

A photograph of a tree root cavern. The image shows a large, hollowed-out space within a tree trunk, with thick, gnarled roots forming the walls and ceiling. The lighting is dim, with a bright opening at the top, creating a sense of mystery and depth. The text is overlaid on the image, with the word 'Exploring' in white and the rest in yellow.

Exploring
The Secrets
of the Tree
Root Cavern

Contents

Prologue

Ryan Gets Railroaded

Meet and Greet

New Friends Bond

Stacy and Lisa Get Revenge

What Is It?

Breaking the Finch Cipher

Cracking the Safe

The Journals

The First Glimpse

Virtual or Reality

The Astral Plane

The Dark Realm

No Children Here

Summerland

Adventures of Sunny Island

SPAZ is not just a game

The Return Home

A Plan is Hatched

The Plan Unfolds

The Intruders

The Getaway(s)

Ryan Saves the Day

New Guardians

Exiled

A Fellowship is Formed

Epilogue

PROLOGUE

Sometime ago, in an undisclosed location, an invaluable artifact was hidden away for safekeeping. But, as time went on and with the demise of its owner said artifact was abandoned and lost to the world. All that survived were old stories and narratives concerning its existence.

Over the years, however, some one or another would hear its tale and begin a quest of their own for the elusive object; fame and fortune being the anticipated rewards for the person who would find the item and discover its valuable secrets.

And so, this story begins somewhere amidst the hot, dry and dusty agricultural area of the San Joaquin Valley, along a narrow two-lane road flanked by rows and rows of green and purple grape vines . . .

RYAN GETS RAILROADED

SCREECH!!!

“That’s it!” Mr. Smith boomed, his throaty Middle Eastern accent echoing heavy throughout the small jalopy as it skidded to a halt. A look of grim satisfaction crossed his tawny, leathered face as he compared a worn-out picture to the scene outside. “After thirty long years,” he trumpeted, “I finally found it!” He planted a big fat kiss upon the photo.

“Let me see, Boss,” Bubba said, leaning over from the passenger seat, his rotund belly pressing firmly into his boss’s rib cage.

“Ugh!” Mr. Smith groaned, plowing his pointy elbow into his hefty henchman. “Get off me, you big oaf!”

Just then, from behind, a horn blasted and a delivery truck swerved, just missing the back left corner of the clunker’s bumper. The trucker shook his fist, screaming, “You idiot! Get that rust bucket off the road!”

“Well, don’t just sit there,” Mr. Smith barked, after maneuvering his mechanical menace onto the soft dirt shoulder. “Give me those binoculars and help me out of this thing!”

Ignoring his overbearing employer, Bubba shoved his shoulder against the sticking passenger door, forcing it open, and stepped out into the arid San Joaquin valley air. A blistering wave of heat and dry, dirty air blew harshly into him. Breathing hard, he pushed forward into what felt like a blast furnace.

Perturbed at Bubba’s disrespect for his authority, Mr. Smith angrily snatched his walking stick from the back seat and thrust his own door open, all the while muttering disapprovingly under his breath. Then, grimacing from the pain in his bad hip, he struggled his way out and stood beside the car, coughing and hacking from the

plumes of dust wafting past his face. Spitting dryly, he cursed the heat and aridity of this infernal place.

Peering over the top of the car, Bubba's large frame cast a shadow on a California King snake as it slithered underneath their automobile. Across the street, a barbed wired fence marked and outlined a large country property. Beyond the fence and across a dry meadow, a blunt terrace called *God's Thumb* jutted out from the bottom of a hillside. Upon the terrace sat a house and other structures. Visible above and beyond the roof of the house was the landmark that initially caught Mr. Smith's attention: an African Baobab tree; a tall, foreign, strange looking, large-diameter tree with leafless branches that protruded from its top only, appearing more like roots than the crown of a tree.

"Hey, Boss," Bubba said. "Now that you found the place, are you going to fill me in on what we're looking for?"

"No!" Mr. Smith barked. "Your job is to be my muscle. That's all you need to know."

"Well," Bubba pressed, "thirty years is a long time. How can you be sure the item is still there?"

Through dark sunglasses Mr. Smith silently surveyed the property as best he could from this distance. "It doesn't matter," he replied in a thoughtful manner. "That house," he said, using his walking stick to point toward God's Thumb, "was its last known location. So *that* is where we'll begin our search."



At that very moment, about a quarter mile down the road, two occupants in a royal blue SUV also had a reason for going to God's thumb, and were on their way there now.

I don't rightly know what she expects me to do for them, twelve-year-old Ryan pondered sulkily as he stared out the window while fidgeting anxiously in the passenger seat. *Their family died; they're supposed to be bummed out.*

The sound of their car passing the seemingly endless rows of grape vines reminded Ryan of the sound playing cards make when slapping against bicycle spokes. Ryan removed his cowboy hat and let his head drop back against the seat. *Why do I have to be the one to pull them out of their slump? I should be riding horses and exploring the mountains behind Granny's ranch right now.*

Driving the car, sitting smartly dressed and characterized by her purposeful mannerisms, was Mary Whitmore, owner and C.E.O. of Over-the-Top Sporting Goods, a chain of stores spanning thirteen states. To Ryan however, she was just good ol' Granny.

Ryan looked over. "Gran'," he said. "Why can't they get someone else play nursemaid to those youngins? I came out here to spend the summer with you."

Granny kept her eyes on the road. "They don't need a babysitter, Ryan. They need a friend. And Lisa has already tried to motivate them," she replied. "But Lisa doesn't have your energy and charisma," she added, with a flattering smile.

"But Gran, I don't . . ."

"I need you to do me this favor, Ryan," Granny interjected sternly. "It's just for a few weeks." She patted his knee. "Besides, I have a lot of work to do right now with the ranch, and the store, and I'm afraid I wouldn't be much of a host at the moment, anyway."

Pondering his predicament, Ryan gazed down absently at the prize belt buckle he won back home in Texas in this year's junior rodeo. Finally, with as much feigned concern as he could muster, he looked up and said, "Gran, I really think I should stick around! You know you are . . ."

"I know, I know, older than a redwood!" she said with a laugh.

“Well—you are, and I think you need me around the ranch to help out,” he asserted.

As Ryan tried his darnedest to change Granny’s mind, their SUV approached a black sedan parked on the shoulder of the road. Ryan noticed two suspicious-looking men standing by the clunker and staring out across a dry meadow, toward an oblong outcropping at the bottom of the hillside. The lanky foreigner leaned on a walking stick and Ryan noticed a scar on the man’s cheek as they drove past.

Noticing something vaguely familiar about the disfigured gentleman, something that conjured up memories from her past, Granny shifted her eyes *surreptitiously* in the rearview mirror for another peek at the stranger, before losing sight of him. After making a mental note to herself, she returned her eyes to the road ahead and her attention to her grandson. “You’re right about my getting old, Ryan,” she said in reply to his earlier comment. “But I can manage a while longer—don’t you worry. *You*, on the other hand, need room to run around, and good friends to run around with. It’ll do you no good being cramped up in town and meandering around with hooligans.”

Ryan furrowed his brow and shot a hard, fixed look at Granny. “Okay,” he said. “But two weeks only, deal?”

“Deal,” granny said with a nod. “Promise?”

Ryan said (just for reassurance). “I promise—unless *you* change your mind.”

Ryan peered out his window. Rows and rows of green, broadleaf grape vines filled his view. He turned his head and looked to the other side of the road. Nothing was visible but dry, dusty, uncultivated, tumbleweed-covered flatland, all the way to the hills in the distance.

Ryan looked at Granny. “I ain’t gonna change my mind.”

Moments later, Granny turned off the main two-lane thoroughfare and onto a private road. The mailbox near the open gate at the road's entrance bore the painted name *Walborg*.

"Ah, here we are," Granny said, "Stegosaurus Ridge, straight ahead." She proceeded through the gate and up the long unpaved road toward the intriguing, rugged foothills that ran southwest, off of the Sierra Nevada Mountain range. Her tires made a crunching sound on the gravelly road as they forged along between the wide fields of tall dried grass. Large boulders dotted the landscape and became more frequent, the closer they got to the mountainside.

Ryan wondered about the uniqueness of this strange landmass. Something about it seemed mysterious; like it was hiding some deep, dark secret. "Gran, why do ya reckon they call it 'Stegosaurus Ridge'?"

"If you were to see it from above," she said, "you would notice that the mountain peaks look like the back plates of a Stegosaurus. Isn't that fascinating?"

While trying to imagine what this mountain range might look like from above, Ryan's mind began to wander, and he started to long for the mountains back home and the camping and spelunking trips he'd used to take on horseback with his friends.

Noticing Ryan's gloomy disposition, Granny attempted to lighten his mood, "You know, Ryan," she said, "I think once you get settled, you're going to have a lot of fun out here."

Gazing out at the acres of dried grass and tumbleweeds in front of him, Ryan frowned. "You're sticking me out in the middle of nowhere, with no horses, none of my stuff, and nothing to do," he muttered. "How much fun can I have?" A few minutes later, however, they passed a partially overgrown motocross track (*wooppy-dooos* and all). He raised an eyebrow. "That *could* have potential," he said to himself.

Reaching the base of Stegosaurus Ridge, Granny swung the car to the left, up the long-inclined road, until they finally arrived atop God's Thumb. Sitting along this

oblong terrace was a fairly large, two-story house with a steeple attic at its rear. The house resembled an old country church.

Granny swung the car left once again, and drove past the side of the house, beyond the newly painted picket fence that surrounded the small front yard of the family residence. At the front of the terrace, she parked between the multi-bay detached garage (where Mr. Walborg made his living running an auto shop) and the fenced-in scrap yard that sat beside it.

“Wow, look!” Ryan snapped, quickly struggling to release his seat belt.

Granny looked up, trying to figure out what had brought on the outburst. “What, that old junkyard?”

“That’s a treasure trove, Granny!” Ryan exclaimed, his face all aglow. He bolted from the car and scurried along the front of the scrapyard, peering through the surrounding chain link fence. “Look at all that stuff!”

Granny shook her head in amusement and opened her car door. “Ryan,” she called out. “Get your stuff and come meet the Walborgs.”

Ryan, still heading toward the other side of the terrace, skidded to a halt at its edge, kicking up dust that floated out over the family’s lake. Squinting against the blazing afternoon sun, he stared at the inviting water as he wiped beads of shimmering sweat from his forehead.

The Walborgs’ lake was the only body of water around for miles. As far as a private lake went, it was pretty extensive, and stretched all the way from the foothills, next to God’s Thumb, to the barbed wire fence by the roadway. Its far side was about a quarter mile away and bordered their neighbor’s property. Dotted the edge of the lake, on the Walborgs’ side, were various large, lush Willow trees that provided wonderful little shady havens for picnicking, fishing or even an afternoon snooze.

Ryan's gaze quickly fell on a beautiful blue and white Jet Ski, tied to the dock directly below him. *I reckon two weeks here may not be so bad after all*, he thought. *Even if I can't motivate the little tykes, I can still have some fun of my own.*

On his way back to the car, Ryan suddenly noticed the Baobab tree that loomed menacingly near the back of the house. Wild and straggly thorn bushes surrounded the bottom twelve feet or so of the tree. His jaw dropped. "That sure is one mean looking tree," he muttered aloud. Then, looking high above the knobby, branchless trunk, he spied a railed-in platform amongst the tree's canopy and a sort of gangway leading to it from the vicinity of the attic. "I've got it!" he exclaimed to himself, a thought forming in his mind.

"Gran!" Ryan huffed; a bit winded as he hustled up to her. "I know something I can do for these kids! I'll build them their own tree house. The platform is already in place." He pointed to the top of the tree.

Granny glanced at the tree. The soft stealthy smile that formed on her lips and the glint in her eye suggested a fond memory. "What do you know about building tree houses, Ryan?"

"Me and the boys got us a tree house back home," Ryan said. "And we built it ourselves," he added, a bit indignant at Granny's doubting his capability.

"Well, I'm sure they'll appreciate it," Granny said, humoring Ryan while opening the back of the car. "Now, get your stuff and come and meet these fine folks." She proceeded to lead the way toward the gate in the picket fence.

Ryan picked up his duffel bag, slung it over his shoulder, and followed a few steps behind.

Granny looked back. "Be sure to mind your manners," she warned. "These are very respectable people."

"I will, Gran. Don't fret."

Granny frowned. “And go easy on your slang. This isn’t the eighteen-hundreds, and you’re not an old cowhand out on the lone prairie,” she said, less than pleased that he spent most of his time at home hanging around a bunch of old-timer rodeo roughnecks.

“Okay, Gran, okay. Don’t fre—worry. They’ll love me—you’ll see.”

Ryan threw an innocent smile her way.

Granny opened the gate to let Ryan through. “See that they do.”

MEET AND GREET

On the second floor of the Walborg house (a warm and loving home made available from time to time to foster children), in one of the five bedrooms, sat Stacy Johnson, age ten, one of two orphans presently in the Walborgs' care. The other orphan was her twin brother William, whose room was across the hallway.

Slouched on the edge of her bed, her head hanging and her long blond hair flowing over her shoulders, Stacy was longing for her parents and grandparents, recently killed in a plane crash. Hearing a noise, she looked up and impatiently swiped at the single tear that rolled down her cheek.

Mrs. Ann Walborg, lady of the house, entered the room in her usual Pollyannaish manner, a laundry basket of folded clothes in her hands. Looking around the organized (but cluttered) room of computers, books, CDs, 3D glasses, and other computer accessories for a place to set the laundry, she settled for a small clear spot on the bed. The only thing in her way was an old tattered flyer that Stacy had found the other day, stuck between the floor boards in her closet. Mrs. Walborg quickly scanned the flyer:

Worlds of Paradise

Create your very own 3D Spirit World

Design and animate: People, Animals, Cities, Villages, Parks, Zoos, Aquariums, and more!

Watch your heavenly creations come to life within a paradise that you create.

Search online for your copy today!

Moving the flyer out of the way, Mrs. Walborg put the stack of laundry on the bed and then sat down beside Stacy, gently rubbing the girl's back. "Are you thinking about your parents, sweetie?" she asked.

Stacy nodded slowly.

Mrs. Walborg caressed her hair, and then using the corner of her apron wiped another tear from Stacy's cheek. "Would you like to talk about it?" she asked. "I'm a very good listener."

Stacy didn't lift her head, she merely shook it.

"Would you like some dessert?" Ann attempted. "I can fix you a bowl of ice cream."

Stacy again shook her head.

Ann pursed her lips and patted Stacy on the knee. "Okay sweetie, maybe later." Standing to leave she heard somebody knocking at the front door.

"He's here, Mom, the new boy's here!" Lisa Walborg, age twelve, squealed with excitement from downstairs. She raced to answer the door, her shoulder-length brown hair swishing behind her, her paralyzed left arm swinging limply at her side.

Granny knocked again. The door swung wide. "HELLO!" Lisa bubbled, though her voice quavered slightly, with nervous excitement.

"Hello, dear. I'm Mary Whitmore, and this is my grandson, Ryan," Granny said, touching Ryan's shoulder. "We're here to see your mother. Is she home?"

Lisa silently nodded, unable momentarily to take her eyes off of Granny's fascinating bracelet: an ornate gold serpent of sorts. Two slightly oversized glass eyes, the most prominent feature, seemed to stare back at her, with an almost hypnotizing effect. Finally tearing her eyes from the bracelet, she re-addressed her guests. "I'm Lisa," she said, stepping back, her face beaming, and her voice now calm and steady. "Come in! I'll get her."

Granny stepped into the entryway.

"Hi," Lisa murmured, with a quick wave to Ryan.

Ryan tipped his hat. "Howdy, Miss," he said, glancing down at Lisa's dangling arm.

Lisa closed the door and followed her guests toward the living room. “Mom!” she shouted up the stairway. “We have company!”

“I like your bracelet,” Lisa said to Mary Whitmore. “My nana has one similar. Hers is some kind of fish, but it’s got the same kind of eyes. I saw it when I was a little girl. She doesn’t wear it anymore, though. Can I see yours?”

Granny touched the bracelet, smiling warmly. “Oh, I’m sorry, dear—it’s pretty difficult to get off—you understand.”

Just then Ann hurried in, wiping her hands on her apron. “Hi, Mary! It’s good to see you again.” She extended her hand to Ryan in greeting. “And you must be Ryan.”

Ryan swiped his hat off his head with his left hand, revealing his short, matted, auburn hair. “Yes ma’am,” he replied, shaking Ann’s hand, with his right.

“Well, I’m Ann Walborg, and we are very happy to have you here, Ryan. You’ve met my daughter, Lisa?” she asked, presenting Lisa.

“Yes ma’am,” he said, with a quick nod.

“Wonderful! All right then, Lisa,” her mother said. “Why don’t you show Ryan to his room and introduce him to the others?”

“OK! Come on, Ryan. I’ll show you around.” Lisa raced up the stairs.

Ryan snatched his bag with one hand, smashed his hat to his head with the other, and hustled to catch up.

On the landing into the game room, Lisa stopped suddenly to wait for Ryan. “You sure are formal . . .” she was saying as she turned around.

Suddenly and without warning, Ryan yowled as he tripped on the last step and plowed head first into Lisa, sending her sprawling flat on her keister. He toppled head over heels, trying to avoid landing on top of her. “Oh, uh—sorry,” he stammered, regaining his composure. Then jumping to his feet, he scurried around reclaiming his hat and duffel.

Lisa just sat laughing. “Well, so much for formality,” she said, when she recovered.

Embarrassed and slightly confused, Ryan bumbled to explain. “Oh—yeah, Granny makes me—uh, said I have to be polite.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that here,” Lisa said cheerfully. “I mean—we do have to behave ourselves. We just don’t have to be so—*proper*.” She presented her one good hand to Ryan. “Let’s try this again.”

Ryan took her hand and pulled her up, and then as tactfully as he could, he asked, “What happened to your arm?”

“Motocross accident,” she said, straightening her clothes. “One of the whoopy-dooos got the best of me.” She thumbed toward the front of the house. “I damaged a nerve in my spine. Now my arm won’t work.”

“*You* used to ride dirt bikes?” Ryan said, pointing at her.

Lisa gave Ryan a playful shove. “Don’t look so surprised. I can do anything a boy can do. I was pretty good, too: won trophies and everything.”

“Sorry,” Ryan said, feeling a little sheepish. “I didn’t mean anything by it. It’s just that you don’t look the type, is all.” Then, changing the subject, he asked, “Can’t they fix your back?”

“Surgery might correct it—but it’s too expensive. My parents can’t afford it. Come on,” she said, ending the conversation. “I’ll introduce you to William.”

Over to one side of the huge game room, on top of the family pool table, William made adjustments to his remote control glider. More interested in science than socializing, William was normally pretty much a loner; however, since losing his family (all except Stacy that is) he had withdrawn into himself even more lately. Dressed in shorts and a short sleeve, button-up shirt, buttoned to the top, he glanced over his big, obtrusive glasses, unamused at the spectacle taking place on the landing.

Lisa led Ryan over. As Ryan scanned the room, one thing was apparent: The Lounge (for what else could it be called?) wanted for nothing, it seemed. Brimming with the latest electronics, it included the largest flat screen TV available, with surround sound, a fancy stereo system, various game tables, a dart board, and even a comfy sitting area. It was clear to Ryan that this was *the* hangout.

“William, this is Ryan,” Lisa said, plopping down into one of the leather armchairs nearby. “He’s going to be staying with us. Isn’t that great?”

William didn’t reply, nor did he look up from his task at hand. “Hi-ya, Willy! You can call me Tex, if’n you want to—most people do.” William tightened a loose control wire. “My name is *William*,” he said curtly.

“Not Willy.”

Ryan paused for a second. “*William* seems a little stuffy for a kid, don’t ya reckon?”

“It sounds intelligent,” William countered.

“Right you are, but intelligence is for grown-ups. Willy sounds more like fun, and *fun* is what I’m all about,” Ryan said, thumbing his chest. “So what do ya say— can I call you Willy?”

Ignoring Ryan, William continued glumly about his work.

Ryan was about to give up and walk away when he suddenly remembered his self-appointed timeline—two weeks to get these kids out of their slump so that he could return to Granny’s. He tried again. “Willy,” he said, bold as could be. “After I drop off this-here bag to my room, what do ya say we get outta this stuffy ol’ house and go outside for some *real* fun?”

William scoffed at the suggestion. “I don’t know what fun you think you’re going to have around here,” he said. “Have you looked outside? We’re out in the middle of nowhere, with nothing to do.”

Ryan laughed to himself at this comment as he remembered that this was basically what he'd said to Granny. However, since seeing the various features of this property, he'd changed his viewpoint considerably.

