffee.

“I don’t know, but it isn’t yet. The fuel lines would almost certainly freeze in the Chariot. Even if we made it there, which I don’t think we could do, it isn’t worth the risk. As long as they are in the cave they’re safe. They have food for another day, so we definitely won’t risk it until after that. But if it begins warming it’ll probably happen fast, just like when it froze.”

“I just wish we could get the radio signal,” Maureen said. “Not knowing how Will is doing is the worst part.”

John hugged her. “I know. But Judy sounded pretty confident. I think she’s right. We need to trust her.”

Chapter 6

Will and Judy had packed up their remaining food and water and headed into the tunnel at the rear of the cavern. Will was feeling much better and the exercise was helping him get his strength back. Judy made them stop to rest and drink water often though, and was constantly asking her brother how he felt.

They had decided if they didn't find a way out within twelve hours, they would turn back, not wanting to risk getting too far from the cave when John and Don came to get them. They hoped they might at least be able to find a place where they could get radio reception and let the family know they were okay.

Most of the tunnel was easy to walk through, though some sections were so narrow they had to turn sideways to squeeze past. They saw no other signs of life. The four steps, chiseled into the cliff leading up to the cave, was the only sign this planet had been inhabited sometime in the distant past.

They had walked for almost eight hours when the tunnel came to an abrupt stop in front of a solid wall.

"Do you think there was a rock fall that blocked it?" Judy asked.

"Maybe," Will answered. "But it doesn't look like it. It looks like it just ends. It's weird."

"Will, look." Judy was shining her light all around the walls, and could see nothing, but when she lowered it, she saw there was a small opening on the tunnel floor next to the side.

They walked over and shined their lights into it. "Steps," Will said. "Just like at the cave entrance."

"I'm not sure we should go down there," Judy said.

"It's only been eight hours, and this is our only option," Will argued. Then he caught himself. He knew that it was his decision to continue to work on the weather station that had almost gotten them both killed. "But you decide Judy. If you think we should turn around it's okay with me."

She looked down it for a few seconds. "Let's take it for a while, but if it doesn't seem like it leads out, we'll turn around."

Will started to step down into the opening.

"No, I'll go first," Judy said.

"But..."

"I'm going first, Will, don't argue." She placed a hand on his shoulder, and he took a step back.

“Be careful, Judy.”

“I will.” She stepped into the opening. It was not very wide, and as she began to descend, she looked up at her brother. “It’s steep, so use the walls to brace yourself.”

“Okay.” As soon as Judy had stepped far enough down, Will began to follow her.

They descended the steps for an hour. They twisted and turned and remained steep. If it hadn’t been that the walls were so close, it would have been a dangerous path, but they braced their hands against the sides to steady themselves. Judy stopped several times to drink and check on Will. She was worried that this was too much activity for him, but he seemed to be fine.

“Hey Will,” Judy said. “I see light.”

“Light?” He looked past her. “There *is* light. How is there light down here?”

“I hear noises,” Judy said. She took the laser pistol out of the holster. “Stay behind me, Will.”

The boy smiled to himself. She was really protecting him. About the time he turned twelve or thirteen, she had stopped watching over him like she did when he was much younger. Other adults were around them all the time now, so she became much more of an older sister than a surrogate parent when his mom and dad weren’t around. Now he was remembering what she was like when he was much younger, before they left for space. He found he liked it.

Finally the steps ended and the tunnel opened up. The two of them just stood looking without speaking.

Finally Judy said, “How can this be?”

“I don’t know,” Will said, “But Robot is going to be happy when we tell him he was right. If we ever get back.”

Judy looked at him sharply. “You mean, when we get back, Will.”

He looked back at her. “Yeah.”

They stepped out of the tunnel into a tropical jungle. There were towering trees with vines twisting and turning everywhere. Lush green plants and flowers of every color of the rainbow. There were birds in the trees, and butterflies and other insects all about.

“How can this be?” Judy repeated.

“There’s no sun,” Will said. “The lighting looks...wow.”

Judy looked up and saw what had surprised him. High above the trees, the sky was a mixture of blue and white hues wrapped around hundreds of orbs and other shapes, as if the light was being reflected through a multi-leveled, glass prism.

“It’s beautiful!” Judy exclaimed.

“Yeah,” Will agreed. “Its like we’re inside a...”

“Blue diamond,” Judy said.

He looked at her and smiled. “Well, I was going to say an ice cave. I’ve seen photo’s like this of them in Iceland.”

“Do you think it’s artificial?”

”Maybe someone built all of this. But I think the sun is being reflected through the ice. Part of it must be thin enough that light can filter through. If it was thicker it would deflect more of it. It would be dark down here like any cave. This jungle wouldn’t be possible.”

“But where does the water come from?” Judy asked. “I mean, this looks like a rain forest.”

“I don’t know, but it’s incredible.”

“Will there’s a path,” Judy said. She was looking past the trees that were immediately in front of the opening to the tunnel. “I guess we only have two choices, go back up the steps, or see where that path goes.”

They just looked at each other for a second. Then Judy smiled. “Okay.”

Will smiled back at her. He was afraid she would say to go back the way they had come. But he was feeling better and now his sense of adventure had returned and this whole thing was amazing. He started to step into the trees to cross over to the path.

“No, you follow me, Will.” Judy stepped in front of him and into the jungle.

Will smiled again and followed her.

“Do you hear anything?” He asked.

“Yeah. Like hissing or something,” she said.

“Look, it’s the plants.” He stepped on one and heard a very slight hiss, as if air was being let out of a tire.

“That’s so weird,” Judy said. She knelt down and pulled a leaf off a tiny, green plant. It emitted a very low hissing sound. “I don’t know why it does that, but let’s try not to step on them.”

They walked carefully until they were on the sandy path. “This isn’t old like those steps,” Will said. “People are using this now. Or something is.”

“Yeah, let’s keep our eyes open.”

They followed the sandy trail through the jungle for several kilometers, keeping a careful look out. Other than the hundreds of birds and butterflies and insects, they saw no life forms

except trees and plants. They stopped several times and tried the radio, but they could get no reception.

“Hey Judy, notice something?” Will asked when they stopped to eat. He was looking up into the sky.

“It’s getting darker,” She said.

“Yeah. I think we’re right. This is reflected sunlight. And the temperature’s perfect. Seventy two degrees. Like we’re inside a cave.”

“I think we need to stop for the night,” Judy said. “But not on the path. Let’s move into the trees a little so if whoever or whatever uses this comes by it won’t stumble across us.”

They found a small sandy area in the jungle and dropped their packs. “It’s too nice for sleeping bags,” Will said. He had rolled his out on the ground and stretched out on top of it, using his backpack for a pillow. Judy told him she would stay awake and be on watch.