"Are you kidding?" he said to William. "Have *you* looked outside?" For the next thirty minutes he ran down a long list of activities that could be done right here on this amazing property, starting with William's remote control glider. He rambled on about fishing, jet skiing, swimming, hide-n-seek, *oh yeah and let's not forget that scrap yard.* He explained that they could build downhill racers, go-carts, a tree house, a platform on the lake for sunbathing and diving off of, and even go camping and hiking in their very own mountains.

Later that afternoon, with William *reluctantly* on board, Ryan set his sights on one last recruit. "Come on," he said to William. "Now, let's go round up your sister."

Stacy had met Ryan earlier, on her way through the game room, while he was attempting to enlist William in his scheme of outdoor fun. She hadn't felt much like socializing, so she hadn't stayed to see the outcome. Knowing her brother, she'd thought that Ryan was wasting his time. And as far as she, herself, was concerned, Ryan needn't even bother. She was way too distraught to listen to the nonsensical ramblings of some junior wanna-be cowboy.

Bursting into Stacy's room, Ryan, William, and Lisa found Stacy sitting at her computer, a pair of wireless 3D glasses perched on her nose. A second pair lay invitingly on an empty chair next to her.

"Wow!" Ryan exclaimed, seeing the strange glasses on Stacy's face. "Your vision must be pretty terrible."

"Those are 3D glasses," Lisa said, giving Ryan a playful shove. "Haven't you ever played 3D computer games before?"

“Nah,” Ryan replied, “I usually don’t have the time. The only thing I use computers for is emailing Granny, and some of my rodeo pards.” He peeked over Stacy’s shoulder. “How do they work?”

Without a word—or turning her attention away from her computer screen— Stacy grabbed the spare pair of glasses from the chair and shoved them behind herself, into Ryan’s stomach.

“Oof!” Ryan huffed, taking the glasses from her hand. Giving them a quick once-over, he put them on. Immediately, he stumbled backwards, swinging wildly at a herd of weird, wispy, ghost-like animals, rushing toward his face.

“WHOOAAA!” he cried, ducking just in time to prevent from being harpooned by a strange—yet friendly-looking—unicorn-type creature. The front half of the critter’s ethereal body was recognizable, but its back half was thin and wispy, like smoke from a snuffed candle. Ryan jerked the glasses from his face. “What in tarnation was that?” he said, breathing heavily.

Stacy grinned to herself at Ryan’s animated reaction. This seemed to improve her mood somewhat.

Lisa plopped, carefree, on to the bed laughing and pointing at Ryan, while William simply slouched against the bed’s headboard, trying his best to ignore the mirth by flipping through one of Stacy’s computer magazines.

“That was SPAZ,” Lisa said. “A program Stacy found online in an old game archive. It stood for *Spirit Park, Aquarium and Zoo*. It allows you to design and create spirit animals. Actually,” she added, flopping stomach-down on the bed, “the SPAZ program is just part of a larger program called *Worlds of Paradise*, which allows the creation of whole spirit worlds.”

“I don’t rightly believe in all that spirit stuff, myself,” Ryan said, unwrapping a piece of gum with one hand. (It was a trick he’d learned while riding horses.) “I think, once you’re gone—you’re gone.”

Stacy snatched the glasses away from Ryan. “Well, I believe in it!” she snapped, setting them down on the desk.

Ryan threw his hands up. “Now, don’t go getting your panties in a bunch,” he said. “I don’t know if that spirit stuff exists, or not. But the way I figure it is, that if there is life beyond the grave, there would have been proof of it by now. That’s all I’m saying.”

Stacy abruptly turned her back on Ryan, donned the 3D glasses once again, and re-immersed herself back into the world of SPAZ.

It took Ryan a whole hour of feigning interest in SPAZ to get Stacy talking to him. Ultimately though, he won her over, just as he had William, with the idea of fun and adventure and the promise of new and bonding friendships between the four of them.

NEW FRIENDS BOND

“Come on, let’s go!” Ryan shouted, bounding through the front door with William’s glider in tow.

William stumbled out behind Ryan, toting his shiny dual-stick remote control box. “No, wait! This way,” he said, taking the lead and heading back toward the hillside.

Ryan skidded to a halt, dust billowing out from beneath his boots. “Why that way?” he asked, doubling back. “Let’s fly it out over the lake!”

William hustled past the tall, unkempt, thorny bush surrounding the towering Baobab tree. Keeping a suspicious eye on the foreboding shape, he swung wide as he passed by. *That thing gives me the creeps*, he thought.

Along the edge of the terrace William drew up close to the hillside, in an attempt to benefit from the sliver of shade provided by the mountain range. At this time of day, the sun was just beginning its arc to the other side of Stegosaurus Ridge, where its blistering rays still bathed most of the terrace. In a few hours, the whole of God’s Thumb would be in shade, but for now the only protection from the blazing sun was near the cliff’s face.

With the back of his hand William slung sweat from his brow. Plopping down on the terrace, he dangled his legs over the edge.

“We can’t get enough lift over there,” William said, on Ryan’s approach. “We need the updraft from the mountain.” This was actually the main reason William had chosen this location, in order to get his glider into the air current that flowed along the lake and up the side of the mountain. He switched on the control box. “Ryan, turn on the glider.”

Ryan fumbled with the motorless aircraft. “Where is it?”

“On the bottom of the plane,” William said, “inside the hole.”

Ryan tipped the glider over. “Oh, here we go.” *Click!* “Okay, all set!”

William quickly thumbed the controller’s two sticks, watching the plane’s control surfaces for proper operation. He bent suddenly, taking one hand from the controller to scoop up a handful of dirt. He threw the dirt into the air and watched as the dust blew up along the face of the mountain. “Okay,” he called out. “Toss it that way.” His pointing finger traced a track along, but slightly away from, the mountain’s face.

Ryan shuffled to the edge of the terrace and cast the sailplane into the upward air current. The sleek plane bucked slightly, and pitched as it was lofted skyward.

His mouth curled in concentration; William carefully manipulated the joysticks. The glider continued its upward pitch as it rolled gently toward the mountainside, in search of the stronger updraft. The silver-skinned glider soared higher and higher, sun glinting brightly off the plastic windshield.

“Yahoo!” Ryan shouted, waving his hat in the air. “Way to go, Willy. Keep it up!”

William’s masterful manipulation of the control box caused the glider to gracefully continue circling high overhead as it gained altitude.

Just as the aircraft reached its limits of lift from the air current off the mountainside, the girls came into view, skimming across the water on the jet-ski, their hair whipping in the wind behind them while the breeze carried their giggles to the boys above. Stacy slowed the watercraft as the girls neared the shoreline.

Ryan nudged his sidekick. “Hey Willy, look over yonder.” He gestured with his head toward the girls.

William looked, and saw Lisa and Stacy, talking merrily as their craft coasted slowly over the rippling waves below.

Ryan made a dive bomb motion with his hand—a mischievous grin followed.

William, with an equally impish grin of his own, swung the plane wide over Walborg Lake. The silent attacker glistened high above.

“Uh-oh!” Stacy exclaimed. “Hold on. I’m turning around!”

Lisa tightened her hold, extra tight, with her good arm around Stacy’s waist. Her life vest, however, made it difficult to get a good grip. “Why?” she asked, looking over Stacy’s shoulder for the cause of her friend’s concern. “What’s wrong?”

“I think William’s up to something!”

Lisa glanced up the butte toward the seemingly innocent boys on the terrace above. “What gives you that idea?”

“I can feel it!” Stacy said, whipping the watercraft around.

Lisa leaned close to Stacy’s ear. “You can feel it?” she shouted, over the engine’s whine.

“It’s a twin thing,” Stacy shouted, back. “Take my word for it. We’d better get out of here—and now!” Stacy aimed for the other end of the lake.

Up ahead, silhouetted against the Sierra Nevada Mountain range, the glider bore down on its prey.

Unaware of the approaching menace, Stacy cranked the throttle.

William shoved the stick forward.

The glider-turned-dive-bomber nosed over, quickly picking up speed. The accelerating jet-ski and the descending aircraft of doom closed in on each other.

Ryan stood in suspense, his hand atop his hatted head, as the stealthy sailplane zeroed in on its unsuspecting quarry.

Wanting the best vantage point he could get, William got up and hurried along the edge of God’s Thumb, towards the retreating jet-ski, the control box pulled right up tight to his face.

Ryan, not wishing to miss any of the action, stayed close behind William.

Reaching the end of the jutting terrace, the boys stopped.

William stared, with tense concentration, between the controls as if he were looking through a fighter plane's gunsight. He maintained steady forward pressure on the right-hand joy stick. *Almost there!* he thought. *Just a moment more . . .*

Suddenly, Stacy screamed. Her hands flew up in front of her face, and she jerked violently backward, ejecting herself and Lisa from the watercraft. The girls hit the water with a large splash while the Jet Ski, as it was designed to do, immediately stopped and idled nearby.

Ryan laughed and cheered.

William pulled abruptly on the joy stick.

The glider jerked upward, just missing the terrace's edge. Both boys ducked down as the winged dart zoomed past their heads.

"Whoa!" Ryan exhaled, checking to see that his hat was still on his head.

William, still bent over, swiveled briskly, both hands still firmly attached to the controls. Tight-faced and fully focused, he continued to guide the screaming aircraft up, up, when suddenly, "Noooo!" he shrieked, as his pride and joy crashed straight into the top of the dreaded tree. One wing sailed off beyond the tree, cork-screwing its way to the ground; the other, bent and broken, partly torn from the fuselage, fluttered noisily high up among the leafless branches.

"Just wait till I get my hands on William!" Stacy gurgled, while treading water amongst the heavy ripples.

Floating nearby in her life vest, Lisa, already thinking it was funny, spat out water between laughs. "Relax Stacy, we'll get him back, and Ryan too," she added, suspecting Ryan had also had something to do with it.

"Stacy," Lisa said, once they reached the Jet Ski, "How did you know William was up to something?"

A small wave pushed Stacy up against the small vessel. She spat out water and coughed as another one caught her off guard. Using the momentum of the next wave,

she scrambled aboard the watercraft and sat a minute, catching her breath.

“I’ve always been able to feel when William was up to mischief,” she said, finally, “especially when it concerned me.”

“Does William have this gift also?” Lisa asked, holding on to the pull bar at the back of the craft.

“Yes,” Stacy replied. “We can feel other things about one another also, like when one of us is hurt, and sometimes if we are very excited over something.”

Lisa pondered this for a moment as she bobbed gently in the subsiding ripples. *That means, she thought, in order to make sure William doesn’t catch on, I’m going to have to plan our retaliation by myself.* “Come on, Stacy,” she said aloud, “let’s get out of here. I’ll hold on to the back. You can tow me in to shore.”

Back on land, William marched, red faced, toward his aircraft’s lacerated wing. “What am I going to do, now?” he said in a huff. “That was my only plane!”

Ryan hustled to catch up. “Don’t fret, Willy,” he said, throwing his arm around his new friend’s shoulder. “I’ll get ya a new one. Granny’s rich. She’ll get us anything we want.”

Unbeknownst to the children, their every movement was under careful observation. From a new and secluded vantage point upon a hill, Mr. Smith teetered unsteadily against his walking stick while peering through binoculars toward the Walborg residence. “I know it’s there,” he croaked. “I can feel it.” He handed the spy glasses back to Bubba. “And I *will* have it!”



Later that evening, up in William’s room, the two boys sat at the computer, staring at a blank email page, mentally preparing for the wish list they were about to concoct.

Ryan suddenly snapped his hands forward, palms out, fingers intertwined, and popped his knuckles. “Ok,” he said, “let’s get this shin-dig started!” He began typing: *Granny, I need your help. There are some things we’re going to need here. Following is our list.* He looked at William. “Okay Willy, what should we start with?”

Coming from a family of modest income, William looked on amazed, wondering how Ryan could be so bold as to expect Granny to surrender, so freely, all of the merchandise they were about to ask for. He scratched his head and blinked. His eyes appeared as huge marbles through his oversized and unflattering spectacles.

Ryan stared intently at his new friend, awaiting an answer.

William shrugged. “Another glider would be nice,” he mustered, feeling a little guilty for even asking. This was out of character for William, to ask for things from strangers. All of the sudden he felt uncomfortable and really wished he hadn’t said anything. He was considering withdrawing his request, when Ryan smartly returned to the keyboard.

“Right you are, Willy,” Ryan agreed. And with that he began their list. He read off the following as he typed:

“R.C. Planes – gliders *and* motorized!” He grinned at William.

“R.C. Boats,

“Snorkeling Gear,

“Metal Detectors,

“Hiking Supplies . . .”

Meanwhile, Lisa had just finished her nightly shower and was drying her hair when Stacy stormed into her room. “Did you notice their smugness at dinner?” she said, still outraged by the boys’ earlier antics at the lake. “I swear I am going to get them back for this!” she vowed, shaking her fist in the air.

Lisa grinned wolfishly. “We will, don’t worry.” She wrapped a dry towel around her wet hair. “We’ll just wait ‘til they don’t expect it.”

Elsewhere, Granny sat in her corporate office waiting for her call to connect, while skimming over an e-mail she just received from Ryan. *It sure didn't take him long to get things rolling*, she thought with a chuckle. *I knew he could do it*. She reminisced about the plan that she and Mrs. Walborg had hatched concerning the twins and Ryan, when:

“Hello!” A masculine voice answered on the other end of the line.

“We may have a problem,” Granny said, plainly.

“Tell me,” The voice answered back.

“There was suspicious activity outside the property, two men. One of them looked familiar—I think it was Musrat.”

“Are you sure?”

“A bit older, of course, but he has the same distinguishing features you gave him.”

“What the devil is he doing in this part of the country?” “You don't suppose he's looking for . . .?”

“No,” the man said, interrupting her. “He never gave any indication that he was in this country *searching* for anything. He probably just found out my identity and is looking for revenge. Keep an eye out, and let me know if he continues to hang around.”

“Will do.” Granny slapped the cell phone closed.

STACY AND LISA GET REVENGE

The next morning, with breakfast over, Mr. Walborg out to the shop, and Mrs. Walborg finishing her chores upstairs, William followed Ryan along the lengthy hallway toward the back of the house.

“Come on. I’ll show you,” Ryan said. “It’s up here. I saw it yesterday.”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember ever seeing it,” William said, dawdling along behind his long-legged friend. “Besides, even if it is, I don’t think we’re supposed to go up there—and—I don’t think I want to, either,” he added, looking nervously behind them.

“Ah, come on, Willy,” Ryan coaxed. “I wanna scope it out. I’m thinking of building a tree house up there.”

William’s face contorted in disdain. He shook his head. “I don’t really . . .” “Just think,” Ryan said, cutting him off mid-sentence, “we’ll be able to launch your new planes from up there!”

The thought of being up in that foreboding tree turned William’s stomach. It was not an uncommon feeling: He had what the doctors call a nervous stomach. Whenever he worried about something, or something bothered him, he got a sick feeling in his gut, kind of like coming down with the stomach flu.

Coming to his target, Ryan stopped. “See!” he said, pointing to the pull-down stairway in the ceiling. “I told ya it was here.”

William halted a few steps back, trying to come up with a good excuse for abandoning this plan. “Maybe we should get permission, first,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to get in trouble.”

“Have they specifically told you *not* to go up there?” William hesitated. “No, but . . .”

“All right then, all they can really do is forbid us from doing it again. Besides,” Ryan said, producing a convincing smile, “we have a good reason for going up there. We need to recover your glider.”

William looked up again at the ceiling that was almost twice the height of two full grown men. A short pull rope hung from the attic ladder’s panel. *There may be a way out of this yet*, he thought. “It’s too high,” he said aloud, feigning disappointment. “There’s no way to reach it.”

With a wily grin, Ryan cupped his hands together. “Step up, I’ll boost ya!” Under raised eyebrows, and with his heavy, thick-rimmed glasses resting on the tip of his nose, William stared dubiously at Ryan.

“You’re a little guy. I got this. Now, give me your foot!” Reluctantly, William stepped into Ryan’s hands.

Without warning, or much effort at all, Ryan heaved William up through the air.

William cried out in pain as his hands slammed forcefully into the ladder’s panel.

“Grab the rope!” Ryan grunted.

“Watch what you’re doing!” William bellowed. “You almost shoved me through the ceiling. Okay,” he said, finding the rope handle. “I’ve got it!”

“Hold on tight.” Ryan let go and stepped aside.

William shrieked as his body suddenly dropped and then he jerked to a halt, holding on for dear life, at the end of the rope. “You could’ve warned me first!” He glared down between his arms at Ryan.

“Ah, keep your shirt on, you’re all right. Now, pull!”

William shot Ryan a dirty look. “I *am* pulling! I knew this wouldn’t work—now get me down!”

“Not so fast, Willy. Now—hold on!” Ryan leapt up and threw both arms around William’s waist.

“Aaaahhh! What are you doing? Get off me! I can’t hold on!”

For an instant, the boys hung swinging and twisting, four feet above the floor, when suddenly they heard a *POP!* above them. They looked up as the stairway gave way and began to drop, squeaking as it fell. William let go, and both boys hit the floor and rolled out of the way, just as the descending stairway landed between them.

Ryan jumped up and beamed proudly.

William, still sprawled on the floor, looked up contemptuously through beady eyes. His glasses lay bent and twisted, a few feet from his head.

Ryan started up the stairs. “You coming?”



Unaware of the boys’ escapades upstairs, the girls sat around the kitchen table, finishing their breakfast, and speaking about the many and varied things that girls talk about. Just then the doorbell chimed.

Startled by the bell, Stacy jumped.

Lisa giggled at Stacy and hopped up. “I’ll get it,” she said.

“Special delivery for Ryan Whitmore!” a uniformed delivery driver announced.

Stacy peeked out from behind Lisa to see about a dozen boxes of various sizes stacked on the porch.

“Sign here, please,” the deliveryman directed. He handed Lisa an electronic signature device and pointed at the signature line.

Being accustomed to accepting packages for her parents, Lisa knew the drill and swiftly signed the digital device.

“Thank you, Miss.” The man slipped the signature device onto his belt. “Would you like some help with these?”

Lisa glanced at the boxes. “Maybe that one,” she said, pointing to a very large, three-foot cubed, heavy-duty cardboard crate.

Leaving a few of the smaller boxes on top of the crate (not that any of the boxes were really small, mind you; even the smallest of the boxes were still half as tall as the girls) the deliveryman used his hand truck and scooped up the tall stack. “It’s a good thing these old houses have large doorways,” he said, bringing the stack into the house.

Stacy began pushing one of the smaller packages through the doorway. “What *is* all this stuff?”

“I don’t know,” Lisa said, testing the weight of a large box. “But how much stuff does one kid need?” She read the label. “Wow! They’re from Over the Top.”

The deliveryman scooped up another stack of boxes with his hand truck, brought them into the house for the girls, said goodbye, and left.

Stacy helped Lisa with the last box. “What is Over the Top?” “A big sporting goods store in town,” Lisa replied.

Stacy’s eyebrows scrunched together. “What could he need from there? And who paid for all of it?”

The girls set the last box in the house. Lisa shrugged. “Maybe he’s a rich cowboy—who knows? Let’s go tell him they’re here!”



The floor boards creaked eerily under Ryan and William’s feet as they treaded cautiously across the dark, spooky attic.

“This way,” Ryan uttered.

William followed Ryan toward a window with thin streams of light coming through the cracks of the closed shutters, all the while keeping his eyes on the eerie

shapes scattered about the gloomy loft. “Ah, yuk!” he croaked, spitting and swinging his arms wildly at the cobwebs that seemed to come out of nowhere, encircling him.

Ryan looked back, shaking his head. “They won’t hurt ya. They’re just dusty old webs.”

William squirmed while trying to pull off the sticky threads. “I hate spiders!”

“There’s no spiders left in them, they’re long gone,” Ryan said, not exactly sure that it was true, but trying to calm his new pardner. “Now, quit horsing around and get over here!”

William scurried up beside Ryan, still wiping the unyielding entanglement from his hair.

Ryan’s eyes suddenly widened at the sight of a black widow spider on the back of Willy’s shirt collar, heading toward bare skin. “Here, you’ve got some web on your back,” he fibbed. “Let me give ya a hand.” He quickly swiped the poisonous critter to the floor and quietly squashed it under his boot. Then, breathing a silent sigh of relief he brushed William’s back a few times for effect. “There! You’re clean. Now, give me a hand with this here window.”

Together the boys pushed, pried and jiggled the old wood-framed window until it broke free and slid, scraping and dragging up the weathered jamb.

Ryan unlatched the shutters and pushed them open.

Fresh air and bright sunlight blasted past the boys, filling the steeple attic. Squinting against the brightness, they peered up at the overbearing and sinister looking Baobab tree. Up in the branches remained the remnants of William’s glider.

William grimaced at the sight of broken balsa wood, torn film, and bare control wires rustling about in the wind.

Outside, and a few feet below the window’s ledge, was an adjustable gangway, complete with railing, leading to the gnarly and branchless tree trunk. The fixed end was attached to the house, with hinges that allowed it to pivot up and down, while the

adjustable end hooked onto one of the rungs of the twenty-foot ladder mounted to the tree's trunk.

The well-thought-out design allowed for the growth and movement of the tree. As the tree expanded, the gangway was free to move inward, and as it grew in height, the gangway was free to pivot upward. When the gangway's incline became excessive, it was a simple matter to unhook it and re-hook it to a rung below its present position, leveling it once again. From there it was an easy climb up the ladder to the trimming platform. At the moment, the gangway was pretty level and there were only about eight rungs to the top.

William peered out over the window's ledge to the ground three stories below, his forehead wrinkled in uncertainty. "I don't know about this. What if it's not safe? What if that thing breaks?"

"I reckon it wouldn't be here if it weren't strong enough, Willy." Ryan climbed out onto the metal gangway and jumped up and down. The only movement from the platform was a minor shimmy and the rattling of its hooks against the ladder's rungs. "See! This thing'll hold an elephant! But stay if you want. I'm going over."

A minute later, Ryan stood atop the soil- and crud-encrusted pruning platform, which was constructed between the largest of the branches and directly over the tree's trunk. Being subjected to the dirty and dusty farmlands of the San Joaquin Valley, combined with the gusty winds and heavy dust storms, the platform's wood planks were almost entirely covered in a thick layer of caked-on dirt. Even the spaces between the boards were filled in and hardly noticeable.

"Willy," Ryan called out, "this'll make one great tree house, and the floor's already in place. The rest'll be a cinch to build."



Strolling down the hallway and jabbering like the school girls they were, Lisa and Stacy came to a halt at the attic's open stairway.

"Why are the stairs down?" Stacy wondered aloud.

Lisa put a finger to her mouth. "Shh! I think the boys are up there. Let's sneak up on them." With her good hand she signaled Stacy to take the lead.

Delighted and eager to surprise the boys, Stacy slipped past Lisa and tiptoed up the stairs. She paused briefly at the top to peek over the edge of the attic floor. Strands of her long fine hair whipped gently around her face from the breeze blowing in from above. "No boys," she mouthed, shaking her head. "But they opened a window."

Lisa carefully ascended the ladder, and then stopped to peer over Stacy's shoulder, puzzlement showing on her face.

"Where could they be?" Stacy whispered.

Lisa pointed to the open window. "It looks like they went outside."

"Why would they go out on the roof?"

"Not the roof," Lisa said, shaking her head. "There's an old stand built in the tree for trimming branches. I bet that's where they went. Come on, let's take a look."

Together the girls proceeded stealthily into the attic. A wealth of dust particles glistened in the streaming sunlight.

As she hadn't been able to fully investigate the attic before now, Lisa passed through the rays of sunlight and disappeared into the somewhat cluttered darkness beyond.

Meanwhile, Stacy headed straight for the open window. Squinting, she peered up at the pruning platform and spied Ryan lounging carelessly against a thick tree branch, his cowboy hat tilted over his eyes and a toothpick sticking out the corner of his mouth.

Standing next to Ryan on the filthy deck, William leaned out nervously against the railing of the trimming platform. He was doing his best to pull what was left of his glider from the grip of the ominous Baobab tree.

“It serves you right!” Stacy muttered, with the thought of yesterday’s prank still a sour memory.

Lisa strolled up and looked out the window. “What are they doing?”

“William’s plane is stuck in the tree,” Stacy said. “That must have been why they came up here.”

Seeing the boys—no way of escape! —on the platform, Lisa’s plan for revenge began to form in her mind. “Wait here,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” Stacy asked.

Lisa pulled Stacy from in front of the window. “I have an idea to get back at the boys,” she said quietly. “Don’t let them know you are here.”



A short while later Lisa returned with a bucket full of water balloons and a super soaker squirt gun.

Stacy squeaked with excitement upon hearing Lisa’s idea, and quickly put her hands over her mouth.

Up on the trimming platform, a feeling of doom suddenly overcame William. He spun around and stared back at the open attic window.

The girls had already ducked out of sight.

Stacy, what are you up to? William thought, as if projecting the thought directly to her. He watched the window—had he seen a shadow move there? He searched his mind for some clue as to why he felt so—so—he couldn’t quite put a word to it, but something felt very wrong. Finally, deciding it must be his imagination or a guilty

conscience over yesterday's caper, he returned to salvaging glider parts from his wreckage.

Then he heard Lisa shout.

“Now!”

Stacy leapt in front of the window, cocked her arm back, and let loose a big, fat, water grenade.

Seeing his sister jump into view, William instantly realized the danger and sprang forward. He threw up his hands, dropping the remains of his glider onto the pruning platform. “Stacy, STOP! You better not or . . .”

Just then, *SPLAT!* William got it, right in the forehead. The splashing impact knocked him backward, spitting and coughing.

Stacy didn't relent; she continued bombarding her brother with water balloons.

Ryan roared with laughter.

Seeing Ryan laughing at his friend's misfortune, Lisa stepped forward and let him have it with the super soaker. The benefit was twofold: the blast of water hit the underside of his hat brim, causing it to sail to the other side of the platform, while dousing his face with the ricocheting spray at the same time.

Sputtering, Ryan wiped his face. “Okay, okay, we surrender!”

“Aha! We did it!” Stacy shouted. “We got them back!” The girls gave each other exuberant high fives.

William set his eyeglasses on the platform's railing and used his shirttail to dry his face. At that moment, something on the deck drew his attention. In the thin layer of what was now mud, he saw lines forming where the water had seeped between the parallel floorboards. What really piqued his interest, though, were the two thin *perpendicular* lines crossing the floor boards and forming a large square in the center of the platform. Using his tennis shoe, William began scraping away the mud.

Seeing William's interest, Ryan retrieved his hat from where it had landed after being blasted off his head, wiped it on his jeans, and sauntered over. "What're you doing, Willy?"

"What do you make of this?" William asked, indicating the square outline before him.

Using his boot, Ryan helped clear away some of the mud. "It looks like a hatch," he said enthusiastically. "I reckon there must be a storage area underneath here. It's probably where they keep the pruning equipment for the tree. Maybe there will be some tools we can use to build our tree house. What do ya say we take a gander?"

The boys dropped to their knees, and with their bare hands wiped away more of the mud from the square cover.

From the attic window, Stacy noticed that the boys were no longer in sight. "Hey, I think the guys are up to something," she said, frowning with suspicion. "I'm going to take a look."

"I'm going, too," Lisa decided.

Stacy glanced down at Lisa's limp arm. "Do you think you should?"

"Why not? I may only have one good arm, but I can still climb a ladder. Just don't tell my parents. My father is so overprotective of me. He wouldn't approve." Lisa threw a leg over the windowsill. "Come on, let's go."

With the hatch cleared of surface mud, William tried to insert his fingers in the spaces between the boards. "I can't get a grip," he said to Ryan. "There's too much gunk in these cracks. I need something to clean them out with."

"Here," Ryan said, pulling his pocket knife from his pocket. "Try this."

Just then, Lisa's head appeared over the edge of the platform. "Hi guys, what are you doing?"

Seeing Lisa's precarious position on the ladder, Ryan hopped up, quickly wiped the mud from his hands onto his jeans, and rushed to assist her onto the platform. He assisted Stacy next, even though she really didn't need his help.

"We found a storage area under the deck," Ryan said, answering Lisa's question. "We're fixing to take a look inside."

Lisa scrunched her nose. "Why bother?" she said. "There's probably nothing in it."

"That's better yet," Ryan replied. "Maybe we can use it to store tree house stuff, like sleeping bags and such."

"We don't even know, yet, if my parents will approve of a tree house." Ryan produced a wide grin. "I like to think positive."

Leaving the boys to their dirty and boring exploration, the girls walked over to the far end of the platform and peered out at the varied landscape.

"Wow!" Lisa exclaimed. "What a view. I don't know why I never came up here before."

From this vantage point, above the house, the girls could see in all directions. Directly behind the house rose the steep and jagged Stegosaurus Ridge. Out in front and about a mile away rose the Sierra Nevada Mountain range, a majestic backdrop to the many green and purple vineyards and various multicolored—and fragrant—orchards that covered the foothills. In the not-too-far distance, on the other side of the house, Stegosaurus Ridge merged with the Sierra Nevada Mountain range. The Walborgs' property sat in a kind of 'v' shape formed by the two mountain ranges.

Lisa and Stacy peered out at the glistening lake and the little shady oases beneath the willow trees and talked quietly about the spectacular view. Meanwhile, Ryan and William continued their assault on the stubborn hatch.

When he'd cleared out the spaces between the hatch boards, William closed the pocket knife and handed it back to Ryan. Together, the boys wedged their fingers and hands, up to their palms, into the hatch openings and begin pulling.

Little by little, the hatch began to move, grinding against the dirt and mud remaining between the cracks. Finally, they wrestled the heavy hatch free and set it, upside down, onto the deck of the platform. To their surprise, the *underside* of the hatch was fitted with a locking device. However, what really got the boys staring in amazement was the deep well-like hole, *and ladder*, that disappeared into blackness beneath them.



Back in the corporate office of Over-the-Top Sporting Goods, the eyes on Granny's bracelet suddenly glowed red. She secretly covered her wrist. *Here we go*, she thought with a dreadful feeling.

She returned her attention to the meeting in progress. "Ladies and Gentleman," she said, standing. "Will you excuse me for just a moment?"

The small gathering of people sitting around the conference table responded with nods.

"Thank you. I'll be just a minute." She rose from her chair and strolled, dignity intact, from the room. When she reached the door, she quickly punched numbers on her cell phone.

"Hello?" The man she'd spoken to earlier answered quickly, as if he'd been waiting for her call.

"We have a breach!"

"I know. I just received the signal." The man glanced at the glowing dial on his custom Rolex watch. "Is it friend or foe?"

"Unknown," Granny said. "But it's got me worried."

“Ok. Looks like it’s time to reactivate the video system. I’ll take care of it. We’ve known for a long time this day was coming.”

“I know, but I’ve never been very comfortable with the idea.” I won’t let anything happen to them; you know that.”

“It’s just that they’re so young and innocent,” Granny said, her voice cracking in her anxiety.

“I’ll keep eyes on around the clock.”

Granny breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you!” “You bet.”

Granny slowly snapped her cell phone closed.

Sometime later, powerful mini cameras located at strategic locations around the Walborg property came to life.

WHAT IS IT?

“Come on,” Lisa said, leading the way through the house to the first floor. “There should be flashlights in the kitchen or laundry room.” Behind her, her friends hustled single file, each one excitedly anticipating their upcoming expedition down into the depths of the hollow Baobab tree.

Upon reaching the living room, Lisa quickly stopped. “Oh yeah,” she said, turning to Ryan. “I forgot to tell you that these packages came for you earlier today.”

“Hey, Willy,” Ryan said, looking over the delivery. “It looks like Granny came through.”

William stepped timidly forward, glancing around at all the various-sized boxes. “We didn’t ask for *that* much stuff—did we?” he asked, wondering if Granny’s store had anything left in it.

“This is nothing, Willy,” Ryan said, waving his hand to take in all the boxes. “We can get lots more if’n we want.”

Just then, Mrs. Walborg entered the room. “Oh, there you are,” she said to the group. “Your lunch is ready in the dining room. After eating, you kids should go outside for a while. It’s nice out. If you plan on going swimming, though, make sure you wait at least thirty minutes after eating. Lisa,” she said to her daughter, “make sure to wear your life vest, sweetie.”

“I will,” Lisa assured her mother.

“Good girl,” Mrs. Walborg said. “I’m going out to the garden for a few hours. If you children need me, you can find me there.” Before leaving she regarded the parcels and then Ryan.

“Goodness gracious!” she exclaimed, giving him an affectionate look. “It appears your grandmother has sent over enough stuff for you to start your *own* store.”

“No, ma’am,” Ryan replied. “Just a few things to get our vacation started.”

Mrs. Walborg rolled her eyes in amusement. “Well, you kids have fun—but behave yourselves.” And with that, she strolled cheerfully from the room.

“What luck!” Lisa said. “We have about two hours, now, before we have to worry about Mom coming upstairs. Let’s hurry up and eat, find the flashlights, and get back out there.”

Without wasting another moment, four sets of legs scrambled in a mad dash for the dining room.

After a quick lunch of chili dogs, brownies, and milk, Ryan, Lisa, William, and Stacy once again took up their quest.

“Check the packages,” Ryan said, hustling back into the living room. “I reckon there should be flashlights in with the camping gear.”

In less than sixty seconds, in what only can be described as a flurry of fingers, the four friends began tearing carelessly into the pile of boxes stacked neatly in the living room.

“They’re not here,” Stacy said, searching through one of the longer packages. “The only thing in this one is some stupid airplane.”

William rushed over. “I’ll take that!” he said, snatching the box.

“Well, I’m warning you,” Stacy said, glaring at William. “If I’m the target of any more of your practical jokes, you won’t have to worry about losing those to a tree— because I’ll break them myself.”

William sneered at his sister.

“Never mind all that,” Ryan said, using his pocket knife to cut the top off the largest parcel. “Keep looking for the flashlights. Daylight’s a wastin’.”

Lisa slid up next to Ryan, and began looking through a medium-sized box sitting next to the coffee table. “Where do you think the ladder goes?” she asked, pulling snorkeling gear from the box and setting it down on the table’s glass top.

Ryan now bent over the large cardboard carton. He hung upside down, digging his way through ropes, harnesses, carabiners, boots, backpacks, and other hiking gear. “To the bottom,” his muffled voice resonated from deep inside the box.

“Duh!” Lisa retorted. “But what do you think it leads *to*?”

“They’re not in here, either,” Ryan said, and then kicking his legs wildly in the air he hollered, “Someone, grab hold of my feet and pull me outta here!”

Lisa moved over behind Ryan. With a snicker, she threw her arms over the back of his legs and leaned down hard.

Ryan grunted as his stomach muscles tightened. His upper body shot upright, like a teeter-totter.

Lisa laughed uncontrollably at the sight, until in a flash, Ryan’s butt slammed against her forehead leaving her sprawled out on the floor.

Without looking back, Ryan snagged his hat from the floor and moseyed over to the next package.

Lisa sat mortified, her red cheeks revealing her embarrassment. All she could do was wonder why this kept happening to her. Glancing around, she realized that no one had seemed to notice. She quickly hopped up and hurried over to where Ryan knelt, digging through yet another box.

“So?” she said, casually playing off her embarrassment.

Ryan looked up. His cowboy hat tilted back, giving a glimpse of his short red hair.

Lisa smiled, thinking his hair color made him look cute. For a moment she looked at him dreamily.

Ryan looked back at her in confusion. “So—what?” he drawled, rattled by her stare.

Lisa drew herself up straight and put her hands on her hips. “So, what do you think the ladder was put there for?”

“That’s what we’re about to find out!” Ryan scooped up another box and placed it on an end table. *Pop!* His fist bounced back from a quick blow that broke the tape holding the two box flaps together.

“This used to be the Wild West,” William said from across the room. “My guess is that it used to be a lookout for bandits. They probably camped out in the hills and had a spotter hiding in the tree watching for stagecoaches.”

“Ooh! Maybe so,” Lisa said, brightening. “We read in school that the Pony Express used to run this way. And with this whole valley being flat and barren, bandits could’ve seen the stagecoach coming from miles away.”

“Ah, here we are!” Ryan said, opening a box of spelunking head lamps, glow sticks and flashlights. “Here, catch!” As if he were a softball pitcher, he tossed gear to each of his friends.

Everyone was now outfitted with portable lighting devices. Once again, they headed for the trimming platform. William took the lead through the house, while Ryan followed in the rear with Lisa, in case she might need help along the way.

Moments later, the four cohorts, light sources in hand, treaded single file across the walkway. Excitement and anticipation radiated from their faces. They reached the ladder, and one by one, scampered up the eight rungs to the pruning platform above.

The hot California sun, having already erased all signs of the recent aqua assault from the deck, beat down harshly on the four young explorers.

“Lights on!” Ryan called, dropping to his knees near the open hatch. Grabbing a flashlight, he hit the switch. His light flashed on. He pointed it into the dark, vertical tunnel. His light beam slashed through the blackness, illuminating a section of ladder far below. Shifting to sit down, he threw his feet over the side and onto the first rung, and pushed his hat tight to his head.

William put on a headlamp and drew the strap tight under his chin. He thumbed the switch. Instantly, light shone straight ahead of him. He knelt down next to Ryan, gulping anxiously. “Ready!” he announced.

“Right! Let’s go.” Without hesitation, Ryan disappeared into the blackness. He held his flashlight precariously in one hand as he descended carefully into the hollow tree trunk. Every few seconds he paused to illuminate the way below him.

William shot a look back at the girls, checking their readiness. “Come on,” he said. “Turn on your lights.” He reached out to assist his sister.

Stacy was staring blankly into the dark opening. She promptly pulled back, holding a flashlight tight to her body. The gloomy void suddenly made her feel depressed, and the loneliness of being parentless once again washed over her. “I—I— I’ve decided to stay up here,” she said, retreating to the other side of the deck, where she sat down and curled up against a large, knotted, and crooked tree branch.

Seeing the anxiety on Stacy’s face and knowing what she had been through, Lisa sighed and set her headlamp on the deck. “I’m going to stay up here, too,” she said, even though she felt disappointed about missing out on any discovery the boys might make. It seemed more important to stay and comfort Stacy.

William shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

Ryan was already lost in blackness when William eased himself onto the ladder. A moment later he, too, had disappeared into the tree’s dark interior.

Stacy looked up somberly. “What do you think they’ll find?”

Lisa eyed the deck in search of the cleanest area she could find. She made a face at last, and plonked herself down, cross-legged. “Probably nothing,” she answered cheerfully. “William’s probably right. The tree was likely used long ago as some sort of lookout. The ladder probably doesn’t even go all the way to the bottom.”

With a light breeze in her face and the crisp blue sky above, Lisa felt exhilarated and again surprised that she'd never come up here before. She reveled in the view of the rugged mountain range and the sweet aroma blowing in from the various fruit crops in the area. Breathing deeply, she took in the fresh, fragrant air as she put her hands behind her head and lay back. "This is heavenly," she said, staring up at the hypnotic azure sky. "Ryan certainly has the right idea about building a tree house up here." She looked over at Stacy and smiled in an attempt to lighten her friend's spirits.

Below, inside the dark tree trunk, illuminated only by the boys' lights, Ryan slowed his pace as the dry wooden rungs squeaked under his weight. Cautiously, he continued testing each rung before committing his full weight to it. A minute later he hollered up, "Hey, I found a boarded-up hole in the side of the trunk, behind the ladder."

Lisa sat up and leaned over the hatchway. "Are you at the bottom already?" she yelled down.

"No!" Ryan replied, looking up past William. He saw Lisa peering back at him. Her face appeared as a dark silhouette against the pure blue sky. "I reckon I'm only about two thirds of the way down."

"How big is the hole?" Lisa shouted.

Ryan estimated the blocked opening. "She's about six foot high and four foot wide."

"She?" William wondered, aloud.

"Where I'm from we call pert near everything *she*."

William dropped down a step and scrunched up close to Ryan. Looking over the young cowboy's shoulder, he inspected a small section of the boarded-up hole. "Let me see your knife?" he said.

In order to keep one hand securely on the ladder, Ryan put his flashlight into his back pocket, and then retrieved his pocket knife from his front pocket and handed it over. “What’re ya going to do, Willy?”

William unfolded the largest blade. “Create an opening so I can see out.” He stuck the blade into the center of an old knot and rapped gently on the end of the knife. A minute later, the plug flew free and a small column of filtered light shone through. He closed the blade and handed the knife back to Ryan.

“Can you see anything?” Ryan asked.

“Hold on a minute.” William removed his glasses, stuck his head between the ladder’s dirty rungs, and squinted through the small, circular opening. “It’s hard to see,” he said, adjusting his uncomfortable stance on the ladder. “There’s something in the way.”

Just then a strong breeze blew outside. “Wait, it’s moving.” He watched the movement for a moment. “Oh, it’s the thorn bush around the tree. We’re at ground level here. Someone must have once used this as an entrance.”

Ryan stood one rung below, using his body as support so William didn’t slip. “Great! Mystery solved. Now, come on. Let’s keep moving.”

William pulled his head from between the steps. “Ok, but aren’t you curious as to why there’s a doorway *here*?”

Ryan didn’t answer straightaway. He waited for William to get re-situated, taking the time to retrieve his flashlight and illuminate the patch of ground below. At the bottom, about twelve steps below him and opposite the ladder, he could see what looked like an opening of some sort.