“When are you going to wake me for my turn?” He asked.

“I can handle it,” she said.

“Judy, it’s really nice that you’re taking such good care of me, but that doesn’t make sense. You need to rest too. We don’t know how long we are going to be in this...whatever it is. You need your strength too.”

“Okay, Will. You’re right. I’ll wake you in a few hours and we can switch, okay?”

“Sounds good,” Will said. He was soon fast asleep.

Judy sat and looked at him for a while. He looked like a little boy again, like when she used to babysit him at night. She sighed. The last four years had changed them all so much. But she knew the changes her brother and sister had gone through were much more than she had to deal with. She was nineteen when they left Earth, still young, but at least she had gone through all the challenges of adolescence. She knew it had to be tough for her brother and sister. She smiled. Watching her little brother sleep peacefully made it seem like they were back home, and he had fallen asleep on the living room floor watching a movie. Not for the first time, she wished they were back there.

“Will! Wake up!”

He opened his eyes as soon as his sister yelled. He started to sit up, but he couldn’t. His hands and legs were bound. “Judy!”

“Will! Help me!”

He looked to his left where Judy had been. She was still there, sitting a meter from him but there was something on her.

“Judy I can’t move!” He said. “What’s wrong?”

“The plant! It’s wrapped around me!”

Then Will looked down at his body. His arms and legs were covered with vines. Or maybe it was one vine. “Me too Judy! I’m pinned down!”

His eyes were focusing in the dark better now. Judy was sitting up but her torso had a wide vine around it and there was another one around her shoulders and arms, pinning them to her sides. The laser gun was laying behind her.

“What happened? Did you fall asleep?” He asked.

“No! I was just sitting here. It happened quickly. I thought I heard something but before I could move it wrapped around my stomach and the other one wrapped around my arms. I couldn’t even hold the laser.”

“The vines moved that fast?”

“Yes. And you were fine until I yelled your name. I’ve been watching you. Those vines weren’t on you. You were lying there just like you were when you fell asleep. But as soon as I yelled they wrapped around you.”

“But...how could they...”

“Something’s coming, Will.”

He stopped talking and listened. She was right. There was rustling in the trees that seemed to be coming from all around them. They both started struggling hard against the vines, but they were trapped.

Then they were surrounded. They looked human. But like natives or a tribe of some kind. They all seemed to be carrying spears and other weapons. There were ten or twelve of them. They pointed their weapons at Will and Judy, leaned close and looked at them.

One of them touched Will’s face, running his fingers across it. “Judy!” Will yelled.

“Leave him alone!” Judy yelled. But then they were reaching for Judy as well.

“Don’t touch her!” Will shouted. They ignored the siblings demands, all of them poking them with their fingers, running hands through their hair. Smelling them.

“Stop it!” Will yelled. He heard his sister’s protests as well. “Leave her alone!”

Then they began talking to each other. The siblings couldn’t understand what they were saying, but the conversation was animated. Finally, they began gently removing the vines from their bodies, seeming to take care not to hurt the plant life. As they pulled the vines from Will’s arms he started struggling but they turned him to his stomach and bound his hands behind his back.

“Let me go!” Will yelled

Judy was struggling and trying to fight, but she had her hands bound behind her as well. Once both of them were on their stomachs and their hands tied, the people started going through their belongings, dumping the backpacks out, rummaging through their supplies and their extra clothes. They started struggling over everything until Will and Judy thought they were going to get in a fight, but eventually they seemed to reach some type of agreement about who got what.

Then Will and Judy were both pulled to their feet and a vine rope was placed around both their necks and looped together, Will in front. The man that seemed to be the leader took the end of the rope and tugged, pulling them back to the path. They led them the same direction they had been walking the day before.

“We’ll be okay Will,” Judy said.

“I know,” he answered. He didn’t know and neither did his sister, but there was little they could do about it.

It began to get light out. Now they could get a better look at their captors. Other than their dress, which was some type of homemade cloth, dyed in several different colors, and their language, they seemed to be human. But their skin tone had an odd color, as if they were slightly sunburnt, but more orange than pink or red. Their hair was all the same light brown.

“I think it’s our skin that they were looking at,” Will said to Judy. “And hair. We look different than they do.”

“Like they have too much carotenoids in their diet,” she answered.

Suddenly the man pulling them by the rope stopped and turned and raised his spear like he was going to strike Will across the face with the end of it. Will flinched, trying to turn his head away, but he couldn’t because of the rope around his throat. “No!” Judy yelled.

The man stopped. The spear was still raised but he was staring at Will closely. He said something low under his breath. Then they were all looking at the boy. The man that was pulling them lowered his spear and approached Will slowly. He tried to back away, but the man tugged the rope, keeping him in place.

“No! Don’t touch him!” Judy yelled. She took a step forward toward her brother but one of the others grabbed her and kept her in place.

The man approached Will, lifted his hand, and touched the boy’s head. Then the others were surrounding him. He was trying to back away, but he couldn’t.

“Will. Don’t move,” Judy said. “It’s your hair I think. It’s almost the color they are. I think that’s what it is. They couldn’t see it in the dark like they could mine.”

They were all just running their hands over his head and touching his hair. “Okay Judy this is really weird,” he said.

“I know. Just don’t move.”

After several minutes, they were pulled along. They traveled this way for several more hours, then Will said, “Judy, there’s a village ahead.”

The path opened up into a small group of huts that looked to be made of adobe or some other material. Even the roofs. They were surrounded, more and more villagers rushing out to see them. At first they seemed interested in both kids, but as soon as they noticed Will’s hair all of the attention went to him. There were fifty or sixty men and women, then dozens of children started hurrying toward them. Again, as soon as they saw Will’s hair they all went to him and started touching it.

“Don’t move, Will,” Judy said. “They aren’t hurting you.”

“I know. I know. I’m trying,” he said.

All of the villagers had the same, slightly orange skin tone. Most of them looked to be in excellent shape with toned muscles and sturdy frames. Even the older villagers. The children seemed friendly and even the men who had captured them seemed to relax now that they were in the village. The one who had been leading them brought Will water and held it for him to drink. Will said, “Give my sister a drink please.” When the man just stared back at him Will nodded with his head toward Judy, and the man took the meaning and held it for her to drink too.

“I think we’re going to be okay, Judy,” Will said.

“It’s your hair I think,” She said. “It might have saved us.”

Then someone shouted. Everyone looked back toward the village where another man was standing, watching everything. This guy looked different. He was tall and must have weighed over three hundred pounds, with layers of fat rolling off him. And his skin had the same orange tone to it, but it was a shade darker than the all the others. He shouted something else, and the man who had been leading them by the rope yelled something at him.

The large man began walking toward them. He looked unhappy. Some of the villagers began edging away, but the man who had led them by the rope stayed where he was. He actually took a step between Will and Judy and this big man.

When they were a meter apart they began arguing. The large man kept looking at Will and pointing and saying something, sounding angrier. But the much smaller man seemed to have no fear of him and raised his voice as well. He was half the size of this large man, who Will began thinking of as a chief.

Judy took a step up until she was next to Will. “Just stay calm, this is between them.”

“I know, but I think it’s about me,” Will said.

“It’ll be okay Will.”

Finally the big man walked past the other one and stood in front of Will, looking down at him. He was frowning. He put a hand up and Will flinched. The big man stopped, and his expression became something between a grin and a snarl.

“Calm Will,” Judy said.

“I’m trying,” He whispered.

The man put his hand up again, and placed it on top of Will’s head. He left it there, then turned and said something in a loud voice to the villagers. The other man took a step toward him and said something back. Suddenly the big man gripped Will’s hair in his fist and began lifting him off his feet.

“No!” Will yelled

Judy ran into the man, but her hands were behind her back and he just brushed her aside and tossed her to the ground.

Then the one who had led them there grabbed the big man’s arm, and Will was released and dropped to the ground beside Judy.

The Chief spun around and threw a powerful fist at the smaller man, but he caught only air as the other man ducked the punch then drove his head under the Chief’s chin. Then he was on him with fists so fast the much larger man was driven back. Finally the Chief said something and put his hands in the air, and the fight stopped. There was blood dripping from his nose and his lips were swelling. As soon as it was over, the smaller man turned toward Will and Judy and smiled slightly and started walking toward them.

“I think this is good,” Judy said.

The man reached down and grabbed each of them by an elbow and helped them up, but just as they got to their feet a spear came through his chest and he spit blood out his mouth and crumpled to the ground.

A gasp went up from the villagers and the Chief was standing in front of Will and Judy over the crumpled body of his adversary. He looked at the siblings and smiled. Then he turned to the villagers and began speaking. When he was finished several of their captors rushed up and grabbed Will and Judy and pulled them through the village and down the path they had been on. The villagers all followed them.

They came to a clearing, the trees surrounding it grew close together, giving the impression they were inside a small fortress. In the center was another tree, though this looked different than anything they had seen before. It towered over the rest of the jungle, reaching over fifty meters in height, and its trunk must have been ten meters in diameter. But it was the limbs that were so strange. They started three or four meters from the bottom, and wrapped around the trunk and entangled each other; thick fibrous ropes, winding around and around until they looked like a mass of serpents trying to feed off each other.

Will and Judy were pushed to the edge of the clearing and into some of the trees surrounding it, and held there. They looked at each other wondering what was going to happen when they felt vines encircle them. "Judy!" Will yelled.

They were close together and Judy reached out and took her brother by the hand. They were immobile now, vines encircling their legs and torsos, pinning them tightly to the trunks of the trees.

They heard cries and screams coming down the path. More villagers were coming, and they had other captives. There was a teenage girl near Penny's age and another girl who might have been ten or eleven. They looked different than the villagers, their skin brown, and black hair hung in braids down their backs.

They were crying as they were being dragged into the clearing, then they were pushed up against trees next to Will and Judy. The teenage girl was put on the other side of Judy and the younger girl next to Will, and held until the vines encircled them and held them fast.

Now the villagers had all gathered into the center of the clearing. The big man stood next to the huge tree. He spoke to the villagers, pointing at the captives, then pointing at the tree. When he was done he walked over to where the four prisoners were and stood next to Will. He said something else, and pointed at Will then at himself. When he stopped talking the villagers started shouting.

The Chief walked up to the little girl and stared at her. Will turned and looked at the girl's face. She wasn't moving. Just staring back at the big man. But Will saw she was trembling. He didn't know what was about to happen, but this girl seemed to.

Then the Chief walked up to Will. He said something else and the villagers laughed. Then he stopped in front of Judy before walking on to the teenage girl at the end. He stopped, said one word, and several natives ran up and began gently removing the vines from around her. The girl was crying and as soon as she was released she dropped to her knees and looked up at the Chief and started talking and crying harder. Will and Judy could tell she was pleading.

Two of the villagers picked her up by the arms and dragged her into the center of the clearing in front of the big tree, and dropped her to her knees. The Chief stood behind her, turned to the tribe and said a few words, then turned and looked down at the girl.

The girl was still on her knees, now looking up at the tree as the limbs began moving. Then they reached for her. A dozen or more of them wrapped around her arms and legs and torso and lifted her and pulled her up off the ground and then snug against the trunk. Then they squeezed.

"Will, don't watch!" Judy said. "Will."

He turned his head to his sister. He had a look of shock on his face. The girl's screams were blood curdling, and Will could hear what the tree was doing to her. There was a breaking, cracking sound, and what he thought was a sucking or slurping.

"Keep looking at me Will," Judy said.

But the boy thought of the little girl. He didn't know how she was related to the other girl, but she looked like just a smaller version of her. He turned his head to look at the child, bound to the tree beside him. When he did he got a glimpse of the tree where it held the teenage girl. The screams had stopped, and Will saw she was covered with blood, and it looked as if a limb of the tree was encompassing her entire head. He quickly focused on the little girl beside him. She was staring at the tree. "Hey," Will said. "Hey."

The girl turned and looked at him. Her eyes were wide and there was a sheen of sweat on her skin and she was just shaking. Will reached his hand out and took hers and started talking to the girl in a soothing voice. She started to turn her head back to the tree and Will said, "No. look at me." She didn't understand his words, but turned back to Will and he kept talking to her. This time she just kept looking at him.

Judy watched all of this and it dawned on her how strong her little brother was. He was just thirteen and they all knew he was a genius, but now Judy saw him as much more. In the most horrific moment of his short life, he focused on comforting someone else.

The horrible sounds had stopped. The chief started speaking again and the captives looked back at the tree. There was nothing left of the teenage girl, except streaking blood that now covered the trunk where she had been held, and a wide, red pool at the foot of it.

When the chief stopped talking he walked back over to the captives but this time he stopped in front of Will. He looked at him and his whole face seemed to curl into a sneer and he quietly gave an order while looking directly in Will's eyes. Three of the Villagers hurried up and started removing the vines from around his body.

"No!" Judy said. "Take me!"

She shouted over and over again, "No! No! Leave him alone. Take me! Take me!" The Chief ignored her, and Judy looked over to her brother. He was silent but his eyes were big, and he was pale.