“I’m more interested in what’s at the end of this thing,” he said, finally. “You ready, Willy?”

“Ready,” William said.

Ryan continued carefully down the creaking ladder. A moment later, he reached the bottom and stepped away to give William room to exit. To his surprise, a floor drain glistened directly below his feet. *Why in tarnation would someone go to all the trouble to put that in?* he wondered.

Turning around, Ryan inspected the opening he'd noticed from the ladder. "Whoa!" he blurted out, tilting his hat up for an unobstructed view. "What've we got here?" Before him was a short tunnel, an entryway into a small, subterranean cavern. Above the entrance was a wooden sign. Ryan wiped away its dust with his bare hand. The sign read: Tree Root Cavern. *Appropriate*, he thought, chortling to himself.

As he began to step into the ebony void, he remembered the locking mechanism on the *interior* side of the hatch above. Not knowing its purpose or who might still be using the cavern, he decided to play it safe by slinking in as quietly and carefully as he could manage. Though his light might give him away, he wasn't about to turn it off. His eyes strained in the dusky cave as his flashlight beam streaked across the root entangled ceiling. Tilting his wrist, he brought the light beam down the far wall toward the floor. Suddenly, he jumped back, and with the speed and agility of a Jaguar he one handedly pulled and opened his knife.

"The girls were afraid to come," William said, lowering himself down the last few steps of the ladder. On the last rung he peeked over his shoulder so as to make sure not to bump into Ryan, and stepped onto the floor. "Find anything?" he asked, turning around.

Ryan stood silent, just inside the cavern, his eyes fixed on the end of his flashlight's beam.

Stepping up beside his friend, William peered into the cave. Instantly, he went rigid.

Lisa hollered down through the opening, "Hey, you guys, ok? What's down there?"

No reply.

Peeved at the lack of response, Lisa grabbed a flashlight and angrily shook it back and forth, causing a dancing light show below. “Hellooo! Ryan! William!”

Still, there was no response.

“Fine,” she grumbled. “Don’t answer!”

“Do you think they’re all right?” Stacy asked, shifting uneasily. “Maybe I should get your mom.”

“They’re probably just playing some kind of prank,” said Lisa, shaking the flashlight once more. “We should close the hatch on them.”

“Or better yet,” Stacy said. “We can leave and pull the gangway up. That’ll teach them.”

The girls finally gave up and lay back on the deck, talking and laughing. William slowly stepped back behind Ryan and stared fearfully at the large, fuzzy looking mound sitting before them in the dark, dank space. “Do you think it’s alive?” he whispered.

Ryan, knife at the ready, said daringly, “Let’s find out!”

William swallowed hard and followed his friend forward.

Slowly, the boys moved into the bedroom size cavern. Their light beams crisscrossed each other, cutting holes in the blackness before them. Eerie shadows from the free hanging roots danced around the walls.

Suddenly, pain shot through William’s shoulder. “Ahh!” he cried, jerking free of his assailant and ripping his shirt in the process. He jumped back, putting distance between him and his assailant. “Who is that?” he screamed. “What do you want?” The beam from his headlamp streaked wildly across the cavern’s pitted and pocked earthen walls as he searched in vain for his attacker.

Ryan quickly joined in the search, swinging his flashlight beam in William’s direction. His light suddenly shone on the culprit. A piece of William’s shirt hung

from his assailer's grip. Ryan laughed heartily. Glaring back at him was an external electrical wall outlet, complete with light switch, to which a shred of William's shirt was snagged.

William took a deep breath, trying to lower his heart rate. "Shoot!" he complained. "That was a good shirt." He snapped the switch up. A wall light flickered momentarily and crackled on. The boys squinted as their eyes adjusted to the illumination. They now spun and turned their attention to the beast in the middle of the room.

Directly before them heavily covered in dust and grit sat a large enshrouded object. Ryan wiped some of the filth from the covering and presented it to William with a smirk.

William shrugged. "Well, it looked like *fur* to me."

To the right of the object, just beyond the light switch, and carved into the wall was a small settee. Two recessed shelves were cut into the wall on either side of the settee. The shelves as well as the settee itself were fitted with slabs of wood. The rest of the room was barren.

Ryan moved in on the object.

William plopped down on the settee's wood slab; his gaze frozen on the crumpled mound. Two small dust clouds billowed out from beneath his backside.

Cautiously, his muscles tight, Ryan grabbed the edge of the tarp and shot William a look. He gave a hard yank. Dust filled the small chamber as the tarpaulin flew overhead and crumpled against the far wall.

The boys coughed and hacked while waving to clear a view through the dense, swirling dust.

The uncovered object came into view and Ryan's beaming face looked like someone who'd just scratched off a winning lottery ticket.

“Well, that’s certainly not something I expected to see in a cave,” William said, using his two index fingers like windshield wipers to clear the dust from his glasses.

High atop the tree-trimming platform, the girls once again peered down into the dark void in an attempt to see Ryan and William. Their light beams cut through the blackness and skimmed dimly along the section of dirt floor at the bottom of the tree’s hollow.

“You guys better answer, or I’m going to get Dad!” Lisa yelled down.

Suddenly, a cowboy hat floated into view and tilted back, revealing a set of shiny white teeth. Ryan squinted as the beams of light danced across his face. “You gals oughta get down here!” he called up the long, vertical tunnel. “I reckon you’re going to want to see this!” And without another word, he moved sideways, disappearing once again from sight.

“Ryan, wait!” Lisa called.

No answer.

Her face now aglow with excitement, Lisa turned to Stacy, who was staring uneasily back at her. “Well, I guess they found more than dirt!” She swung her legs around and planted her feet on the first rung. “Come on,” she urged. “Let’s see what they’ve discovered.”

Stacy leaned back. “That didn’t sound very tempting to me. I think I’ll stay here.”

“Come on, how bad can it be? William’s still down there, and we know how much of a scaredy-cat *he* is.”

Stacy giggled. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.” She hopped up, dusted herself off, and prepared to mount the ladder.

Lisa began her descent, staying tight against the rungs. With only her balance and her one good arm to keep herself from falling, she proceeded slowly.

Moments later, Stacy stood next to Lisa at the entrance to the cavern. Both girls appeared mesmerized as they stared at a large, glistening, circular structure encircled by six rings, each one numbered from zero to nine around its periphery. At the top of the structure was a lid, and at its bottom a baseplate, each having four rounded lugs jutting out from them, equidistant, and connected to (top to bottom) by four large, telescopic cylinders.

“It looks like something from outer space,” Stacy breathed.

Ryan was on his knees in front of the enigma, eagerly spinning the four movable rings, (The top and bottom rings were stationary and did not rotate), while William seemed perplexed as he walked around, searching the object, apparently looking for something specific.

The girls hurried up next to Ryan.

“Wow!” Lisa said, running her hand gently across the shiny, smooth top. “What *is* this thing?”

“A safe,” was William's muffled reply from somewhere behind the metal monster.

“Really?” Lisa squeaked. “What do you think is in it? And—why would someone put a safe way down here?”

Ryan once again spun the rings. “I have no idea why someone would put a safe inside the bottom of a tree trunk. As far as what’s inside,” he said, with a twinkle in his eye, “I reckon it’s got to be pretty valuable, to need something this secluded and sophisticated.”

“Ooh!” Lisa squealed. “Maybe there’s cash and jewelry in it.”

Ryan shook his head. “Nah, I’m thinking more like gold bars.”

Overhearing Ryan’s comment, William said, “Well then, there must be a lot of them, based on the size of this thing.”

Stacy stepped past Ryan, to the far side of the safe, to look closely at a control box that was mounted to a pole in the ground. Protruding from its face was a smaller button box with two pushbuttons on its face. The top button was labeled UP, and the other button, in the center position, was labeled DOWN. Below this button was an empty space where a third button could possibly have fit. “I don’t know, you guys; maybe it’s not a safe,” she said. “I’ve never seen one like this, before.”

William stood up and looked over the top of safe to Stacy. “Yes, you have, Sis. Remember that movie we saw, where a secret message was hidden inside a Cryptex?”

“Are you telling me this is a large version of that?”

William moved out from behind the safe. “Yes, it’s the same concept. See,” he said, pointing out the various features. “A hollow cylinder surrounded by a combination lock, which will slide open to reveal the contents inside. The only difference is that this one requires power to open it.” He patted the control box.

“Stacy,” Ryan said. “Press that button for me, would ya?”

Stacy looked at the control box and, figuring he meant the UP button, placed her finger on it. “Ready?”

Ryan crossed his fingers. “Go ahead.”

Stacy pushed the button, but the only thing to be heard was a click from the switch. The Cryptex safe remained closed.

“Shucks!” Ryan said, slapping the ground.

Stacy laughed. “Did you really expect that to work?” Ryan shrugged. “It was worth a shot.”

After another quick look around the top of the Cryptex, William returned sullenly to the settee.

Ryan stood up and wiped his hands on his jeans. “Did you find it?” William shook his head.

“What about these?” Ryan said, indicating the two stationary rings.

William shook his head again. “No, I still haven’t figured out why those don’t move.”

“Find what?” Stacy asked, sitting down next to her brother.

“An index mark,” William replied.

“Oh!” Stacy said, fully understanding the meaning of this. “Well, that’s one way to keep people from getting into it.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Lisa said. “What’s an index mark?”

“You know,” William said, “an indicator for lining up the numbers.” As William talked, his shoulder rubbed on the edge of the wooden shelf he was leaning against, causing it to wiggle and rattle.

Ryan, now sitting atop the Cryptex and listening to the conversation, became somewhat annoyed by the noise. “Willy,” he said, “what’s with all the racket?”

William indicated the shelf. “It’s just this board,” he said, “it’s loose.”

“Well, it’s irritating. See if you can wedge something underneath it.”

“Better yet,” William said, standing up. “I’ll just remove it. It doesn’t need to be there, anyway.” William attempted to slide the shelf from the grooves in the walls. All that happened was that the shelf rattled even more. Bending down, he tried to peer between the wood slab and the earth shelf that it sat on. “Hey, I think there’s a latch here,” he said, shaking the shelf again. “Yeah, there is. I can see it.” He straightened up and began searching the walls. “There’s got to be a release here, somewhere.”

Ryan slid off the safe and came to investigate the shelf, too.

The only protrusion William could find in the vicinity of this shelf was the electrical box and light switch. He began futzing with it. First he pushed, and then he pulled. Next, he attempted to slide the box along the wall in every direction, without luck. Finally, he twisted it.

CLUNK! The latch released.

“Ryan, check the shelf now,” William directed.

Ryan pulled the shelf free, revealing a hollowed-out area underneath. He gazed into the man-made recess.

“What’s in there?” Lisa asked, crowding closer.

Ryan rummaged through a small cache of screwdrivers and wrenches. “Just some old tools,” he said, feeling thwarted. Then, in the midst of replacing the shelf, something tucked in a corner caught his attention. He fetched what looked like a pair of metal dog tags. The difference, though, was that they were shaped like the top of the Cryptex safe, and not at all like traditional dog tags.

William saw Ryan remove the tags. “What are those?” he asked, stepping closer for a better look.

“I think they’re machine ID tags,” he said, holding them out in front of him by the small chain binding them together. “There’s another one just like these, mounted on top of the safe. I saw it when I was sitting up there.”

William put his hand out. “Let me have a look.”

Ryan dropped the tags in William’s hand.

William’s first observation was that the two tags were of different colors; one was a silver tone and the other, a gold color. “I don’t think these are ID tags,” he said, after examining them. “The markings don’t look like serial numbers.”

Stacy stood up. “Let me see.”

Lisa stepped over to have a look also.

William spread the tags out in his hand for everyone to see. At the top of the gold tag were the words: *Code Key*. And below that: *CK=7*. The silver tag read, Code Resolution: *1_{CK}, 11, 21, 1211, 111221, G6, G7...*

Lisa scrunched up her face. “What does all that mean?” “It looks like a secret code,” Stacy said.

“Yee haw!” Ryan hollered, slapping his leg. “I bet it leads to the combination.”

William shook his head. “A lot of good that will do without an index mark,” he uttered.

“Oh yeah,” Ryan said, suddenly forlorn. “I plum forgot about that.”

Stacy continued staring at the gold tag. *If this is only the key, she thought, then where is the actual cipher, itself?* “Ryan,” she said aloud. “Check the other shelf. See if there’s anything under that one.”

Examining the other shelf, Ryan found that it wasn’t fitted into grooves like the first one. It just sat free on top of the earthen shelf. Nor did it have a hollowed-out area beneath it.

Stacy was about to give up on the idea for the moment, when she remembered something that Ryan had said. She looked at him. “Ryan, didn’t you say there was another tag like these?”

“Yeah,” Ryan replied, “in the center of the lid.” He cupped his hands together. “Ya want a boost up so you can see it?”

“No,” Stacy said. “Can you just read it to me?” She knelt down and smoothed out a section of dirt before her with her hand.

Ryan hopped atop the safe once again, in order to see the tag. “All it says is Finch Engineering, and after that, CK – G5.”

Stacy scribbled this information into the dirt with her finger.

Ryan slipped back to the ground. “So, what do ya think?”

“I think we just found the last piece of the puzzle,” she said with a triumphant smile. “Now all we have to do is solve it. Hand me those tags.” Without wasting another second, she took the chained tags and began scribbling all of the clues of the Finch cipher into the dirt in front of her.

Ryan and the others looked on, clueless, at Stacy’s scribbles. “Well,” he said, scratching his chin, “while y’all try and figure out the code, I reckon I’ll look around some more to see what else I can dig up.”

Ryan turned his attention back to the settee. His eyes fell on its wooden seat, and he realized that he hadn't yet tried looking under it. Hoping it was another secret hiding place—and expecting it to be locked—he grabbed hold and gave a little tug, only to find the bench give way and lift free. Peering inside, he found the whole recess filled with pumps, motors and hoses. Momentarily disappointed, he ultimately decided it wasn't a total loss, shrugged it off and proceeded to probe the equipment for a thorough understanding of the safe's operation.

Behind Ryan, Stacy continued scribbling various number patterns in the dust and dirt, in an attempt to comprehend and solve the secret code.

Puzzled, Lisa peered down at the clues: $CK - G5$, $CK=7$ and 1_{CK} , 11, 21, 1211, 111221, G6, G7.... “I still don't get it,” she said to Stacy. “Can you explain it to me again?”

Stacy paused and took a deep breath. “Okay, look,” she said. “The value of seven is being assigned to the variable CK. So, this clue,” she indicates the clue written in the dirt ($CK - G5$) can be rewritten like this: $7 - G5$, or 7 to G5.” Stacy wrote the new designation in the loose dirt.

Lisa's forehead wrinkled and her brows knitted tightly together in concentration. “But that still doesn't make any sense,” she said.

“The G5 portion of it does,” Stacy replied. “It represents a position.” She pointed to the set of numbers in front of G6. “The only two things I haven't figured out yet is the pattern to the series of numbers, and how CK relates to the first number in the series. But I'll get it,” she assured Lisa. “It's just a matter of time.”

“Oh! Gosh!” Lisa said, checking her watch. “I can't believe how long we've been down here. It's almost time for dinner. Mom will be looking for us. We'd better go.”

BREAKING THE FINCH CIPHER

Later that evening, after a stupendous seven-course supper that Mrs. Walborg had spent two hours preparing, William and Stacy were up in Stacy's room, hovering over a page full of number combinations they'd tried, in their attempts to decode the Finch cipher. Next to them, displayed on Stacy's computer screen, were a calculator program and a search engine list of web sites dealing with number codes.

Leaning back in her chair, Stacy stared at the ceiling and sighed. "I can't believe this!" she moaned. "I've tried every possible combination and calculation I can think of."

"There's definitely something we're missing," William said, standing with his foot on the edge of her chair. "Maybe we're looking at this all wrong."

Just then Ryan and Lisa wandered in. Ryan strolled up behind William, tilted his hat back with a finger, and peeked silently over Willy's shoulder at the page full of numbers.

Lisa strolled over and plopped down on the bed. "Any luck yet?" she asked.

"Not yet," William answered, tapping a pencil against his lips. "In fact, we're pretty much stumped right now."

"Have you tried typing the *actual* string of numbers into a search engine?" Lisa asked. "Just to see if anything comes up."

"We've tried everything," Stacy said absently, without really thinking about Lisa's question.

"Wait!" William exploded. "We *haven't* tried that, yet." Taking over Stacy's keyboard, he quickly started a new search query with the series of numbers from the silver tag. A moment later, a results page appeared. The top listing read: *look-and-say sequence*. William clicked on it. A page opened, revealing instructions for deciphering this type of number sequence.

“I can’t believe it!” Stacy cried. “There it is.”

Together, Stacy and William read the instructions and studied the examples of the look-and-say number sequence.

“I see it, now,” William said. “I can’t believe how easy it is. All you do is read what you see in the first position, then write it in the second position, and so on.”

Stacy looked at the series of numbers again. 1_{CK} , 11, 21, 1211, 111221, G6, G7.... “Right,” she said. “Now all we have to do is figure out how CK figures into all of this.”

William appeared to be deep in thought for a few minutes. Then, snapping his fingers, he said, “I’ve got it! CK represents the code key to use in that position. And since the gold tag says that the code key is $CK = 7$, we simply start the number sequence with the number 7 instead of 1. The tag on the Cryptex reads $CK - G5$. So, that means we take 7 to the G-5th position.”

Stacy found a clean area on the notepad and wrote out the new number sequence: 7, 17, 1117, 3117, 132117. “There,” she said, “now what?”

William removed his glasses and began cleaning them with his shirttail. “That’s it!” he said, beaming. “132117 is our combination.”

Stacy and Lisa begin jumping up and down, cheering.

“Not so fast,” Ryan said. “What about the safe’s missing index mark?”

William put his glasses back on and grinned even wider. “I’ve solved that mystery, too. And tomorrow when we go back down to Tree Root Cavern, I’ll show you.”

In a dramatic fashion, Lisa flopped backward on the bed. “Ahhh!” she moaned. “We *finally* come up with a solution to the code, and now we’re going to have to wait all night before we can test it.”

CRACKING THE SAFE

The next morning, Lisa slowly woke to the musical sounds of birds chirping in the Baobab tree outside her window. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she yawned and stretched— when it hit her. *The safe!* she thought. *Today's the day were going to open it!*

Whipping off the covers, she sprang to her feet and began to undress.

Halfway out of her nightdress, she heard the vacuum cleaner and stopped. “Oh, bother!” she huffed. *Mom's upstairs doing chores.* Letting the gown slip back down her body, she fell back onto the bed with such force that it caused feathers to shoot from her pillowcase. *How are we supposed to get into the attic now?*

Just then, “Oh good, you're up!” Mrs. Walborg said as she looked in cheerfully from the doorway. “I have to go help out next door for a little while. Will you kids be all right fixing your own breakfast today?”

Lisa couldn't believe her good fortune. *Good old Mrs. Dewees?* she thought, faking a yawn so as not to reveal her excitement. *With all her ailments, she'll keep mom busy for hours!* “Sure, Mom,” she said aloud, stretching and yawning again for good measure. “We'll take care of it.”

“Thanks, sweetie. Your dad is in the shop, if you kids need anything. I'll be back soon.” She waved as she left the doorway.

Lisa waited and listened for the sound of the front door closing, signaling her mother's departure. Then, leaping to her feet, she changed in a matter of seconds, and was soon banging on the doors of Ryan, Stacy, and William. “Wake-up!” she shouted. “Come on! Let's go!”

Barefoot and shirtless, Ryan sauntered out of his room, fastening his jeans. “It sounds like a stampede out here,” he said sleepily. “What time is it?”

“It's early, but Mom's gone for a while, and Dad's in the shop—so we should do this now!”

Ryan rubbed his hand through his hair, stirring it to life.

“Hey, what’s with all the noise?” Stacy mumbled, staggering groggily out of her room.

Ryan chuckled at Stacy’s tangled and knotted hair.

Just then William, his glasses balanced cock-eyed on his face, bounced hastily through the doorway, something like a human pinball. “Hold on! Wait for me!” he panted, tucking his twisted shirt into his shorts. Everyone laughed as he suddenly changed direction mid-run, tripped on his shoestrings, sprang off his knees and raced back toward his room. “Shoot!” he grunted. “I forgot the code.”

Minutes later, with everyone dressed and full of high expectations and images of cash, gold, and jewelry on their mind, the four junior adventurers chattered noisily as they strolled down the hallway toward the attic’s entryway.

One by one they, treaded up the wooden staircase, through the eerie attic, out the window, across the high walkway, and climbed up the outside of the massive Baobab tree and back down its hollow trunk, into Tree Root Cavern. Each of the children guessed and anticipated the contents of the Cryptex safe as they went.