Finally Judy gathered as much phlegm as she could and spit it at the chief. It hit him in the side of the face and ran down. He turned to Judy. He slowly wiped his face, then barked another order to the villagers and they stopped pulling the vines from Will.

They moved over to Judy and began removing the vines from her body. "No!" Will yelled. "Don't take her." The chief looked at him and smiled. "Let her go!" Will said. "Me! Me! Look at my hair!"

Judy was free now and they were dragging her to the tree. As they pulled her past her brother she said, "It's okay Will. It's okay. Don't watch. Turn your head." Then, "I love you Will."

"I love you Judy!" He yelled and watched in horror as they dragged her to the tree and pushed her to her knees. Then Will felt something touch his hand and he turned, and the little girl had reached out and taken it and she was talking to him in a soothing voice. Will looked at her and tried to focus on her, but he heard the sounds the tree had made before. He looked at it and saw the limbs once again unraveling.

The girl was still talking to him in a calm voice and he looked back at her and tried to focus on her face, but he heard Judy scream and he turned his attention to his sister. The limbs had wrapped themselves around her now and were lifting her in the air and pulling her in.

“No!” Will screamed. Now he was crying. “Please stop!” He shouted. “Take me! Take me!”

Then he yelled, “I love you Judy!” He didn’t know if she could hear him or not. Her feet were a meter off the ground, she was now held tight against the trunk, and the limbs were squeezing her.

The little girl was still talking to Will, and her grip had tightened on his hand, but he couldn’t take his eyes off his sister. As he watched, tears running down his face, his mouth opened in horror, the huge tree seem to catch on fire high above Judy’s head. Then Will heard the unmistakable sounds of laser rifles coming from the jungle. Blast after blast hit the big tree’s branches. The Villagers were all panicking now, most of them running back down the path toward the village, some just running into the jungle. Will saw the chief’s huge body disappear into the trees.

He looked back at Judy. The tree had dropped her, and she was lying at the base of it now. “Judy!” Will yelled, but she didn’t respond. “Judy!”

Then he saw his dad and Don step out of the jungle, each carrying laser rifles. “Dad!” He yelled.

He saw his father say something to Don and the Major ran over to Will while John went to check on Judy. Don grabbed him by the arms, “Are you hurt Will?”

“No, but Judy...”

“Brace yourself,” Don said. Then he began firing the laser into the tree above his head. The vines immediately released him.

As soon as he was free Will turned to the little girl, but he didn’t have to tell Don what to do, the Major had already turned his attention on that tree and opened fire above the girl’s head. As soon as she was free she disappeared into the jungle without a word.

Will and Don ran to where John was kneeling over Judy. Her eyes were closed but she was breathing. They gathered around her and Will dropped to his knees by her head. “Judy! Judy!” He was touching her face gently.

She opened her eyes and looked up. “Will!” She reached for him and the brother and sister held each other and cried.

“Are you hurt Judy?” her father asked.

“I’m sore but I don’t think I’m injured.”

“We better get out of here, then.” John and Will helped her up. Don had his back turned now, looking down the path and scanning the jungle.

When Judy was on her feet John hugged her and held her for a few seconds.

“We need to leave,” Don said. “There’s movement in the jungle.”

“We can’t go back the way we came,” John said. “Let’s go this way and see if we can circle the village and get back to the cave.”

“I think we need to do one more thing first Doc,” Don said, looking at the big tree.

“I’m with you. Judy, Will, move back.”

Judy grabbed Will’s hand and pulled him away from the tree. Don and John backed up a couple of meters, looked at each other, and John said, “Let’s light it up.”

They opened fire with both lasers, starting high at the top, then making their way down. As the laser blasts struck the limbs they heard a loud hissing sound and the branches began to frantically twist and curl. They worked their way down the tree until they got to the thick trunk and both focused their fire on the center of it. Now the entire tree was ablaze, the burning limbs twisting faster and faster this way and that until they began turning to ash and dropping all around the smoldering trunk. The hissing sounds of the dying tree grew louder and louder.

A spear landed in front of Don’s feet, coming from somewhere back in the jungle toward the village. He quickly turned and opened fire and John joined him. Then they ran over to Will and Judy. Judy was still clutching her brother’s hand, standing by the edge of the forest.

“This way,” John said, leading them into the trees.

“I’ll watch our back,” Don said. He opened fire again and there were two screams just past the tree line where he fired.

John led them deeper and deeper into the trees. They would stop every few minutes, John raising his hand for them all to be quiet, then they would look back behind them to see if the Villagers had stopped following. But each time, they would catch glimpses of the warriors moving quickly and silently toward them.

They stopped again after an hour of this, and listened closely. “I think we lost them,” Don said.

“Yeah, but we may have lost ourselves too,” John said.

“Will, you okay?” Judy asked. Her brother hadn’t spoken since they left the clearing. She had not stopped holding his hand the entire time. “Will?”

“Oh...yeah. I’m okay.”

Judy and her father shared a look. They weren’t sure they believed him.

“Down,” Don yelled.

Judy pulled Will to the ground and their father and Don jumped down in front of them as spears started landing all about, one of them barely missing Don. As soon as the spears stopped coming Don and John started firing lasers into the jungle. They heard a couple of screams but they couldn't tell how much damage they had done.

"Let's go!" John said and he grabbed Will by the shirt and pulled him up as Judy stood with him.

"I'll lead, but we're moving fast, we need to put distance between us and them." He started off through the trees, moving quickly but carefully, scanning the jungle in front of them.

They rushed through the forest this way for almost an hour, not stopping to rest until they thought they were far enough from the tribe to risk it.

They all jumped down behind a cluster of thick trees that were surrounded by bushes. "Everyone drink water," Don said.

Judy pulled a canteen out and handed it to her brother. He just looked back at her for a few seconds without taking it. "Will, are you okay?" Judy asked.

"Yeah. Oh. Sorry." He took the canteen and drank and handed it back to Judy.

"See anything Don?" John asked. Don had stayed a meter or two behind them, scanning the jungle slowly.

"No, maybe they finally gave up."

"Dad, do we know where we are?" Judy asked.

"Instruments don't work down here. I'm just guessing. We need to start working our way back around to get to the cave entrance."

"What's it like up there?" Judy asked.

"Warming. No longer subarctic, but it was still covered in ice when we left yesterday. We melted the ice sheet in front of the cave with lasers to get in. It was like a mini ice age. Covering everything and killing everything."

"Except down here," Will said. It was the first words he had spoken other than responding to them asking how he was doing.

"Yeah," John agreed. "This is unbelievable. I think it was designed by an intelligent race. They turned an uninhabitable planet into a habitable one."

Don was looking all around, but when John said this he looked at him. He didn't say anything, but the others could tell he was thinking.