“So, where’s this mysterious index mark?” Ryan asked William, upon arriving. William pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. “It came to me last night, just as we solved the code,” he said, looking at the numbers on the paper. “Since the top and bottom rings are stationary, all we have to do is find where the first and last numbers of the combination line up on those two rings.”

Ryan, Lisa and Stacy all stood poised, watching William as he searched the top ring for the number 1. Finding it, he looked straight down to the bottom ring. “Here it is!” he said, locating the number 7. “This is our index location.” Swiftly, he and Ryan proceeded to position the four movable rings in the correct order between these two numbers, completing the sequence with: 132117.

“There, that’s it,” William announced. “Let’s give it a try.”

Everyone held their breath. The room became instantly silent. The dim cave light flickered behind them as all eyes focused on Ryan.

“Here goes!” Ryan said. Swallowing hard, he pressed the circular switch, *click!* Nothing happened. A murmuring of mutters and moans sounded throughout the earthy cavern. Then, deep within the safe, a low rumble was heard, followed by a faint whirring of hidden motors. Suddenly, the loud *SLAP* of air hoses dancing to life echoed from the walls.

The girls jumped and grabbed hands.

Ryan stepped swiftly to the front of the safe, with William right beside him.

Nervousness turned to awe as the top of the Cryptex safe squealed to life. Neither slow nor fast the safe’s top rose into the air until it stopped about two feet above its starting position, revealing a hidden vault. Cheers and excitement filled the secret den.

“Woo-hoo!” Lisa cried. “We did it! We solved it!”

Stacy moved in tight behind the boys and strained, on aching tiptoes, to peer over their shoulders. “So, what’s in there? Let me see!” she begged. “Are we rich?”

Behind Stacy, Lisa’s face glowed with anticipation as she squinted to make out the shadowy shapes inside the dark vault.

William felt along the shelf and into the void, grabbing the first thing his short arms could reach: round and wooden—and heavy. Groaning, he pulled. A large steering wheel from an old sailing ship slid into view. “Why, would anyone put this old thing in here?” he grumbled.

“Here, let me give ya a hand with that, Willy!” Ryan said, and together they pulled the large, hefty artifact from the safe’s shelf. Radiating out from its round hub, and banded by a concentric ring, were eight wooden spoke handles, and fitted over the hub’s large hole was what appeared to be a crudely molded cap or plug of some sort.

As the boys tilted and lifted the wheel free from the safe, the light from the cave's single bulb glinted off of the crude dusty cap.

Stacy's eyes sparkled greedily. "That looks like gold!" she cried.

"Wow!" Lisa squealed. "Look at the size of that thing. It must be worth a fortune."

"We're rich!" Stacy shrieked. And together, the girls held hands and jumped up and down in celebration.

Setting the wheel on the ground, against the wall, under the cave's light, Ryan and William took a look at the shiny gold cap.

"She sure is a beaut," Ryan said, and then looking at William, added, "I reckon that answers your question as to why it was in the safe."

William shook his head in disagreement. "That's still no reason to put the *whole* wheel in there. It would have been easier just to pry that gold cap out and store it." Without another word, he returned to the Cryptex to see what other riches might lie within.

Ryan, however, stayed behind with the girls to admire the glistening golden disc, and to revel in their safe-cracking success and prosperous discovery. Taking his shirttail, Ryan wiped the layer of dust from the hub cap's surface. It was then that he made an additional discovery. "Willy," he called over his shoulder, "there's some kind of picture inscribed here." He looked closer. "It looks like a map."

Studying the outline of the image, Ryan noticed that it looked like the side view of a man's arm up to his shoulder, with closed fist. Scratched within the shape were the words: *Blood Island*. "Yee haw!" he hollered. "I think we've got us a wheel from a real-life pirate ship!"

Just as the words left Ryan's mouth a strong blast of air, appearing as if out of nowhere, slammed against him, almost knocking him off his feet. "Whoa!" he cried, stumbling sideways. "Where did that come from?"

Lisa looked over at Ryan. “What?” she asked, wondering why he looked so stupefied.

“Didn’t you gals feel that gust of wind?”

Stacy and Lisa looked curiously at one another and then back to Ryan, both answering in the negative.

Ryan shrugged it off. “Come on,” he said, “let’s see what else Willy’s found.”

Approaching the safe, Ryan, Stacy, and Lisa found William swinging his short arms in all directions, fruitlessly groping within the deep dark vault. Finally, empty-handed, he withdrew. “I don’t think there’s anything else in there,” he said. “But, I’m not really sure. I can’t reach all the way in.”

With the ship’s wheel, and the possibility of it being from a pirate ship, fueling Ryan’s imagination, his mind began conjuring up images of gold coins, jeweled swords, and other riches. He quickly stepped forward. “Let me take a gander, Willy,” he said. “I have a longer reach than you do.”

Ryan leaned forward into the dark vault, his hat snagging on the safe’s top and getting knocked off in the process. It fell to the earthen floor. Stretching out as far as he could, he swept his arms in wide arcs. A moment later, the tips of his fingers brushed against a stack of ridged objects. “I feel something, Willy. Give me a boost up.”

Grabbing Ryan’s foot, William hoisted him up deeper into the compartment.

Ryan slithered in. “It feels like books,” his voice echoed back.

Lisa pushed her way forward, uprooting William from his position in front of the safe. “Ooh! Let me see,” she urged. “I bet they’re important.”

Ryan pulled the rigid stack toward him. “It’s just a bunch of notebooks,” he called back.

William glowered at Lisa. “They’re probably nothing but some old bank ledgers!”

“Or maybe they’re full of more clues,” Lisa said, finding this little treasure hunt exhilarating.

Ryan backed his way out of the safe, bringing the notebooks with him. Resting on top of the stack was a finely handcrafted wooden box, slightly larger than a cigar box.

Lisa’s eyes lit up at this new discovery. “Ooh! I’ll take this, instead.” She seized the box before William could protest. Her eyes sparkled with anticipation as she read the I.D. tag on its lid: *Prototype – Property of David Finch*. She rotated the lid open, peered in—and frowned. Snapping the lid closed, she pushed the box back into William’s hands. “I changed my mind! I’ll take these after all!” She promptly scooped up the notebooks and scooted off toward the settee.

“Hey!” William grumbled. “If *you* don’t want it, what makes you think *I* do?”

“I can think of no one better suited for what’s in that box than you,” Lisa said, setting down the notebooks.

William opened the box and glanced inside. “Why?” he replied indignantly, “because I wear glasses?”

“Well, that,” Lisa said with a chuckle, “and because you’re probably the only one who might be able to figure out what they *really* are.”

Still disgruntled, William returned his attention to the box. Inside he found an old and very strange pair of glasses, the likes of which he’d never seen before. Along the top edge of the bulky black frames, the full width of the lenses, was mounted a small box. And, affixed to the outside of the beefy ear pieces, fastened near the lenses, were rotating arms, with foam tips at their ends covering what seemed to be mini speakers. William found the lenses themselves fascinating, as their outsides were completely blacked out, while their insides contained many tiny light-emitting windows (LEWs). William was indeed intrigued, and decided to find himself a place to plop down and further investigate this fascinating oddity.

Seeing William sit down on the floor near her, Lisa held up one of the notebooks and cleared her throat to get his attention. “These aren’t bank ledgers,” she said. “These are journals—concerning various topics.”

William looked back over his shoulder at Lisa. “Does one of those topics happen to concern these weird glasses?”

“I haven’t seen anything on them yet,” Lisa replied, “but I’ll keep looking.”

Back inside the Cryptex, Ryan was inching his way out when, by surprise, he discovered something he’d never expected to find inside the safe. *Why in tarnation would anyone put an electrical box in here?* he wondered.

Standing outside the safe, and being the only one without anything to investigate, Stacy awaited Ryan’s exit. “Is that all there is?” she asked as he dropped to the floor.

Ryan bent down and retrieved his hat. “I reckon so,” he said. “Though, I must say, for a big, fancy safe, I sure did expect to find something a lot more valuable than this ol’ stuff. The only thing of any value here is that gold hubcap.”

“Maybe there’s more value to this stuff than meets the eye,” Stacy suggested.

“Well, unless those are magic glasses,” Ryan said, thumbing toward William and his funky discovery, “or those notebooks lead to some secret treasure, then I doubt it.”

Disappointed by Ryan’s take on the situation, Stacy hung her head sadly.

Ryan saw the defeated look on Stacy’s face. “I reckon, though,” he said, “if you want to, we could take another gander at that ship’s wheel. There could be some clues there I missed. What do ya say?”

Stacy cheerfully agreed, and together she and Ryan began strolling over toward the wheel—when one of the journals on the settee caught Ryan’s attention, with a sketch of the open Cryptex on its cover. He turned his head to read the title: *Cave Equipment Manual*. Something about the drawing looked peculiar. Ryan turned his gaze

to the real safe. He hadn't noticed it before, standing as close to it as he had been, but he could see it now, a discrepancy between the vault's height and the safe's overall height.

"Stacy," Ryan said. "Does that vault look too short to you?"

Stacy looked at the safe. "What do you mean?"

Ryan rubbed his chin, thinking. "Well, I'm just wondering why anyone would build such a tall safe for such a small vault."

"Who cares," Stacy said, finally annoyed—and bored with what appeared to be a failed adventure. "I'm going back to the house." She started for the exit.

"Wait!" Ryan shouted. "I've got it. There's probably another vault below this one, and I bet *that's* where the treasure is!"

Stacy stopped. "What treasure?"

Ryan rushed over to the control box and punched the UP button—nothing happened. He punched it again.

The short vault remained stationary. "Shucks," he said, kicking his boot through the dirt. "I was sure that was gonna work." He pushed the DOWN button and watched somberly as the safe hissed air and closed.

Stacy stared inquisitively at Ryan, awaiting an explanation.

"A pirate's treasure," Ryan explained. "I figure since they have the wheel from a pirate ship, then they must have the treasure, also. Otherwise, like Willy said, why store the wheel at all, especially in a secret cavern, deep underground, in this oversized safe?"

Stacy shook her head at Ryan's apparent obsession with pirate treasure. "If that wheel really did come from a pirate ship," she said, "then I think the only treasure you're ever going to see from it is that gold hubcap."

Hearing the escaping air from the safe's cylinders caused William to look up from where he sat on the floor at the back of the cave. Seeing Stacy and Ryan

standing around talking, he called to them. “Hey guys! Have you ever seen anything like these before?” He stood and strolled over to the safe just as it closed, and placed the queer-looking glasses on its top.

Disheartened and grumpy over not finding anything more of value in the safe, Ryan waved William off. “I’m not interested in some old glasses,” he said. “I’m going back to the ship’s wheel to see if I can find any clues. Stacy, you coming?”

“No,” Stacy said, “I’m going to stay here and check out these glasses.” Remaining with William, Stacy slid open the lid to the small box attached to the frames. Peering in, she noticed that half of the slim wooden container housed an empty battery compartment, while the other half contained miniature circuitry. “What do you think they are?” she asked, poking cursorily around in the circuitry compartment.

William shrugged a shoulder. “I was hoping you might have an idea.”

Stacy closed the lid to the compartment and donned the glasses in an attempt to peer through the darkened lenses. “They appear to be some sort of primitive, self-contained, computer glasses, or maybe a prototype for 3D glasses.”

“Then how do you explain the LEWs?”

Removing the glasses, Stacy studied the tiny crystals. “Maybe that’s what it took to project three dimensions, back in the old days.”

“Hey, guys,” Ryan grunted, lugging the ship’s wheel toward them. “Take a look at this!” He muscled the artifact up on top of the safe. “What do *y’all* make of it?” He pointed to the image of Blood Island.

Stacy traced the outline of the landmass with her finger and wrinkled her nose. “That’s not somewhere I’d want to visit,” she said.

“But what d’ya think it is?” Ryan pressed. “I think it could be a treasure map!”

William examined the figure. “Usually,” he said, “markings on a helm designate the ship’s home port.”

Ryan thumped the hubcap. “Since when do pirates have home ports?”

“You’ve got a point,” William said, pondering Ryan’s comment. “I guess it *could* indicate the place of some pirates’ horde. But alone, it’s certainly not a map. There are no clues or directions to any specific location. So, by itself, it’s useless. Besides, I doubt that that’s the island’s real name, anyway. And without knowing its true name, or its coordinates, there’s no way to find it—or any treasure that might be there.”

“Well,” Stacy interjected. “That might not be entirely true. If that outline is a fairly accurate representation of a real landmass, then there are online programs that can take that image and search various Internet maps for a match.”

“That’s it!” Ryan exploded. “That’s what we have to do! So, how do we begin?”

Stacy had just begun to explain the process to Ryan when, from somewhere behind them, they heard a low rumble. Ryan and the twins paused to listen, trying to discover its source. Turning, they saw Lisa sitting on the settee, holding her stomach and giggling.

The cave echoed with laughter as the kids decided unanimously that the sound signaled lunch.

THE JOURNALS

After a satisfying meal of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, the kids decided to split up in order to get more accomplished. William set off on a mission to find batteries for the cryptic glasses, while Ryan, after a little instruction from Stacy on Internet research, attempted to chase down leads to Blood Island. The girls, however, decided to return to Stacy's room, and with the help of the journals, mount a quest of their own into the mystery of Tree Root Cavern.

"You know what I don't get," Stacy said, pondering the whole situation, "is why someone would put a lock on the *inside* of the tree. It makes no sense."

"Right now, none of it makes any sense," Lisa said, pulling the stack of notebooks closer. "That's why we need to go through these journals, to see if they will provide some answers."

Lisa began looking over the titles. The first one in the stack was the cave equipment manual—she left this for Ryan. The title of the next one was only partially legible; however, looking through it, she saw a sketch of the funky glasses that William was investigating. She saved this one for him. The third journal, entitled *Pyramid*, was a leather-bound daybook. White stitching outlined the title and cover design, a series of triangles within a larger triangle. The final volume was simply labeled, *Game Specs*. Since Stacy was the game enthusiast of the group, Lisa handed this one to her, which left the *Pyramid* journal for herself.

Just then, from down the hall, William approached, whistling. *She'll be coming around the mountain when she comes . . .*

As he ambled into the room, Stacy rolled her eyes at the comical sight of her twin using his exhalations (while whistling) to cool off a piping-hot corn dog.

"Well," she said, "did you find any batteries?"

William took a bite of his corn dog. “No,” he said, between chews. “But I talked to your dad, Lisa. He said he’ll pick some up when he goes out.”

Lisa stared apprehensively at William. “You didn’t tell him what they were for, did you?”

William shook his head as he swallowed his food. “I told him they were for my plane.”

“Good!” Lisa said, breathing a sigh of relief. “We certainly don’t need him asking any questions right now. Okay, let’s get started!” she directed. “Everyone take a journal.”

Leaving the strange glasses on the desk, William sat down on the bed with the girls.

“Here,” Lisa said, handing William the journal she had put aside for him. “I think you’ll find this one to your liking.”

Looking down at the worn cover, William raised a curious eyebrow. Barely legible were the words: *quency asses*.

What in the world could this be? he thought, opening the grungy notebook. The title page simply read: *Design Specifications*. No help there, he decided. However, upon scanning a few more pages, he came to a part of a sentence that read, “...the frequencies used by these glasses cause . . .” He stopped and closed the book.

Looking once again at the obscure phrase on its cover, he smiled at the simplicity of the solution.

Getting up from the bed, William retrieved a mechanical pencil from Stacy’s desk and filled in the missing letters. The title now read: *Frequency Glasses*. “Well, now that I know what they are,” he said to himself, “let’s see what they’re supposed to do.” Returning to the bed, he flipped open the notebook once again, and took up where he left off.

On either side of William, the girls remained intriguingly engrossed in their own notebooks.

With only one good arm, Lisa struggled as best she could, and without complaint, with the investigation of the heavier, leather-bound daybook. She didn't seem to mind, as the topic within her journal read more like the exploits of an international spy than that of an engineer and inventor.

Just as Lisa was getting to gist of the information, Ryan burst noisily through the door, interrupting her concentration. "Stacy," he said, "I need your help. All I could find on that web search about Blood Island were some movie listings, a few fictional book titles, and a description that blood islands are some sort of cell clusters in the human body. I reckon it's time to try your idea about matching map images, now."

"Later," Lisa said, preventing Stacy's reply. "Right now, we need *your* help going through these journals before my mom gets back. I don't want her to see these yet, because she'll start asking a lot of questions that we don't want to answer right now." She slid the remaining journal toward Ryan. "Go through it and see what you can learn. We'll go over our findings together once we all finish."

Ryan noticed that this was the same journal that he'd seen in the cave, the one with the picture of the Cryptex safe on its cover. Still curious as to the safe's disproportional parts, he accepted the notebook, and found himself a place on the bed to sit.

Lisa was about to take up her journal once again, when Stacy suddenly grabbed her arm.

"Lisa," she cried. "You've got to see this!"

Masking her displeasure at being delayed further from the intriguing *Pyramid* journal, Lisa simply smiled and peered questioningly at Stacy.

“I can’t believe it!” Stacy said. “These are the design specs for the SPAZ game!”

Lisa leaned over to take a look. “You mean—the one you’ve been playing?”

“Yes,” Stacy bubbled. “Now it makes sense why that flyer I found was in your house. This game must have been developed for use with those funky 3D glasses.” She pointed to the desk where William had left what was now known (to him) as the Frequency Glasses.

“So, besides creating all of this other stuff,” Lisa said, “this David Finch guy designed and wrote computer games, too? He must’ve truly been a genius.”

“No,” Stacy said, remembering that a woman’s name was in this journal. “Actually, I think someone else created the game. I saw her name here, somewhere.” Stacy flipped back a few pages. “Yeah, here it is. Mary G. Lipton.”

Upon hearing this name, Ryan looked up, dumbstruck. “What was that name you just read?”

Looking back to her journal, Stacy verified the name of the game’s designer. “Mary G. Lipton,” she repeated.

Ryan shot inquisitive looks from one girl to the other. “Let me take a gander at that,” he said, reaching for the notebook.

The girls looked at each other in confusion as he pulled the journal away.

Ryan slapped his knee, “Well I’ll be!” he cried. “This is Granny’s name. It looks like she’s the one that wrote this SPAZ game you like, Stacy. I didn’t even know she believed in this spirit world stuff.”

Lisa thought back to her meeting with Ryan’s grandmother, when they’d first arrived. “But—your grandmother introduced herself as Mary Whitmore,” she said to Ryan.

“Sure enough!” Ryan admitted. “However,” he said, stabbing a finger in the air, “Lipton was her name before she was married.”

“But, surely there’s more than one Mary G. Lipton in the world,” Stacy suggested.

“I reckon so,” Ryan agreed. “But there’s only one way to find out; we’ll have to ring her up—but not yet! First, I reckon we oughta see what more there is to all of this stuff.”

Meanwhile, William sat off to the side, hunched over the journal lying open on the bed in front of him. Oblivious to the conversation around him, he probed deeper into a subject of a supernal nature. His eyes drank in every word. He was scarcely breathing as he pored over the book’s contents.

Lisa, happy to get back to the leather-bound daybook, decided to read it at her desk, where hopefully she’d be less likely to be disturbed. Taking a lollipop from her candy jar, she stuck it in one side of her mouth—like a chipmunk with a cheek full of nuts. Then, like a true research journalist, she began to scrutinize and decipher the enigma of the *Pyramid* journal. She delved wholeheartedly into the book that talked of mystery, secrecy, covert actions and code names.

Soon, her expression changed to fascination when she came upon a complex drawing of equilateral triangles—the image more detailed than its counterpart on the cover.

The information most prominent that Lisa gained from this diagram was the words: Pyramid division – a special covert team, and Ghost – U.S.M.C. Commander, unit Leader. Two other names that also caught her attention were Eel and Shark. Both of these were titled: Navy Seal (Elite) - Anti-Terrorist Specialist. The whole drawing looked like a top-down view of a strange truncated pyramid.

Over on the bed, Ryan continued his study of the Cave Equipment journal. After scanning various pages concerning hoses, pumps, motors, and mathematical equations, he turned to one showing a detailed sketch of the inside of the safe.

Ah! Here we go! he thought. *Now, let's see what you're hiding.* After studying the image for many minutes, he eventually decided that the area under the vault was nothing more than a maintenance crawlspace. He was about to turn the page when he saw Lisa waving him over.

“Ryan,” she whispered. “Come have a look at this.”

Ryan set his journal down and slipped quietly off the bed, so as not to disturb the twins, and stepped up beside Lisa. “What’s up?” he asked softly.

“I think this David Finch guy might have been a spy!”

Ryan picked up Lisa’s used lollipop stick and put the clean end into the corner of his mouth. “What makes ya think that?”

Lisa looked disgusted by Ryan’s actions. “Do you have to chew on everything you come across?”

Ryan shrugged. “It’s better than chewing tobacco.”

Lisa looked even more revolted by this comment. She shook it off. “Never mind,” she said. “Take a look at this.” She pointed to the drawing. “Doesn’t this look like he could have been some type of covert operative? It could explain the cave and the safe.”

Ryan considered the diagram and a few of the daybook’s other pages. “Nah,” he said. “I reckon someone was just writing a novel or something. These are probably just their notes.”

“I guess that does make more sense,” Lisa agreed. “But still, I can’t help but wonder why someone would find it necessary to create this big elaborate safe, fill it with nothing of any apparent value, and hide it in the bottom of a hollow tree.”

Crossing his arms, Ryan leaned back against the desk. “Well,” he said. “If this David Finch person was a spy, don’t ya think we would have found some sort of secret spy equipment in the safe?”

Lisa chuckled. "You're probably right!" she said, closing the notebook. "With all of this mystery and secrecy lately, I guess my imagination just got the better of me."

Ryan smiled and ambled back across the room, where he stretched out along the foot of the bed.

Lisa hopped up on her knees next to Ryan, and glanced over at Stacy, who was still reading the *Game Design* journal. "You know," Lisa said to Ryan. "It's still pretty amazing that your grandmother may have been the one who wrote the SPAZ program."

"Oh, yeah!" Ryan said, sitting back up. "I almost forgot about that!" He hopped to his feet. "I reckon it's time we found out for sure. What do ya say?"

Lisa leapt to her feet. She followed Ryan toward the door, grabbed his hat from the dresser, put it on, and hurried up next to him. "Do I look like a cowgirl?" she asked.

Ryan sized her up and shook his head. "Not in that getup," he said, referring to her shorts and frilly top.

Lisa struck a cutesy pose. "Maybe I'll start a new trend," she said with a laugh.

Stacy glanced up from her reading. "Hey, where do you two think you're going?"

Lisa looked back. "We're going to call Ryan's grandmother, to see if she knows anything about the SPAZ game."

"Well, hurry back," Stacy said, frowning. "You're the one who made a big deal about rushing through these journals."

Waving acknowledgment, Lisa disappeared through the doorway behind Ryan.

William, in the meantime, remained engrossed in his journal. His eyes, frozen wide with interest, appeared the size of half dollars through his thick Coke-bottle lenses.



Mary Whitmore (aka Mary G. Lipton, aka Granny) was sitting at her desk, checking a few figures in her ledger when the phone rang. She looked at the caller ID and smiled. “Hello, Ryan!”

“Hi Gran, how’re you?”

“I’m fine, dear. Did you kids get the things I sent over?”

“Yeah—they’re great! We haven’t used them all yet, but we will,” he assured her.

“Good, I’m glad to hear it,” she replied, all the while feeling that there was more to his call than pleasantries. Right, she was, as in his next breath Ryan came straight to the point.

“Granny,” he said. “We were wondering if’n you ever heard of a computer program called SPAZ?”

“We?” Mary asked, a peculiar grin creeping across her lips.

“Me and Lisa,” Ryan said, looking at his friend. “She’s here with me.” “Why do you ask?” she probed.

“Well, you see,” Ryan said. There was a pause, and Granny tilted her head to consider what he might *not* be telling her. At last, he continued. “Stacy found this here computer game online and we noticed that the designer’s name was Mary G. Lipton, and well—wasn’t that your name before you were hitched to Granddad?”

Mary chuckled. “Yes Ryan. That was my maiden name.” “So, is that you, Gran? Did *you* design the SPAZ program?”

“Oh dear, that was a long time ago,” Mary said, her thoughts going to the past.

She heard Lisa in the background, bubbling with excitement and a low whistle from her grandson. “Well, I’ll be a leapin’ lizard!” he exclaimed. “I never knew you wrote computer programs, Gran!”

Mary laughed a hearty laugh. “There’s a *lot* you don’t know about your old Granny, Ryan,” she said with a glint in her eye.

The conversation continued a few more minutes, with Granny talking about how surprised she was that her program had lasted so many years, and that kids were still enjoying it today.

“Well now, is there anything else I can help you with?” Mary asked as the call wound down.

“No, Gran, that’s all for now,” Ryan replied.

“Well then,” she said, looking down at her ledger, “I guess I’d better get back to my books.”

Ryan’s voice rang in her ear, and she smiled at his enthusiasm. “Sure thing, Gran!”

As the call ended, Lisa looked at Ryan, “Wow! I can’t wait to tell Stacy it *was* your grandmother that designed the SPAZ program.”

Ryan, however, had lost his grin as soon as the call was over. He now stood staring out the window, his lips pulled tight, deep in concentration.

Lisa noticed the perplexed look on his face. “What’s wrong, Ryan?”

He turned away from the window and stared into Lisa’s intense brown eyes. “There’s still something cattywampus here!” he said, rubbing his chin. “Since Granny’s journal was stored here, then it figures that she knew about Tree Root Cavern and the Cryptex safe. So, what I can’t figure is why she didn’t tell me about all this stuff when we first arrived. She didn’t even tell me that she knew this place.”

“Perhaps she was just trying to honor Mr. Finch by keeping his secret,” Lisa suggested.

“Maybe,” Ryan conceded. “But my gut tells me that there’s more to it than that.”

Lisa stood and gestured toward the door. “Then, I say we get back to the journals and keep digging.”

Ryan nodded his approval. “Right you are! Let’s go.”

THE FIRST GLIMPSE

Lisa's dad was shorter than average, but lean and solid. His narrow face sported a well-groomed mustache, and his jet-black hair was cropped short. "William!" he called, ascending the staircase into the upstairs game room. "Are you up here?"

"Oh, shoot!" William muttered. "It's Mr. Walborg. Stacy," he said, shoving his notebook under his pillow. "Hurry! Hide the journals."

Stacy didn't respond.

William looked over at his sister and, noticing that she was asleep, jumped up, swiftly hid the remaining three journals, and rushed to the door.

"I'm in here!" he called, seeing Mr. Walborg approach in his grease-smudged mechanic's overalls.

"Oh, there you are!" Mr. Walborg said, reaching the doorway. "Here are the batteries you wanted." He handed William a small, brown paper bag. "I threw in a few extras for good measure," he added. "So, how's your glider coming? When I saw it last, it looked like it was about finished and ready to fly."

"Well," William said, a bit sheepishly, "I did finish it, and it did fly—for about three minutes, until I crashed it into that old tree out beside the house. But Ryan's grandmother already sent over a replacement. Now all I have to do is build *that* one."

"That's all right!" Mr. Walborg said, tussling William's hair. "Building them is half the fun. Let me know when you get the new one finished. I'd like to see it fly."

"I will," William said.

And with that Mr. Walborg turned and left.

William peeked down the hallway and watched Mr. Walborg cross the game room and disappear down the stairs. Hastening to the desk, he filled the battery compartment of the Frequency Glasses. *Just wait until the others find out what these things*

really do, he thought with a knowing grin. He donned the glasses and flipped the switch. *I sure hope this works.*

The dim LEWs began flashing rapidly, and his eyes were immersed in twinkling brightness. He rotated the boom arm speakers down over his ears, and heard a pattern of soft humming sounds. Suddenly, an *EXPLOSION* of light filled his head. He stood frozen, mesmerized. He felt a pulling sensation from within, as if he was being sucked right out of his body. There was a slight *pop* as his *astral body* separated from his physical body and then . . .

“Welcome William! We’ve been expecting you.”



“Stacy, wake up!” William hissed, shaking her shoulder.

Stacy stirred. “What?” she griped, sleepily.

William held out the glasses. “Here! You’re going to want to check these out.”

Stacy looked up through squinted eyes. “Oh, you got them working.” She yawned. “Are they as good as mine?”

William grinned. “Better!”

VIRTUAL OR REALITY

“I don’t care about them ol’ glasses,” Ryan protested as William pushed him down into the desk chair.

“Really, Ryan, you’ve got to see this!” William insisted. “They’re much better than Stacy’s glasses. And you don’t even need to look at a computer screen. Everything is self-contained within the glasses. Here, just give them a try.” He shoved the Frequency Glasses at Ryan.

“All right, all right,” Ryan huffed, taking the glasses. “But really, I’m not much of a game person. I told y’all that before.”

“Oh, I think you’ll like this game,” William replied, a prankish grin appearing on his face.

Reluctantly, Ryan slipped the heavy and cumbersome frames onto his face. “Okay, now what?”

William rotated the boom arm speakers down in front of Ryan’s ears. Before Ryan was even aware of the high-pitched, alternating sounds or the twinkling LEWs in the lenses, his mind was filled with an explosion of light, followed by a sensation of being ripped from his natural body. “Ahhh!” he hollered. “What’s— happening?”

Over on the bed, Stacy smiled in memory of her own experience.

“Just relax,” William said. “The sensation will pass. After that, you can interact with the program as you please.”

However, before Ryan’s astral separation was even complete, a loud, gruff voice boomed inside his head.

WHERE BE YE GOIN’, LAD?

At that moment, a massive and gnarly nebulous fist, the size of a semi-truck, burst forth from the sky, streaking down upon him. In the next instant, a gigantic,

vaporous finger and thumb snatch the front of Ryan's shirt, jerking his astral body, kicking and hollering, through space at blinding speed.

Shortly, Ryan found himself deposited roughly on his keister in a dreary, misty swamp. The large apparitional appendage dissolved, revealing an encircling band of vicious and grungy-looking phantasmal cutthroats, who thrust curses and sword points at him, their faces grim.

Ryan shook his head to clear the dizzy feeling from his mind and stood up. "Wow!" he said. *"That was more exhilarating than busting broncs!"*

His eyes darted from one spectral buccaneer to another. Looking beyond them, he glanced around, taking in the whole scene. In the distance, he noticed an old sailing ship wrecked off the swampy coast. *This is great, he thought. I'm in a pirate game.*

Looking up, Ryan noticed a dark billowing cloud blowing in, from which formed a large, foreboding presence. A grim and dark figure of a man with beaded hair and braided beard began to materialize. The dark blue overcoat and tricorne he wore, as well as his commanding demeanor, suggested that he was the leader of this motley crew. His fierce eyes were black as coal, and the crooked and swollen scars on his face gave testimony to a mean and violent nature.

He floated slowly forward.

Intrigued, Ryan stared at the old flintlock blunderbuss protruding from the man's sash, and the scimitar in his hand.

The burly corsair approached, and with a hard and veiny hand placed the tip of his sword under Ryan's chin, forcing the boy to tilt his head back. He peered into Ryan's face.

All Ryan noticed as he gazed up the length of the sword were the Pirate's fingernails, long, filthy and chipped.

"This is pretty realistic, Willy!" Ryan said, from behind the glasses. "I can even feel the point of the sword."

William's eyes widened in astonishment. *Sword?* Suddenly feeling the need to give Ryan a little instruction, he said, "If you want to communicate with anyone while you're in there, all you have to do is project your thoughts. There's no need to actually talk."

Project my thoughts? No wonder they kept these things locked up. There must be some sort of top-secret brain sensors in them, Ryan speculated.

William left Ryan to his adventure and hopped back onto the bed with the girls. Stacy leaned toward William and whispered, "Did you tell him?"

William shook his head with an impish smile. "He still thinks it's just a game. Did you tell Lisa?"

"Yes," Stacy said, grinning at Lisa, "but I don't think she believes me."

Lisa looked perplexed as she sat listening to the twins. "Do you two really expect me to believe that those glasses can see into the spirit world?"

William held up the journal. "It's all right here in the book—if you care to have a look."

Lisa shook her head. "That sort of thing just isn't possible. I think maybe you misread it. It's more likely that the book is talking about the glasses seeing into a virtual world."

"Then how do you explain that William and I—both—saw and talked to our parents?" Stacy asked.

Lisa raised an upturned hand in front of her, "Simple," she said. "You probably just interacted with two avatars that happen to look like your parents."

"But they knew everything about us," Stacy contended.

"Well *of course* they'd know everything about you, because *you* know everything about you!" Lisa said reasonably.

Stacy shook her head, and added, "They even talked about their accident."

Remaining adamant in his position, William continued holding the journal out for Lisa to inspect.

Lisa took the journal and set it beside her. “You know, guys, you are still very sad over the loss of your parents. Maybe the whole idea of their death, coupled with the virtual spirit world of SPAZ, just played tricks on your mind.”

William leaned back against the wall unwavering in his conviction. “If you don’t believe us, read the journal for yourself.”

Lisa patted Stacy comfortingly on the leg, like a big sister trying to appease a younger sibling. “All right,” she said, picking up the journal, “let’s have a look.”



With the sword point still under Ryan’s chin the raspy-voiced pirate boomed, *“Arrgh! So, ye be the lad what’s tryin’ to abscond wi’ me schooner wheel, eh?”*

Ryan swallowed hard, wondering how a character in a game would know that he’d found a ship’s wheel in the real world. Or, he considered, *is this just a coincidence? Could it be that a lost ship’s wheel is part of the game, also?* Deciding that this was probably the case, he relaxed.

“Well, laddie?” the pirate barked. *“What say ye?”*

Ryan, not knowing the plot or his mission in the game decided to make it up as he went along. He also decided that since he didn’t know pirate speak, he’d play a character he knew best—an old-fashioned cowboy. Easing the sword away from his throat, he stared into the pirate’s face. He tilted his cowboy hat down atop his brows and narrowed his eyes. He projected his thoughts, as William had told him to do.

“Well, pard, I reckon you snatched the wrong hombra. As for me, I know nothing about no schooner wheel.”

“PARD?” The pirate bellowed, now shoving his sword point against Ryan’s chest. *“I be not yur pard, laddie! Me name’s Cap’n Blood—and ye’ll address me as such, savvy?”*

Hearing the name *Captain Blood*, a few things became hauntingly apparent to Ryan. His first thought was that this experience probably *wasn't* a game, and next, that this ghost probably *was* the true owner of the ship's wheel, and after whom Blood Island was named.

Ryan immediately became very nervous and very excited, at the same time. This new revelation meant that the ship's wheel really *did* hold some secret—or else the pirate wouldn't be so interested in it.

“Aye, as farr ye knowing not about it,” Captain Blood continued, *“ye be a false-tongued villain, lad; farr I seed ye wi’ me own deadlights pillagin’ me wheel from yonder iron box.”* Captain Blood pointed his sword downward, and immediately a hole opened in the foggy swampland, through which could be seen the interior of Tree Root Cavern, as if looking right through the ground with x-ray vision.

Ryan saw the object of Captain Blood's focus. *“Oh, that wheel,”* Ryan said nervously.

“Aye,” Cap'n Blood barked, *“that wheel. Now, mark well, lad; if ye not be wantin’ to walk the plank, ye’ll stay clear and forget ye ever laid yur deadlights upon ‘er!”*

Putting on the bravest face he could manage, Ryan declared to Captain Blood, *“You’re dead! You can’t use it anymore.”*

“Blast it!” Captain Blood squalled, springing on Ryan and knocking him to the ground. Then, with one knee pressed down on the boy's chest, he thrust his sword crosswise to Ryan's throat. *“Does ye think me dead, still? Or, is it more proof ye be needin’?”* He pressed the blade closer. *“Quickly, boy, speak, or I’ll have ye keelhauled under me vessel till yur tongue is loosed or ye be drowned.”*

Thinking quickly, Ryan theorized that even if this wasn't a game, these ghosts couldn't hurt him—he wasn't really there, was he? He turned his head and, laughing, peered out toward the half-sunken shipwreck. He lifted his hand and pointed. *“Is that the vessel you’re going to drag me under?”* he asked, mockingly.

Captain Blood suddenly became very quiet, very dark. His eyes glowed red, with flames for pupils, as he stared evilly into Ryan's eyes. He stood and raised his hands toward the shipwreck, his right-hand making circles in the air with his scimitar. As he muttered an incantation under his breath, the shipwreck began vibrating, and then shaking. Magically, it began restoring itself to brand-new condition as it rose from the shallow seabed. Within seconds it was fully restored and floating at anchor atop the gentle waves.

Captain Blood reached down with his free hand, and in one swift movement yanked Ryan to his feet. *"Come, Laddie. Let's see if ye still be doubtin' her seaworthiness after ye ride 'neath her barnacles farr a spell."*

Ryan swallowed hard. Deciding not to test his theory further, he snatched the Frequency Glasses from his face and breathed a sigh of relief as he found himself back in Stacy's room, safe and sound. Spinning his chair around, he promptly addressed the others. "I hate to tell y'all this," he announced, "but that weren't no game, and I have proof—'cause I met Captain Blood, and he was mighty mad that we messed with his wheel, and . . ."

William started howling with laughter. "You're right," he said, regaining his composure. "It's not. It's the spirit world. That's what the glasses were invented for, to communicate with the other side. I was just kidding about it being a game." He pointed to the book that Lisa was poring over. "That journal explains it all."

Lisa looked up from the journal in question and raised a finger. "We haven't concluded that for sure, yet," she said. "It's one theory we're investigating."

"*She* hasn't concluded that yet!" William corrected with an obstinate look. "Stacy and I *know* it's true."

"Me, too!" Ryan spurted excitedly.

"If you're still not convinced, Lisa," William said, "then why not have a look through the glasses, yourself?"

Recognizing the challenge, Ryan quickly got up from the chair and held the Frequency Glasses out. “Just watch out for Captain Blood,” he said in his most serious tone. “He’s really peeved that we messed with his ship’s wheel.”

Lisa rolled her eyes skeptically. “Really, Ryan, *Captain Blood?*”

“Oh, he’s real, all right,” Ryan asserted. “And, seeing how much he wanted that wheel back, I’m more sure than ever that it holds a secret. And I’m gonna find out what it is.” With the Frequency Glasses still in his hand, Ryan re-issued the invitation to Lisa by extending his arm.

Lisa set the journal down and slipped from the bed. “Okay,” she said, “I’ll have a look, but all three of you are going to feel pretty silly when I find proof that it’s just a game.” She sat down at the desk and let Ryan help her don the glasses.

After a final skeptical look at Ryan, Lisa relaxed and focused on the lenses in front of her. The many LEWs flashed rapidly before her eyes in seemingly random yet calculated patterns. As Ryan dropped the boom arm speakers over her ears, she immediately heard a series of faint, high-pitched tones.

A second later, she entered the astral world. *Whoa!* she thought, feeling a strange, sucking sensation. *I’ve never had a game do that before.* She looked around. Forgetting that the lenses were blacked out, and seeing the bedroom and her friends—and *not* the playing field of any game—she believed that Ryan had not yet activated the glasses. She was about to say something to him when it dawned on her that her present point of view was not from the chair in which she had sat down, but rather, from the other side of the room.

Glancing toward the desk, she saw herself sitting trancelike, the Frequency Glasses covering her face. She blinked and looked down at her astral form. *Wow! This is weird.* She turned her hands over and back again, staring. *I look like Casper the Ghost.*

Lisa looked back to her friends, and with the speed of thought, instantly joined them on the bed. They, of course, didn’t pay her any attention since they couldn’t see

her. She waved her hand in front of Stacy's face. There was no reaction. She poked William in the side of the head and giggled as her hand and arm penetrated completely through his skull.

William unconsciously reached up and scratched his head at the point of entry.

Great ghosts! Lisa exclaimed. *They were right. This isn't a game.* Ecstatic over the freedom that this experience provided, and bombarded with endless possibilities, she decided to leave the house and give her new stealthy body a proper test.

In a flash she was off.

Leaving Lisa at the desk, Ryan stepped over to the bed to where the twins were discussing the technical aspects of the Frequency Glasses. "I still don't get it," he said, joining the conversation. "How does a pair of eyeglasses cause us to leave our bodies?"

"By using light and sound waves," William said, "they attune the frequencies of our brains to match those of the spirit world."

"Is that why we can't see ghosts, because they operate on different frequencies?" Stacy asked.

"Yes," William replied. "They operate on higher frequencies. The ghosts that *are* visible once in a while have figured out how to temporarily lower their frequency rate, thus allowing themselves to be seen. So, in order for us to interact on their plane of existence, our brainwaves need to be altered to match those of their world."

Ryan's eyes almost popped out of his head at the thought. "What do you mean, *alter our brain waves?*?" he said with a squeak of fear in his voice.

"Relax, genius," William said. "Your IQ is safe. The change isn't permanent or dangerous."

Stacy lay back on the bed and stared absently at the ceiling, daydreaming about how much fun it would be to travel the spirit world as a group. An idea began to

form. “William,” she said. “Do you think there’s a way we could transfer the signals from the Frequency Glasses to the computer?”