"What about those people?" Judy asked.

"I don't know," Her father said. "Unless this was created so long ago they evolved like every species."

"What about the tree?" Will said. "It was...evil."

They all looked at him. They knew he was never going to forget this. "Plants that consume... protein...do it for the nutrients," John said. "Normally nitrogen. On Earth they consume insects, though some are capable of trapping rodents and small animals. But the size of that tree...it needed something larger."

He reached out and put a hand on Will's shoulder. "It was probably like everything else here. The way the vines can trap you and hold you. A process of evolution. I doubt if it was evil."

"It was evil," Will repeated, a blank look on his face.

"Do you think there are more of them?" Judy asked. "They fed...they took a girl to it before me."

"There's no way to know," John replied. "We have no idea how big this is. It could encompass the entire planet, under the surface. But we aren't going to find out. We're getting out of here as soon as we can."

"There was something about Will's hair," Judy said. "I think because its red. They were surprised by my hair when they captured us at night. But as it got lighter and they saw Will's they were amazed. It was the color of their skin, and I think that had something to do with it. But they weren't all happy about it. The guy who was leading the ones that captured us seemed like he thought it was good. But that big guy...I think he was like a chief...he seemed furious. Maybe jealous. He killed the other man and that's when they took us to the tree."

"Yeah, my guess is there's something in their diet to give them that sunburned, orange look," John said. "Maybe they evolved that way too."

"Not everyone here did," Will said. He was thinking about the little girl and what he assumed was her sister. The teenager they had fed to the tree. He hoped the little girl had escaped.

And suddenly they were surrounded. The Villagers poured out of the trees from all sides, brandishing spears and clubs. One man thrust a spear at Will and Judy shoved him to the ground and John shot the man with his laser. Don and John opened fire all around, while Judy dropped on top of Will and covered his body.

"Let's go," John grabbed Will and Judy both and pulled them to their feet and ran into the bushes that surrounded the trees they had been hiding behind. The bushes were thick, and full of thorns that tore their clothing and pricked their skin as they made their way through them.

John stepped into another small clearing and was struck in the side of the head and fell to the ground. He dropped his laser and looked up to see who had struck him. It was the Chief, over three hundred pounds, sweat pouring from the layers of fat that covered his body, standing

and glaring down at John, a club in his hand. He raised it high to strike him again, but John rolled out of the way just in time.

Don was firing all around. The natives had no weapons that could match the lasers, but there was so many of them, when some would die, others would take their place and they kept swarming from the trees.

John had immediately climbed to his feet when the Chief missed him with the club and hit the man with two quick jabs, then a hook to the ribs. The man was overweight, but he was strong, and the punches didn't seem to faze him.

Finally John punched him in the throat. The huge man stumbled back, but regained his balance and stepped forward. Suddenly, a fiery burst hit him in the chest, opening a gaping hole. The Chief looked down at it in disbelief, dropped to his knees and fell forward.

John and Judy quickly turned to Will. He was on his knees, John's laser in his hands. He was staring at the big man who was now face down on the ground.

The other attackers seemed to melt away into the trees.

"Will, give me the gun," John said.

Will didn't answer and he didn't move. He was still staring at the dead Chief.

"Will," Judy said. He still didn't answer or acknowledge any of them.

John slowly walked over to him and knelt down and took the weapon from his hands. Will turned and hugged Judy and started crying.

"No signs of them," Don said.

"Okay, we need to keep moving." John looked at his children. They were still on their knees. Judy was still hugging Will, looking at John over his shoulder. "You got him, Judy?"

"Yes. Come on Will, we have to go." She helped her brother to his feet, and took him by the hand.

"You ready, Will?" John asked, placing a hand on his shoulder. The boy nodded.

They continued on through the jungle, John leading once again, Judy holding Will's hand, Don bringing up the rear. They stopped after another hour and sat down to rest. Will hadn't said anything and just sat quietly, but he wouldn't let go of Judy's hand.

"Maybe killing their leader was enough to scare them off," Don said. He had no sooner gotten the words out when a spear landed beside him. He opened fire again, John joining him.

"Let's go!" John said, helping Judy pull Will to his feet and moving back into the jungle, the way they had been going. But after several meters, they found themselves surrounded by thick thorn bushes.

“It’s like the others, but thicker,” John said. “And the thorns are much longer. I don’t see a way through.”

“Well we better find one,” Don said. “They’re coming.” He opened fire again and John joined him.

John and Don were in front, Judy kneeling behind them, Will next to her, gripping her hand tightly, all of them looking back the way they had come.

“It seems like there are more and more,” Don yelled. “That village wasn’t this big. There has to be others.”

Then Will felt something grab his free hand. He quickly pulled away and spun around. The little girl was there, the one who had been pinned to the tree next to him. She motioned to Will like she wanted him to follow her.

“Dad,” Will yelled over the sounds of the laser blasts “Dad!”

John stopped firing and turned to his son. Will and Judy were both looking at the little girl now.

“She wants us to follow her,” Will said.

The girl rushed up to Will and grabbed his free hand again and began pulling him.

“Let’s follow her, Dad,” Judy said.

“Okay. Now. Let’s go.”

Will stood and the girl ran toward the thicket. “There’s no way through there,” Don said. But as soon as the little girl was next to them, she dropped to her hands and knees and started crawling. Will was behind her and did the same thing, then Judy.

“It looks like she knows where she’s going,” John said. He dropped to his hands and knees behind Judy and followed her in. Don looked around behind them, sprayed the jungle one more time with laser fire, then dropped and followed the others.

Once inside the thorn bushes, they saw what the girl was doing. About a meter up, the thorns grew, but down here, the branches were easy to push out of the way, and the girl was on what appeared to be a sandy path through them.

Will had no problems following her, but the others caught a few thorns on their backs. Still, it was relatively easy to pass under them.

They moved this way for almost an hour. Every few minutes the girl stopped and listened. Then she would look at Will and start back through the bushes.

Finally Will saw her stand, and he crawled up and out of the thicket then turned and took Judy’s hand and helped her to her feet. When he pulled Judy up he turned back to the girl. But he stopped and stared at what was in front of them, too surprised to talk.

As Don and John joined them, they were also silent. It was hard for them to believe what they were seeing. It was a vast body of water. The sky above it had the same beautiful blue and white hues streaking across, but the light that filtered through the ice above and shimmered across the water was the most beautiful thing they had ever seen.

Don walked to the edge, where there was a small sandy beach that seemed to go on forever around the edges of the water. "Can't see the other side," he said. He knelt and put his fingers in the water, then put them to his mouth. He turned and smiled at John. "Saline," he said.

John smiled back at him, "Happy Major West?"

Don didn't answer, he just kept smiling.