William looked inquisitively at his sister. “What are you thinking, Stacy?” “I’m thinking,” Stacy said, “that if it *was* possible, then we could astral travel simply by using the computer screen and a pair of headphones.”

Ryan walked to the dresser and snatched up a cellophane-wrapped toothpick left from a prior night’s take out. “What good would that do ya, Stacy?” he asked, unwrapping the cylindrical wooden pick. “It seems easier to just use the glasses.” He stuck the toothpick in his mouth.

Stacy looked at the boys with a raised eyebrow. “Well, if we can transfer the signals to *one* computer, then I can use the network . . .”

“To transfer the signals to *all* the computers,” William blurted out with a snap of his fingers. “Stacy, you’re a genius!”

“What’d I miss?” Ryan asked, confused once again by the twins’ techno-talk.

Stacy explained, “If we can duplicate the signals across all of our computers, then we can all travel to the spirit world together.”

“Y’all want me to do this again?” Ryan choked, remembering his experience with Captain Blood. “Thanks, but no thanks. Once was enough for me.”

“Come on, Ryan,” Stacy urged. “According to our parents, there’s a wondrous land over there where children live, and I want to see it. Just think of the adventure we could have if we did this as a group. Besides,” she added, teasing, “you don’t have anything to worry about. We’ll protect you.”

“Ha, Ha, very funny,” Ryan said, folding his arms.

“I’ve got it!” William suddenly burst out. “I can make a cable with a Y adapter that will couple mini-microphones with the boom arm speakers. Then all we have to do is plug it into the audio-in port on your computer.”

Stacy pondered this for a moment. “That’ll work for the audio signals—but what about the video?”

“That’s simple,” William said. “Just aim the computer’s camera at one of the lenses.”

Stacy mulled this over for a moment. “That *could* work,” she said. “We could use my laptop. We just need to figure out how to make some kind of mount to hold the glasses in front of the web cam.”

“Where’s the web cam?” Ryan asked.

Stacy retrieved her laptop. “Here, in the top edge of the screen.” She pointed to it.

Ryan chewed on his toothpick as he thought of an idea. “I can make that for y’all,” he volunteered. “I reckon there’s bound to be something in your dad’s scrapyard I can jury-rig together.”

“Great!” Stacy chimed. “Let’s get started.” She powered up her laptop. “I’ll start writing the interface program for the network.”

William leapt off the bed and headed for the door. “Now, where did I put my soldering iron?” he said, scratching his head.

Ryan chuckled. “Oh! I guess we’re doing this *now*.”

THE ASTRAL PLANE

“WOW! That was amazing!” Lisa cried, spinning around in the pneumatic chair and pulling off the Frequency Glasses. “You guys were right . . .” She stopped mid-sentence. Her joyous expression dimmed as she glanced around the room.

Sitting near Lisa at the desktop computer, Stacy stared intently at the screen while her fingers tapped away in flurried succession at the keyboard. Over in another corner of the room, hunched over a fold-out table, William appeared as a mad scientist might, complete with safety goggles and smut smudges on his cheeks. A thin trail of smoke rose into the air in front of him. Beside him, leaning over the dresser, his face contorted, Ryan strained as he pulled and pried on a piece of steel. The only sounds to be heard in the room were the rapid clicking of computer keys, the buzzing of a soldering iron and the scraping of pliers on metal.

“What’s going on?” Lisa demanded.

Without interruption to the program she was writing, Stacy replied, “Lisa, you’re not going to believe this, but I think we’ve found a way to take a trip to the spirit world as a group.”

“No way!” Lisa said in excited disbelief. “Really?”



Later, with Lisa caught up on the details of the plan, the necessary hardware fabricated, and the network interface program completed, William left the room in search of some final accessories. The other three lounged about lazily, while Lisa related *her* adventures with the Frequency Glasses. Even though she never actually made it to the spirit world, or encountered any spirits, she had, however, astral-traveled about the Earth plane with great amusement. She told how she was able to visit anyplace she wanted, simply by thought—and that the speed it took to get from one place to the next was almost instantaneous.

Returning from his industrious search-and-find mission, William entered the room carrying a piece of foam rubber and some plastic clamps.

“Did ya find what ya need, Willy?” Ryan asked, leaning casually against the dresser.

“Yup. Now all we have to do is hook it up.” William handed Ryan the piece of foam rubber. “Here, shove this in between the bracket and the back of the lens. It will steady the glasses and keep them from moving around.”

“Good idea!” Ryan said, taking the piece of foam rubber. Then, retrieving the “S” shaped bracket he’d made earlier, and the Frequency glasses themselves, he mounted everything to the laptop. With the bracket and the ear pieces of the Frequency Glasses sitting along the top edge of the laptop’s screen, and one lens supported inside the bracket itself, the other lens was free to float in front of the web cam.

Using the clamps, William connected the dual microphone cable he’d fabricated to the boom arm speakers. “Stacy,” he said, “you’re up!”

Tapping rapidly on the computer’s keyboard, Stacy caused various scripting windows to pop up and disappear as she configured the glasses to work over the home network. “Okay, I think that’s got it,” she announced. “Let’s see if it works.” She pulled a small set of headphones from a desk drawer, positioned them over her ears, plugged their cable into the computer’s headphone jack, and clicked on a shortcut entitled: Audio Frequencies.

Two soft, high-pitched tones oscillated in Stacy’s ears. She clicked on the second shortcut she’d created: Visual Frequencies. A new full-screen window opened, displaying a pattern of flashing lights.

Instantly, Stacy felt the familiar sensation of being sucked from her body. A moment later—and of course unseen by her friends—she manifested nearby in astral form, a wispy, wavering, floating duplicate of her real self, clothes and all.

Satisfied with the outcome, Stacy averted her eyes from the flashing screen, thus disengaging herself from the astral realm. “We did it guys! It works,” she exclaimed in joy.

Cheers abounded throughout the room.

Stacy turned to the network and quickly got to work implementing the process on the other computers. “Okay,” she said, a few moments later. “I’ve sent each of you a file called Spirit Window. Create a shortcut to it, and then activate it. This will produce the signals you need. Don’t forget to use headphones.” She turned back to the computer screen and quickly reentered the astral plane.

Ryan stared blankly at Stacy. “Create a what?”

“Don’t worry,” William said, “I’ll show you.”

“Hurry up, guys,” Stacy said, watching them through her astral eyes. “It’s lonely out here.”

Lisa wasted no time and pushed past the boys. “Stacy, don’t go anywhere,” she hollered. “I’ll be right there.”

“Come on, Ryan,” William urged. “I’ll help you get set up.”

A short time later, one by one, the three kids entered the astral plane, each beginning their celestial journey in their own rooms.

Lisa was first to join Stacy in her room by instantaneous trans projection; the trick she’d discovered while astral traveling.

Stacy was busy amusing herself with the limitlessness of her aerial form by flying across the room, performing a series of continuous somersaults. “*This is great!*” she squealed. Lisa watched with amazement as Stacy then dove speedily from the ceiling, down under her bed and out the other side, her body automatically shrinking, stretching and deforming as needed.

Lisa floated over to the mirror on Stacy’s dresser and giggled. *This is strange*, she thought. *I can’t see my reflection*. She waved her arms to see if she could detect any trace

of herself whatsoever in the mirror. Her reflection remained absent. It was then, however, that she discovered something truly amazing. She turned to her friend. “*Stacy! Look,*” she cried, waving her left arm. “*As a ghost I’m not crippled!*”

Down the hall, William was unprepared for weightless locomotion. “*HELP!*” he cried out. “*How do I steer me?*”

Ryan received the mental message and took off through the walls to help his friend. He arrived to find William wavering and bobbing upside-down, like a bottle on an ocean wave. With a tug on William’s ankle, Ryan righted his inverted friend. “*What’s the problem pard?*”

“*I kind of got discombobulated,*” William said sheepishly. “*The last time I was in astral form, my parents came to me. I didn’t have to move around. So, I’m not exactly sure how to do this.*”

“*It’s a cinch, Willy,*” Ryan said. “*All ya gotta do is concentrate on where ya want to go. Just think, forward, if you want to go forward. And, stop, if you want to stop.*” Ryan demonstrated by making a few maneuvers around the room. “*Got it?*”

“*Yeah—I think so,*” William answered, unassured.

“*Okay, let’s go.*” Ryan escorted William down the hallway, their wafting, aery forms picking up speed as they proceeded.

Back in Stacy’s room, astral Stacy moved about like a professional gymnast and ballerina all in one, except that she performed her aerial acts without apparatus or grounding. Just then, right in the middle of a maneuver, William arrived, speedily and uncontrollably, and slammed right into and through Stacy, causing her to become a swirling mass of mist.

(One of the laws in the spirit world dictates that no harm shall come to anyone, and as such, allows their bodily form to dissipate and become gaseous during any substantial force, be it friction, impact or whatever. Once the force is removed, their bodies again become spiritually material.)

Ryan followed directly, and chuckled at the spectacle.

Lisa rushed to Stacy’s aid. “*Are you okay?*”

Stunned for a moment, Stacy finally re-formed and patted her torso with both hands. *“Yeah, I’m fine. But—what was that?”*

Lisa pointed to where Ryan was pulling William by the legs in order to remove his head and shoulders from being embedded in the wall.

The girls laughed. *“It serves you right!”* Stacy heckled. William righted himself and smiled stupidly. *“Sorry, Stacy!”*

“All right,” Ryan said. *“You wanted me to be part of this; here I am. So, what do ya say we get this show on the road?”*

“Where should we go?” Lisa asked.

“I want to try and find that place Dad told me about, where spirit children live,” Stacy replied.

“Do you know how to get there, Sis?” William asked.

With the finesse and agility of a bird, Stacy dove through the air once again, performing another acrobatic maneuver. *“No,”* she answered. *“Not really. He just said he’d heard about it, and that we should try to find it.”*

“Well then,” Ryan said, ascending toward the ceiling, *“I reckon we just head out and start exploring.”*

William quickly began a sort of dog paddling maneuver toward Ryan. *“Wait! Don’t leave me!”*

Ryan looked back. *“Remember, Willy, just think about where you want to go.”* William grabbed hold of Ryan’s wispy boot. *“How am I supposed to do that when I don’t know WHERE we’re going?”*

Ryan laughed while assuming a superhero stance. *“Just think, up, up and away!”* In a flash, he soared up through the ceiling, with William still clinging to his foot and flapping like a flag behind him.

Lisa looked at Stacy and rolled her eyes. *“Oh, great!”* she said. *“He’s not happy with just being a cowboy. Now he wants to be Superman as well.”*

Stacy giggled. *“Well, he can’t be Superman, that’s already taken. If he wants to be a superhero, he’ll need his own identity.”*

Lisa motioned for Stacy to follow her as she started out after the boys.
“How about Cosmic Cowboy?”

“That’s good,” Stacy acknowledged. *“And for his uncoordinated compadre, we’ll call him Wavering Willy.”* The girls laughed as they floated leisurely through the ceiling, on their way toward the celestial unknown.



Sometime later, the gang (now more accustomed to this mode of travel) soared rapidly through outer space, enjoying all of the magnificent sights along the way. William, however, still trying to maintain his balance, traveled sprawled out like a skydiver.

Ryan fell back from his position as lead and formed up next to his friend. *“Hey guys, ya wanna see a human Ferris wheel?”* Before William could object, Ryan grabbed hold of his foot and gave it an outwardly shove.

William began cartwheeling through space.

Stacy and Lisa came up alongside William, pointing and laughing.

“He looks like a pinwheel without the stick.” Lisa said.

“Hel-l-lp! Sto-o-op meee!” William cried out.

“Alright, keep your shirt on, Willy,” Ryan said, reaching into William’s swirling mass. The friction caused his friend to slow to a stop. *“I was just having a bit of fun with ya, buckaroo.”*

“Well, knock it off,” William grumbled, still sprawled out.

The kids were just passing a spectacular blue and gold star-forming region, when Ryan took hold of William’s legs and pushed them together. *“Here Willy, let me help you stabilize.”*

With William's arms still extended, Stacy saw an opportunity for some mischief of her own.

William sensed his sister's forthcoming antics. "*Stacy, whatever you're up to, you'd better not do it!*"

Stacy zipped over next to her brother, grinned mischievously, and slapped down on one of his arms. William began spinning through space like an arrow, with Ryan still holding his ankles.

The girls once again burst out laughing. "*Whoohoo!*" Stacy hollered. "*Now all we need is a dart board!*"

Eventually, Ryan flew free of William's twirling torso. He cleared his dizziness with a quick shake of his head, and then, knowing now how it felt, rapidly raced to William's aid, where he found his buddy far ahead, still screaming and streaking through the cosmos.

Stacy and Lisa continued laughing uncontrollably as the darting duo disappeared into the distant cosmic dust.



With the shenanigans now behind them, the four friends streaked on aimlessly, taking in the sights.

"*Hey, look over there!*" William said, pointing far off to their right at three mammoth columns of dark dust and gas, sitting before a beautiful backdrop of multi-toned blue-greens. "*I think that's the Eagle Nebula.*"

"*It looks like something straight out of the Grand Canyon,*" Ryan commented.

Continuing on deeper into space, they passed many other dramatic and striking scenes. One of these was the Crab Nebula, which, according to Lisa, looked like a fuzzy green and brown critter that was being electrocuted.

Stacy's favorite was the Cat's Eye Nebula, which resembled a conch shell. In fact, she even tried to fly into it, until she realized that it was just gas and space dust, and didn't have any real shape or solidity. She lost interest and returned to the others.

William, now finally able to somewhat control his motility, paused to take in the fantabulous view of the Sombrero Galaxy, which when viewed from its edge looks like a translucent UFO.

Finally becoming bored with all of this, Ryan floated over wearily to his friends. *"I don't know about y'all,"* he said, *"but unless someone has an idea on how to find the entry to your spirit world, I'm gonna bow outta this here rodeo and hang up my spurs for the day."*

"Oh, please, not yet," Stacy pleaded, facing Ryan with her hands together in a praying position. *"There has to be a way in. Just stay with us a little longer."*

Ryan grunted to show his disapproval, but decided not to give up on his friends just yet.

Lisa floated up beside Stacy. *"It's too bad your dad didn't show you something of the spirit world,"* she said.

"Why?" Stacy asked. *"How would that help us?"*

"Because," Lisa replied, *"if he had taken you somewhere, you could focus your thoughts on that place and project us there."*

"Wait a minute!" Ryan said, stopping midflight. *"Are you sure that's all it takes?"*

The rest of the kids converged on Ryan, their vapory, translucent bodies hovering freely in the darkness of space.

"Yeah," Lisa said. *"All I had to do was concentrate on a place that I had been to before, with the desire to return, and all of the sudden I was there."*

"If that's the case, then I might be able to get us in." Ryan paused a moment, trying to figure out how to do this as a group. A second later, the solution came to him.

"Okay," he said. *"Everybody holds hands."*

Lisa, William and Stacy all complied with Ryan's request, and a moment later, the four young space travelers looked like a string of misty, translucent fishing bobbers floating on an invisible ocean.

"Okay, hold on tight." Ryan closed his eyes. *I sure hope there ain't no pirates around when we get there,* he thought. Then, visualizing to the best of his memory the area in which he'd encountered Captain Blood, he desired himself there once again.

Suddenly, *POOF!*

Just as Lisa had described it—the four children instantly disappeared.

THE DARK REALM

In the time it took to blink, the young celestial adventurers found themselves trans projected to another dimension: this one, dank and dreary.

As the four friends became aware of their dismal surroundings, a feeling of melancholy and despondency overtook them. The air was cold and damp as they surveyed the landscape through the visibly nauseating fumes that rose from the stinking swampland.

Having arrived in one of the dark levels of the spirit world, the four friends found, to their revulsion, that within the slough were stagnant pools filled with all manner of repulsive, mucus-emitting, reptiles and misshapen vermin in various stages of decay.

William quickly covered his nose and mouth with both hands. *"Abh! Yuck!"* he squawked, while undulating his way toward Ryan.

Williams's movements and the merging vaporous taper of his legs reminded Ryan of a mermaid, swimming. He shook his head in amusement at William's approach.

"What is this place?" William said, still covering his nose.

"This is where Captain Blood brought me," Ryan said, using his cowboy hat to fan away the putrid fumes.

Stacy looked at Ryan in disgust. *"So, why did you bring us here?"*

"Y'all wanted entrance into the spirit world," Ryan replied. *"This is the only place I knew of."*

William gulped. *"This definitely isn't the same spirit world Mom and Dad told us about!"*

"Come on," Stacy said. *"Let's see if we can find a way out of here."*

Floating over the disgusting swampland, the kids soon realized, with sadness, that below them were pools, putrid green and brown, occupied by living souls floating

en masse, some face down, others up. With open eyes, these comatose souls stared blankly. Even though it was a blank stare, one individual's eyes conveyed sadness, and her motionless, outstretched arm seemed to beckon for help from within her watery prison.

"This is awful!" Lisa cried. *"Why are these poor people here?"* She bent down closer to the water. *"Do you think we should try to help them?"*

"Whoa! Hold on there, Missy," Ryan said, rushing forward and grabbing her shoulder. *"They're probably here for good reason."*

Lisa righted herself and stared sorrowfully at the imprisoned souls. *"Oh!"* she said. *"I didn't think of that."* And then with a heavy heart, she added, *"I sure hope they're not stuck here for all eternity."*

Ryan suddenly realized that he didn't remember these foul pools from his previous visit. He stepped back from the water's edge and took a moment to survey the area. The region looked familiar to him, he thought. He could even see the rocky coastline where Captain Blood's shipwreck had once stood. However, now, there were no signs that the hidden reef ever had held a vessel at all.

Lying just beyond the swamp, Lisa, Stacy and William noticed a number of dirty, rotten hovels, little more than sticks and mud. They moved in this direction. Ryan, returning to his friends, followed.

Dark, ugly and downtrodden spirits meandered aimlessly about. Featureless and genderless, they appeared as shadows with grayish glowing orbs for eyes. As they shambled about, none of them bothered to confront or even look at the approaching children. Nor did they engage in or care about *any* activity. Some of the apparitional forms didn't move at all.

The children, nonetheless, decided to move, they continued on, away from the wetland, to where the landscape eventually became rocky and hilly, forcing them to ascend until finally they reached a chasm.

“Wow,” said Lisa, peering down. *“There’s no bottom!”*

“There’s got to be,” William contradicted, but had to concede, *“Even though you can’t see it—it’s got to be there . . .”* Looking down along the walls, the kids were appalled to see subhuman forms sprawled upon various rocks and boulders.

Tattered and filthy rags covered these creatures that were nothing more than skin and bones. They clutched the cliff face for support with misshapen talons for hands. Their monstrous faces were distorted and malformed, with small, penetrating eyes and huge, repulsive, jagged-fanged mouths. They hissed and clawed at the air as the kids arrived overhead.

In the deeper recesses of the abyss, the creatures were even less humanlike. Worse, somewhere in the darkness below, very queer sounds echoed off the walls. The kids listened in horror to sounds that ranged from mad, raucous laughter to shrieks of torment.

Looking down, William watched warily as a hideous, subterranean, demon-like beast stalked up the rocky crevice toward them. *“I—don’t think we should stay here!”* he said, his voice crackling.

Hearing William’s comment, Lisa looked far and wide, but saw nothing but darkness and despair. *“And just where do you suggest we go?”* she asked.

“Anywhere but here!” William croaked.

Lisa spread her hands out in front of her. *“Well, we don’t exactly have a guidebook to the spirit world, you know. And none of us knows anywhere else to project to.”*

“Maybe we should just head up,” Stacy suggested. *“Mom said that the higher a person goes in the spirit realm, the better it becomes.”*

The kids looked up into the dull, monochromatic sky. This was not the same type of sky that belonged to the earth, or even outer space. Devoid of any detail, just a gloomy, gray veil, it gave a feeling of hopelessness and despair as one gazed upon it.

William looked over his shoulder, seeing more of the grotesque souls begin creeping out of the dark depths. *"I think we should just keep going straight,"* he voiced anxiously. *"We're bound to find someone that can help us."*

"Help us do what?" Stacy said, her voice squeaking.

William shrugged. *"Maybe give us directions out of here."*

"If they knew the way out," his sister challenged, *"don't you think they would've already left?"*

Lisa floated in between the quarreling siblings. *"Maybe they can't,"* she said. *"Just like those poor souls in the water, this might be their fate."*

"Willy has a point, though," Ryan said, in defense of his friend. *"Just because they're trapped here it doesn't mean that they don't know where the exit is. However,"* he added, *"it is your rodeo, Stacy. I reckon it's up to you to make the decision. So, what do ya say, up or straight?"*

Stacy moved some way from the group and turned a full circle, scanning the horizon.