"What's going on?" Will asked.

"This is why Don's the pilot of our ship," John said. "I read his theory the year before we left on the habitability of exoplanets. Major West proposed that there could be planets that contain underground oceans which would make many of them more habitable than we realized."

"Earth actually is less habitable than a lot of planets," Don said. "Having oceans on the exterior means that it has to be in a habitable zone to sustain life. But my theory was that there are many planets and moons that have underground oceans with their own environment, their own ecosystem, that are not susceptible to the dangers of space. Asteroids, severe weather changes and such. The temperature is moderate because it's warmed by the planet's core. And on this planet the sunlight that's filtered through the ice. I called them IWOWs. Interior Water Ocean Worlds. Needless to say, there were more than a few astrophysicists who thought I was crazy."

The little girl said something to Will. She was motioning for him to follow her along the ocean.

"We better go, Major West," John said. "If you're ever going to win that Nobel prize." He reached a hand down and pulled Don to his feet.

They started following the little girl along the beach. Don paused for a second and looked out across the water before catching up to them.

They walked along the water for another kilometer before the little girl turned toward the trees again. After several meters they saw they were at the bottom of a rocky cliff, practically hidden in the jungle. But on closer look, they saw it wasn't a cliff at all, but a man made structure, built of huge blocks, evenly honed and fit together, climbing into the tops of the trees.

They stood looking up at the giant structure.

"Maybe an ancient city?" Don suggested, looking at John.

“Maybe,” he said. “It would be great to take time to explore this, but if we stay much longer, you might not want to leave, the way you wouldn’t stop staring at that ocean.” He smiled at the Major and Don smiled back.

“She wants us to follow her again,” Judy said.

She was motioning for them, but Will was looking up to the top of the wall and he didn’t see her until she took his hand again. Then he smiled down at her, and let her pull him along the side of the wall.

After several minutes, she stopped. There was an opening in the wall here. She pointed to it.

They gathered around her. “We need to go this way?” Will asked pointing inside the opening.

She pointed to him then to the entrance.

“You think it’s the way back to the surface?” Judy asked.

“I don’t know,” John answered, “But she got us out of there. I guess we need to trust her.”

Will pointed at her, then at the opening, but she pointed back to him, then pointed at all of them, then to the entrance. She pointed at herself then back to the jungle.

“Come with us,” Will said. “It’s not safe here.”

She just stood looking at him silently. Will stepped toward her and took her hand and gently tugged her toward the entrance in the wall. She pulled her hand back and pointed to herself and back to the jungle.

“Dad, she won’t go, she’s going to die here,” Will said.

“This is her home, Son. I know she was captured, but she seems to know how to survive here. And I don’t think we’re going to talk her into going.”

He walked up and shined a light in the opening. “There’s stairs. I’ll lead.”

They turned and looked at the little girl. She stepped up and took Will’s hand again. She began speaking. When she was done she hugged him quickly, turned and disappeared back into the jungle.

Will just stood watching the trees where she had gone. “What do you think will happen to her?” He asked, to no one in particular. Maybe he was talking to himself.

Judy put an arm around his shoulders. “I think she knows what she’s doing, and I think she will make it back to her people.”

They turned. John was standing by the entrance waiting, giving his children a few minutes. “You ready?” He asked.

“Yeah,” Will answered.

John walked inside the wall, Will and Judy behind him, Don taking up the rear after scanning the jungle one last time.

They followed the steps higher and higher, until they came to an end inside a small cavern. John looked around carefully before walking in to it, but once he was satisfied there was nothing to be concerned with, he stepped up then turned and waited for the others. "There's light up ahead," He said. "I think we're at the surface."

Several meters down another tunnel, they found he was correct. Once again there were ancient, carved steps leading a few meters down until they were standing on the surface.

It was still cold, and everything was covered in ice, but the sun was bright and it was warming.

They all gathered outside. Will and Judy no longer had coats, as the Villagers had taken their packs and everything they carried.

"You guys stay here," John said, turning to his children. Judy was standing with her arm around Will, trying to keep them both warm. "By my calculations the Chariot is several kilometers away. I'll make the hike and come back and pick everyone up."

"Not happening that way, John," Don said. "You stay with your kids; I'll get the Chariot."

"You sure?"

"I'm on my way. Be back as soon as I can." He turned and smiled at Will and Judy. "Better get back inside and stay warm."

Don started across the ice. Judy led Will back up the steps inside the cave with John following. "Here Will," John took off his coat. "Put this on."

"It's not bad in here, I'll be okay," Will answered. "Give it to Judy."

"Put it on, Will," Judy said.

Will got the coat on then walked over to the wall and sat down and leaned against it. Judy sat next to him. Will was looking down at the ground. Judy and John shared a glance. They were both worried about Will's state of mind.

An hour later Don's faint voice came over John's radio, but it was too distorted for them to know what he was saying. "He's probably at the Chariot," John announced. "His voice seemed calm, so I don't think anything was wrong."

Twenty minutes later Don pulled up in the Chariot. When he walked up the steps he took his coat off and gave it to Judy and the four of them started to walk outside. Just before he left the cave, Will turned around looked down the path. "Come on Will," Judy put a hand on his neck and gently turned him around. "It's over." John was looking at the two of them, and again he and Judy shared a look.

John let them go in front of him, and as he watched his two children, Judy still walking beside Will with a hand protectively on his neck, he wondered if this would ever really be over for them.

The kids climbed in the back of the Chariot. Don took the driver's seat and John got in beside him.

Soon after they started across the frozen ground on their way back to the Jupiter 2, Will fell asleep with his head on Judy's shoulder. She put an arm around him and listened to his soft breathing.

John looked back at the two of them. "He'll be okay I think," Judy said.

"What about you?" John asked.

"I will too."

"You know Judy, I need to apologize to you. I think I haven't given you enough credit. You took really good care of your brother. You knew what you were doing the whole time, and he wouldn't be alive now if it hadn't been for you."

Judy smiled at her father, "Thanks Dad." Then she looked down at her brother. "But we took care of each other. And when that other girl...well...Will took the little girl's hand and just talked to her, trying to get her to not look at the tree. Trying to get her to stay calm. Even though he knew what was happening was going to happen to all of us. He's really strong Dad. You would have been so proud of him."

John looked at his children, Judy's arm around Will as he slept with his head on her shoulder. "I'm proud of you both," he said.

Chapter 7

The Jupiter 2 had just entered the orbit of the planet they had hoped to never return to. The planet where the kids never aged. The whole family was gathered on the Bridge. They were all curious about the response they were going to receive.

“Jupiter 2,” They heard over the ship’s intercom. “This is Bartholomew, what are you doing back here?”

“Bartholomew, This is Professor Robinson. Will was in the Pod when it went through the wormhole. We need to get him back.”

“Will? Why did Will go?”

“It was an accident, but it launched with him on board. We need your help.”

“It’s out of the question. First of all, there’s nothing we could do. We have nothing that would go through the wormhole. Your pod was the only chance. Secondly, you are not welcome here, turn your ship around.”

“Barth, this is Penny. You have to help us. Will is all by himself. He didn’t want to go back to Earth. He wanted to stay with his family. There has to be a way to get him back.”

“There’s nothing we can do Penny. A Discoverer Ship was supposed to go to Earth when we first left our planet. We never knew if they made it, but we sent our last Scout there in April of eighteen ninety seven, Earth time, just in case. A month later our radio telescope picked up a tiny radio wave, coming from the wormhole.”

“Marconi,” Judy said. “He sent his first radio signal across the Atlantic in May of eighteen ninety seven. Maybe that was it.”

They all looked at her. “*What? ...I read,*” she said, sounding exasperated.

“It would have been too weak,” Don argued.

“Maybe for *our* technology,” John said.

“When we received the signal, we had hope,” Bartholomew said. “We assumed that the signal was sent to let us know he had made it. The boy we sent. But we never heard from him or anyone else. And that was our last Scout. Even if we wanted to help you, we couldn’t.”

“Bartholomew, bring us in,” John said. “Maybe together we can figure this out. I think you owe us that much.”

“It’s out of the question,” The boy said.

“Bring us in, Bartholomew,” Penny said. She was crying now. “Please. I promised my brother I wouldn’t give up until we got him back. He wouldn’t give up on me when I wanted to stay

there, and I won't give up on him. Please."

"I'm bringing you in, Penny." It was a girl's voice. It was Marti.

They heard arguing but the microphone was cut off. A few minutes went by, then Marti's voice came back over the speaker. "Prepare for landing Jupiter 2, I'm locking on your ship now and guiding you through the force field. I don't know if we can help...but Professor Robinson is right, we owe it to you to try."

Chapter 8

The small town of Aurora, sets off Texas State Highway 114, thirty miles, give or take, from downtown Ft. Worth. There are less than two thousand inhabitants, and not much happens. So when the black helicopters began hovering early in the evening, just before dusk, they had everyone's attention. The citizens left their homes and the few businesses that were still open and piled into the street to stare up into the sky.

This is where many of the citizens were standing when the black SUVs began arriving. There were dozens of them. The highway was blocked in both directions, as were all other roads in and out of the small Texas town. Then the military vehicles arrived, and the village filled with soldiers ordering everyone off the streets. An hour later it was locked down.

Aurora no longer had its own police department, sharing the services from the nearby towns of Rhome and Boyd. So it was easy to isolate it with little concern of the local authorities. Once the nearby towns were notified, any nosy law enforcement officers would find the military blocking their access to the town, with all the papers in order. This was a Federal operation with Federal jurisdiction.

There was some discussion about what exactly they should announce to the press. Everything from a chemical spill to a possible terrorist attack was discussed. In the end, Dr. Gaston overruled all of that. "We'll be in and out in a few hours, and once we're gone the locals are going to make up whatever it is they want to believe. So let them."

Several helicopters landed at the cemetery south of town, where the alien body was supposed to be. Initially, it was buried beneath a tree with a sign erected and a rough etching of the cigar shaped vessel that crashed. But that sign had been stolen years before, as had a more recent one. Few knew where the original grave was actually located, if there had ever been one.

The helicopter carrying Dr. Gaston landed just outside the entrance of the cemetery. She climbed out, followed by her assistant and several agents who were not assigned to any intelligence service. They reported only to her.

She stopped at the entrance to the graveyard to read a sign. There was a brief history of the cemetery, with one sentence acknowledging this as the burial place of the pilot of the crashed spaceship from eighteen ninety seven.

She walked on inside the grounds where fifty or sixty agents had already spread out, establishing a perimeter. Several of them approached her. With them was an old man who must have been in his eighties. Two agents had him by the arms, walking him toward the woman.

"This is Bob Jarret," One of the agents said. "His father was caretaker here for fifty years, going back to nineteen ten."

"Mr. Jarret," Doctor Gaston acknowledged him.

He didn't seem concerned by all the people. "You finally came for him," he said, in a slow Texas drawl.

"For whom?" Dr. Gaston said.

"The boy. The boy from the spaceship."

"And just why would you think that?" She asked.

The old man casually looked around at all the people, the helicopters, the black SUVs. He smiled. "I didn't fall off no hay wagon last night Miss. There's only one reason all you government people come way out here."

"You said a boy?" She asked.

"That's what my dad told me. All the old timers said it. Said the pilot was a child. Just a teenage boy."

"Well, then you know we want you to take us to the grave."

"You going to dig him up, aren't you?"

"You have a problem with that?" She asked.

"Nope. I figured it was a matter of time. Just wanna know what's in it for me."

"You show us where he's buried, and we don't put you in prison," she said. "How's that?"

He just smiled. "I'm eighty four. Figure I got me maybe a couple years left. Prison don't scare me none. But that tree they buried him under's long gone. You'll be digging round out here for a month."

"Ten thousand dollars sound fair?" She asked.

"Twenty sounds fairer," he replied.

"You're eighty four," She answered. "What will you do with all that money?"

"Any goddamn thing I please. I'm eighty four."

She gave him a rare smile. "Done. Take us to it."

The old man pulled his arms loose from the two agents holding him and walked over to a tree on the far side of the cemetery, while they followed.

"Dig right here," he said, pointing to the ground.

"I thought you said the tree was no longer here," Doctor Gaston said.

"Yeah, well, this is a different tree."

Dr. Gaston almost smiled at the old man again.

She nodded at two of the agents. One of them said, “over here,” into his radio and a couple minutes later, two men joined them, each carrying a shovel.

Dr. Gaston turned to the old man and looked at him. He stepped up and put his foot on the ground at the foot of the tree. “He’s right here.” He stepped back and the agents started digging.

“Go slow,” Dr. Gaston said. “There won’t be anything left of the casket.”

Twenty minutes later one of them stopped and looked at Dr. Gaston, standing a few meters back with the agents and the old man. “Something here,” he said.

“Okay.” She looked at her assistant, a middle aged man who had worked with her for over ten years. “Keep everyone back. And have someone take Mr. Jarrett home. Make sure he gets paid.”

“Sure you don’t want to wait to see what’s in there? The old man could be lying.”

“He’s not lying,” she answered. She walked up next to the hole where the agents were waiting for her instructions. There was something shiny in it. “Okay. Use your hands.”

They began clearing dirt off whatever it was that was in the hole, until half of it was visible. It looked like a metallic sleeping bag, completely encompassing whatever was in it. “More light!” Doctor Gaston yelled. Two agents rushed up with electric lanterns and put them next to the hole.

Doctor Gaston was wearing jeans. When she started to step down in the grave one of the agent’s offered his hand, but she glanced at him sharply and he pulled it back.

When she was standing next to the shiny object she said, “Everyone back from the hole except Agent Carmichael.” They all backed away and her assistant climbed down and stood next to her.

Dr. Gaston reached in and found a zipper at the top of the metallic bag, and slowly pulled it down until the head and upper body of a corpse was visible. Without looking at her assistant, she said, “Call HQ. I want the boy moved now. To AFETA.” AFETA stood for Armed Forces Experimental Training Activity. A secret facility in the ever expanding intelligence services, located in Williamsburg, Virginia at Camp Peary. The facility also was known for hosting “The Farm,” the CIA’s Clandestine Service operation. But even the CIA didn’t know what Dr. Gaston’s group did there. They had a private unit with its own building apart from everything else.

“No one can get close to him now,” The agent argued. “Are you sure?”

“He’s just gone from being the most famous boy on Earth to the most important boy in the world.”

“Why?” The agent asked.

“We thought he held the secret to his family’s disappearance and intergalactic travel through an Einstein-Rosen Bridge. But he may just hold the secret to the origins of the human race.” And much more, she thought, though she wouldn’t speak it aloud. He may just have the secret to immortality.

She was still staring into the hole at the face of a boy who looked to be no more than sixteen or seventeen. He had a light complexion and brown hair, and he seemed to be smiling. His eyes were wide open, and they were as blue as the sky. He was wearing some kind of jumpsuit. There were gaping holes in his chest, where it looked as if someone had shot him with a shot gun. But other than that he was perfectly preserved, as if he hadn’t aged a day since he was put in the ground.

“Okay, Will Robinson,” Dr. Gaston said, as she looked at the boy in the grave. “Time for you to talk. I’m all out of patience.”

Don pulled the Chariot up next to the Jupiter 2 and Penny and Maureen and Doctor Smith rushed out to meet them, all bundled in winter coats and trying not to slide on the icy surface.

John looked in the back seat where Will was still asleep with his head on Judy’s shoulder. He smiled at them.

“Will?” Judy said. “We’re back. Time to wake up.”

Will was still dreaming his lucid dream. Awake and yet not awake. In it and observing it at the same time. He was in the back of the Chariot, his head on his sister’s shoulder. A few hours before they had escaped from the jungle which was somehow located beneath the surface of this barren planet. Don was driving and his father was in the front next to him. The jungle had been horrifying, but now all he felt was comfort. Leaning on Judy, her arm around him, her soothing voice, saying, “Time to wake up, Will.” And he wondered again if he had judged his sister too harshly. Maybe *he* had pulled back from *her* as he saw his two sisters grow close; become more than just sisters. Become friends.

And maybe it was more. Neither he nor Judy had spoken of the jungle planet...of the tree ... since it happened. Both of them trying to move past it in their own way. Now he thought, maybe his sister didn’t speak as harshly to him as he imagined. Maybe when he felt she was being bossy, it was because she was just worried about him. And maybe he needed to give her a break. He was a witness to it all, but the tree had actually held her in its grip, lifted her off the ground. She was seconds away from an unimaginable death, and she was carrying that with her while still trying to comfort him.

And...he had felt such guilt. Guilt that he had almost gotten them both killed when he stayed too long at the weather station. Guilt that it had been his idea to follow the path in the cave that took them to the jungle. Guilt that when the Villagers had tried to take him to the tree, Judy had stopped them, getting them to take her instead. He had watched the limbs wrap around her and lift her, then squeeze. He couldn’t get the image out of his mind. And later,

after they had left the planet, when she would ask if he was okay, he would always answer “yes,” quickly, as if he had no idea what she was talking about. As if she were annoying him. And he realized he had begun to talk to her that way all the time. About everything. Because he was angry. At himself. But he took it out on her. Because it was easier to be angry at her than to remember how he had almost watched her die. And how it was his fault.

And he thought she knew. But she didn’t act any differently to him. Even when he was rude to her or acted annoyed when she asked him how he was doing. The comments she made when she was with Penny were really not bad, and now he could remember so many times when she felt she had said something that upset him, she would stop by his room and apologize and ask if he was sure he was okay. He always pretended he didn’t know what she was talking about.

“Time to wake up Will,” he heard his sister’s soft voice again, then her hand on his shoulder, nudging him.

But they had escaped the jungle. Escaped the tree. He was back at the Jupiter 2 now, and his family was here. He smiled and opened his eyes, hoping once he was awake this time he would remember them all. But it wasn’t Judy he was looking at. He was staring into the eyes of Dr. Gaston. She was leaning over him, her face inches from his. “Time to wake up Will Robinson. Time to start talking.” Her voice wasn’t warm like his sister’s. And it wasn’t soothing.

End Notes

I know I took a lot of creative license with the classic Judy character, but I wanted to bring her into the story, and liked the idea of her being a lot more than she was portrayed in the show, and a lot more than her family gave her credit for.

The Aurora, Texas UFO crash was a real story that ran in the Dallas Morning News in 1897, including the supposed burial of a pilot in the local cemetery, which witnesses described as “not an inhabitant of this world,” and a local authority on astronomy gave the opinion he was a native of the planet Mars. The locals claimed he was buried under a tree. A sign was erected with an etching of the ship that witnesses said the pilot was in when it crashed. This marker was stolen, as well as one that replaced it. That’s where the story ends, and my imagination takes over.

Interior Water Ocean Worlds (IWOWs) was a theory that had been around for awhile but began to gain prominence about the time the Jupiter 2 would have launched in the late 90’s. In the original pilot episode, Don was described as a graduate of the Center for Radio Astronomy, who had developed a theory of “other planet’s fitness for human habitation.” I don’t remember, but I don’t think they ever mentioned this again in the series. But I used it to give him credit for the theory of IWOWs.

My description of the man eating tree was not an original idea. (So I can’t be blamed :) It was taken from a story that was printed in “New York World” in 1874, supposedly from a letter written by a German explorer named Karl Leche, describing his travels in Madagascar. He claimed to have witnessed the sacrifice of a girl to a man eating tree by a tribe called the “Mkodo.” This description is pretty much exactly what I used here. Hence, the title of the story “The Madagascar Tree.” No tribe, no tree, and no Karl Leche were ever discovered.

Yes, Will isn’t much closer to being reunited with his family, which means I probably have to come back to this. :) As always, comments are welcome.

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