The others talked among themselves, while Stacy considered her options. Their heads jerked up wildly at the sound of Stacy's scream. Looking back, they were mortified to see her being whisked away, down into the black abyss. Her face was caged in the clutches of long, slender, sinewy fingers. Her abductor was dark as night, stealing away stealthily from boulder to boulder, back down from whence it had come.

Stacy screamed again.

"Stacy!" Ryan yelled. *"Look away from the computer screen!"*

It was no use. She couldn't think. The experience was too horrific for her mind to handle: the sights, the sounds, the smells, her entrapment. Sitting in her room, she could actually feel the pressure of the creature's arms around her, and the grip of its fibrous fingers against her face.

Ryan smashed his hat down tight on his head. *"I'm coming, Stacy!"* he shouted. The creature looked back and hissed.

But before Ryan could make a move . . .

"LET GO OF MY SISTER!" William roared. In a flash he sailed, straight as an arrow, without wobble or waiver, right past Ryan. Streaking down between the craggy cliffs, he disappeared beneath the mountainside.

Mortified, Lisa looked at Ryan, and with gut-wrenching fear for her friends, grabbed his hand tightly.

Ryan stared, momentarily stunned, at the point where he'd last seen William, in utter disbelief of his buddy's courageous actions. Then, squeezing Lisa's hand for reassurance, he said, *"Stay here! And don't worry, I'll get them back."*

Lisa pulled sharply on Ryan's hand. *"No!"* she cried. *"Don't leave me here alone."*

Meanwhile, deep beneath the hellish mountain, through benighted tunnels and fetid trenches filled with queer and shadowy spectral forms that drifted like mist, William continued relentlessly in pursuit of his sister's captor.

Stealthily onward, the fiendish devil scurried from rock to rock and cliff to cliff, dragging Stacy along by her face. Her lifeless astral body flapped behind the creature like a deflated balloon. Literally frozen with fear, Stacy no longer screamed. With her eyelids fixed open, the demonic images of her surroundings streaked past her vision, tormenting her mind. She couldn't breathe, and her heart pounded like a jackhammer in her chest.

Directly behind Stacy's wavering body, William raced as fast as he could, zigzagging back and forth through the endless passageways in desperate pursuit to save his sister. *"Stacy, wake up!"* he screamed. *"Snap out of it! Disconnect from the computer!"* He strained with all his might to overtake the evasive beast, to no avail. *"Don't worry, Stacy,"* he continued shouting. *"I'm coming!"*



Far above, Ryan grabbed Lisa by the shoulders. *“I need to help Willy!”* he said sternly. *“Disconnect and wait at the house. We’ll meet up there and regroup.”*



Almost there, William thought, as his hand, mere inches from the wraithlike assailant, stretched forward. His fingers, open and aching, aimed for the demon’s shoulder. *Now!* his mind screamed. And with that, he lunged forward.

SMOOSH—William’s aery form smashed into the wall at the end of the tunnel. Even his physical body, in front of the computer screen, felt the shock of impact.

Focused on his target, William hadn’t seen that the tunnel had turned abruptly. He recovered quickly and resumed the chase, though looking far ahead at the rapidly diminishing figures, Stacy’s rescue seemed hopeless.

At that moment, an idea came to him. He focused intently on his escaping enemy. Burning the image into his mind, he instantly trans projected himself onto the creature’s back.

The creature shrieked, and using one of his clawed appendages reached back, trying to free himself from his attacker. With a mighty effort, he sprang hard off of a wall and into a long, downward free-fall.

Holding on tightly, William pulled back frantically at the creature’s head. He wrapped an arm around its neck, trying to strangle it. He didn’t see, until it was too late, the boiling-hot tar pit below them: a doorway to a lower, darker, more evil dimension, yet.

William screamed, as he, the creature, and Stacy plunged deep into the burning sludge.



“All right,” Lisa agreed. *“I’ll break connection and see if I can help Stacy do the same.”* *“Great,”* Ryan said. *“I’ll see you soon.”*

Just as Ryan turned to face the direction of William’s disappearance, and before Lisa could bring herself out of her astral trance, William suddenly emerged from the great gulf with Stacy in tow.

“Yee! Haw!” Ryan hollered, waving his hat. *“Way to go, Willy!”*

“Time to go!” William shouted, streaking past Ryan once again, this time straight up toward the gray, gloomy sky.

Lisa watched the twins diminish into the atmosphere. *“Stacy, William, wait! Where are you going?”*

Ryan glanced back at the chasm—to see about a dozen grotesque mutant souls spewing out and coming their way. Without warning, he grabbed Lisa’s hand.

“Come on! Willy said it’s time to go!”

With that, he took off after the siblings, pulling Lisa right along with him. Lisa looked back to see what the fuss was. Her expression quickly turned to horror as she cried, *“Hurry! Quick! Faster! Faster!!”*

NO CHILDREN HERE

With the girls in tow, William and Ryan raced upward, away from the pursuing demons into the grim, forbidding sky. Their aery torsos and legs tapered out and wafted behind them like streamers in the wind.

Faster and farther, they ascended, until finally, one by one, the shadowy wraiths ceased their pursuit and dropped off, back into the hellish void from which they had come.

“Okay!” Lisa shouted. *“You can stop now. They’re no longer chasing us.”*

Ryan hastened to a stop and scanned the area below. Seeing no more danger, he shouted far ahead to William, still streaking on at full speed. It took Ryan two more attempts before William finally halted.

“Come on,” Ryan said, *“Let’s catch up to them and see if Stacy is all right.”*

“Hey,” Lisa said, as the two of them resumed their ascension, *“does the sky look like it’s getting brighter to you?”*

Ryan squinted into the distance and shrugged. *“Maybe,”* he said, *“I can’t rightly say for sure.”*

Upon reaching their friends, Ryan and Lisa found Stacy recovering from her terrifying ordeal, thanks to William’s gentle coaxing and persuasion.

“Stacy, look,” Lisa said, pointing upward. *“Your mom was right. It does get brighter, the higher we go. In fact,”* she added, *“it looks to me like the sky is becoming a rainbow.”*

Sure enough, as Stacy peered far ahead, she could see a faint, variegated atmosphere. *“You’re right!”* she shrieked. *“Hurry, let’s go see what lies beyond.”*

In a flash she was off, and assuming her rightful place once again as leader of the expedition.

Lisa quickly joined Stacy, followed by the boys, and in a short span of time, almost without realizing it, the four emerged from the gray veil that marked the boundary for dark spirits.

The feelings of desperation and gloom begin to fade from the children, replaced by warmth and elation. Plunging deeper into the living rainbow, the kids now found themselves enveloped in a wonderfully dense fog, emblazoned with soft pastel colors. Zooming back and forth, they laughed and played in the magnificent, ever-changing, multicolored mist.

Spreading her arms out to her sides, Stacy zipped past her friends, zigzagging and barrel rolling in the richly hued haze. Gazing back at her handiwork, she shrieked in delight, realizing that the colors and patterns she had just created remained fixed in space amidst the otherwise dynamic atmosphere.

Impressed by the results of Stacy's artistic acrobatics, the others followed her example; soon the area was turned into a spectacular piece of three-dimensional space art.



Emerging later from the spectral border, the four friends found themselves in a fairly bright and industriously active land. All about them under the shimmering, deep-blue sky, many colorful beings flew. Some of them appeared and disappeared right before their eyes. One materialized a short distance away and, spotting Stacy and the others, paused momentarily.

Stacy stared inquisitively at the celestial being. He had a thin, small frame, covered by a bluish silver official-looking tunic. From within his body emanated a light that shone through his colored gossamer clothing, framing him in a blue tinted aura. In contrast, his short-spiked hair glowed yellow.

After briefly studying the children, the glowing blue spirit hurried off.

Not giving the incident any further attention, Ryan, Lisa, Stacy, and William proceeded to traverse this new landscape from high above, noticing many things. This new place resembled a simpler, cleaner and more ethereal version of Earth, with a friendly, sociable atmosphere. Spirits were busy with manual and menial chores. Some of them seemed to be building, much the same way as on Earth, with various types of hand tools. In some regards this world looked as modern as present-day Earth, and in other respects it appeared more primitive.

“Look at that!” said Lisa. *“Most everyone here seems to get around on foot, or by horse and cart! It’s like seeing the olden times . . .”*

There were those who moved through the air as well, but these spirits seemed to be of a different class from those on the ground. For one thing, their clothes were different. Instead of wearing ordinary earthly clothing, these aerial beings wore robes, togas, and tunics. They also seemed to radiate light from within their bodies, whereas those on land did not—or very dimly at best.

William said, as if in sudden realization, *“Nothing here is old, worn-out, or decayed! No dead trees, no trash or litter . . .”* The trees and plants below were lush and verdant, the houses and buildings in pristine condition.

Glancing about the area from high above, the kids could see, in one direction, groups of beautiful houses and low buildings organized into what looked like a city. In another direction they saw small villages, set close to lakes and streams. Looking behind them produced a view of immaculately landscaped hills and dales, adorned with various types of domiciles. These structures were designed and constructed, it seemed, to blend with the landscape.

“Excuse me,” a pleasant voice said from behind them.

Stacy turned to see the blue-uniformed being from earlier floating effortlessly in front of her.

“Are you and your friends lost?” he asked, warmly.

"Yes, actually," Stacy replied. "We are trying to find the land of children."

"With that," said the blue-uniformed spirit, "I can help. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Auris, an inhabitant of the higher spheres, and currently a messenger with the Sphere-to-Sphere Messaging Service, SSMS for short." He bowed. "And, you are?"

"I'm Stacy, and this," Stacy said, indicating William who was just approaching, "is my brother, William. And these," she turned slightly to face the others, "are our friends, Lisa and Ryan. We are . . ." she paused to consider the proper terminology.

"Astral travelers," William submitted.

"Ah! Splendid! I don't see too many of your type in my travels," Auris remarked. "That explains how you ended up here in Twilight Zone, instead of Summerland, where normally, spirit guides would have escorted you."

"Twilight Zone? Summerland?" Lisa said, moving in closer to the conversation. "The twilight zone," Auris said, spreading his hands out to indicate the whole area, "is where most spirits, children excluded, begin their spiritual journey. It is the lowest light level, in the first of the progressive spheres here in the spirit world. Below this," he continued, "is the dark realm, with its many levels."

Stacy shuddered. *"We've already experienced that nightmarish place,"* she admitted.

"Oh, my!" Auris said. "Do try and stay away from that realm. It is dangerous for anyone not trained or prepared to enter any of those levels, and even more so for children."

"Don't worry," Ryan said, "we won't be making that mistake again."

"What about this Summerland you mentioned?" Lisa inquired again.

"Ah, yes," Auris said, suddenly looking off to the side as if he had just received a message from someone. "Summerland is the name of that place for which you seek. Now," he added, quite abruptly, "I must return to my task at hand. So, one, two, three, off you be!" And with a slight wave of his hand, POOF! Ryan, Lisa, and the twins instantly vanished.

SUMMERLAND

POP! Without warning, the four space artists instantly arrived into a brilliant new world that was bathed in a warm, golden light that didn't seem to have a source. Cries of joy erupted from each of the children as they gazed far below. A mighty ocean rippled below them, but they could see through its transparent, unreflecting surface into the depths, to a vivacious and living seabed streaked with varicolored reefs branching out from a grand circular island, like tentacles from an octopus.

Above the island, but below the kids, the sky sparkled with a variety of flittering, floating, and flying fauna beyond imagination. Varying in size and shape, these aerial animals radiated with a range of colors unknown on earth.

Lisa shrieked with delight at the fabulousness of the fluorescent hues emanating from these ethereal creatures.

Stacy took off excitedly toward the island. "*Come on!*" she called over her shoulder. "*Let's take a closer look!*"

The others wasted no time in following.

Soon, details of the island began to take shape. The beachfront all around the island's perimeter glistened with the appearance of silky white sand.

Stacy shrieked with delight. "*Look at that beach!*" she shouted. "*It almost looks like it's made out of diamonds.*"

Lisa moved up next to Stacy and pointed to the dramatic green and brown mountain range bordering the ring-shaped beach, on the inland side, and dotted with a diverse wealth of wondrous waterfalls, some spilling inward, others outward to the ocean. "*Have you ever seen so many waterfalls in your life?*"

The rest of the island's terrain was varied. Interspersed between large, lush forests were open fields of variegated wildflowers, lustrous lakes, meandering streams, rolling hills and dales, and spacious parks.

Nearing the island, it was impossible for Ryan, Lisa, William, and Stacy to see its extent due to the enormity of its size, but if they could have, they would have witnessed joyous spirits in every section of the island enjoying the perfect tropical environment.

Continuing their leisurely descent, it was apparent that the four astral adventurers had entered the *fly zone*, as the space around them suddenly exploded in an exhibition of colors.

Stacy cheered as a flock of hummingbirds filled the sky, darting to and fro. These were no ordinary hummingbirds, however. These little creatures changed colors independently and at will. Their display was reminiscent of the grand finale of a great fireworks show.

“Have you ever seen such a sight?” Stacy’s voice shrilled.

Lisa didn’t respond. She was spellbound by an entirely different flock of birds that were gliding gracefully and majestically below her. The regal characteristics of these fascinating fowl, with their rainbow-colored plumage, wide wingspans, extremely long tail feathers, and prominent crowns suggested they were not only a variety of, but probably the most magnificent, bird-of-paradise species ever created.

Off to the side and continuing his slow descent, William spied a kaleidoscope of enormous butterfly-like creatures cruising leisurely about. Each one was slightly different in style and color from the next, yet all of them had long, striking, whip-like tails that complemented their luminescent bodies and gossamer wings. They brought to William’s mind an image of a hybrid between the Lunesta butterfly and a Pandoran Banshee.

“Wow! I wish I could ride one of those,” William said to himself.

Then, as if answering William’s call, one beautifully yellow-hued specimen broke from the swarm and turned straight up, looking somewhat like a thin door hinge on end. A moment later, an explosion of color filled the sky directly below

William. His heart jumped as he felt a bump under his caboose, and then a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach as his body was pushed forcefully higher into the air. It took him a moment to realize that he now happened to be sitting upon the object of his desire.

SWOOSH! With one flap of the creature's whopping wings, William was whisked skyward.

Stacy gasped and stared in disbelief after William, who had vanished with his aerial abductor into the radiant sky.

Lisa clasped her hands over her mouth. *"Wow! Did you see that?"*

Lisa's excited exclamation startled Stacy out of her bewildered gaze. *"Why did that – thing—take my brother?"* she demanded of no one in particular.

Ryan laughed. *"It must've known that Willy was the weakest flyer out of all of us and decided to . . ."*

Ryan didn't get a chance to finish his sentence, as from high above he was interrupted by euphoric shouts from William, whose mighty mount turned sharply and began a downward spiral toward a profusion of other mounted creatures.

"Yee ha!" Ryan hollered, waving his hat at his friend. *"Ride 'em cowboy!"* Lisa suddenly pointed downward. *"Hey look! There are other kids riding those things!"*

"Hooray!" Stacy shouted. *"We found them! We found the spirit kids that mom spoke of!"*



Sailing gracefully high above the island, William sat ecstatic on his winged wonder. His ceaseless ear-to-ear smile silently communicated his joy to all of the other fun-faring aerial riders whose colorfully fledged mounts filled the sky around him.

"Welcome, my young visitor, to Summerland."

Startled, William jumped and looked quickly from side to side. “*Who said that?*” he asked nervously, addressing the unknown voice in his head.

“*My name is Felicity, and I am the one on whom you ride,*” answered his escort. She turned her large furry face back to peek at her passenger.

William stared in amazement at this royal-looking creature that appeared to be more animal than insect. Although her body had the general shape of a butterfly, her head and legs appeared almost as if from the feline family.

“*You—you can talk?*” William stammered.

“*Of course, I can,*” she replied. “*Most creatures here can communicate.*”

William’s mind began to swim. He suddenly found himself doubting everything around him. *This is all too much*, he thought, shifting anxiously on the back of his gracious guide. *I must be dreaming.*

Picking up on William’s thoughts, Felicity glanced back at her guest once again. “*I am pleased to inform you, young rider, that you are, in fact, not dreaming.*” She lifted one of her legs into William’s line of sight, and then extending her claws, clicked two of them together. “*Would you like me to pinch you for confirmation?*”

William shook his head rapidly. “*No, no. That’s all right,*” he insisted. “*I’ll take your word for it.*”

Felicity laughed heartily. “*So be it,*” she said, retracting her claws. “*Now then, who might you be?*”

“*Oh!*” William said, pausing to sort out his many and varied thoughts. “*My name is William.*” And then thinking back to Felicity’s opening comment, he asked, “*But, how did you know I was a visitor?*”

“*Well, most recently, from your doubt in our reality,*” Felicity said, warm humor in her mental voice. “*But originally, from the direction you and your friends entered, and the fact that you all arrived here unaccompanied, not to mention the way you are all dressed.*”

She continued, *“If you were arriving as new residents, you would have been escorted.”* She lifted a wing and turned sharply, in order to direct William’s attention to a different section of the island. She slowed and stayed on this new course so that William could watch the scene before them. *“Do you see the line of children off in the distance, coming down from above?”*

William looked far, far out to the other side of the island. *“All I see are a bunch of tiny lights raining down from the sky,”* he said.

Felicity looked again. *“Oh my, yes! To you they would look like lights from this distance, wouldn’t they?”* she said, with a little laugh. *“I sometimes forget that you material-world beings don’t have the same eyesight as those of us created here.”*

William gazed curiously at Felicity. *“You were created here?”* he said, dumbfounded. *“Didn’t you live on Earth, or some other planet, before dying and coming here?”*

“Heavens, no!” Felicity replied. *“I and my kind are spirit creatures called Nabiyali, also known to the children here as Yali Gliders. We were designed and created for the enjoyment of all who come to Summerland, and we are very happy to be of service.”*

William began to consider the idea of being created simply to serve, but decided to set it aside to ponder another time. He returned his attention to the long stream of lights descending onto the island. *“So, those lights are all kids who have, have . . . died?”* he asked, solemnly.

Not understanding William’s distressed feeling, Felicity did, however, realize from dealings with newly arrived children that material-world beings do view this process as a loss, and feel a sense of heartache and mourning over it.

“Well, the dim lights you see are new arrivals, yes,” she said, as sympathetically as she could. *“The brighter lights are their Guardian Angel escorts.”* After a brief pause, she proceeded. *“Summerland receives about twenty thousand new arrivals daily. But they have not died, young William; they have simply transitioned to the next phase, a better, more real phase of their existence, as all material beings do.”*

Felicity dipped her wing and resumed their descent toward the island. *“Now, young Sir,”* she said, *“I have a few questions for you, if I might?”*

William looked down at Felicity’s glowing visage. *“Sure,”* he said, *“what would you like to know?”*

Felicity slowed her descent to allow time for her questions before they should reach the island. *“If you and your friends aren’t new arrivals,”* she said, *“I mean, if you’re not dead, as you would put it, how is it that you were able to enter the spirit world? And—how did you find your way to Summerland?”*

William spent the next few minutes telling of the Frequency Glasses and how he and the others had come to be here. Somewhere in the middle of his story there was a flash of light; not blinding, mind you, it simply caught his attention. In a brief few second, it was followed by a message from his sister.

“William, where are you?” Stacy’s voice sounded in his mind.

After replying to Stacy’s thought-message, he turned to his fuzzy companion and inquired about the flash of light.

“That light, my dear William, announces an incoming distant message, as you have just experienced. Its purpose is to give the receiver and others around a chance to pause their conversation so that it might be delivered.” Felicity proceeded to enlighten William further. *“Spirit life is essentially an existence of mind. Thought is the predominant force; it is powerful and concrete.”*

William looked puzzled. *“What do you mean?”*

“Take for example your hands,” she said. *“They are used to create and build, among other things, correct?”*

“Yes,” William answered.

“And your mouth and ears, they are used for communication, and your feet for mobility, right?”

William answered in the affirmative once again.

“Well,” Felicity continued, “here the spirit world we can do all of that, and more, simply by thought. Some of this, though, takes time, effort, and specialized training to learn. Communication and travel are two functions of thought that are simple to comprehend and effectuate, as you and your friends have already discovered. Others are more involved.”

Felicity neared a woodland area somewhere over the interior of the island.

“How would you like a tour of Sunny Island?” she offered.

William looked confused. *“I thought you said this was Summerland?”*

Felicity stopped midair and hovered. *“Summerland is the name of this whole world or sphere. Sunny Island is one of three islands in this realm for children. The Isle of Concordia,”* she said, pointing with her left wing to some unseen island far out on the horizon, *“is for older kids, and Melody Islet,”* she pointed with her right, *“is for younger children. You and your friends were quite fortunate, it seems, to have arrived over the island most suited to children of your age.”*

William thought back to Auris the messenger, and wondered if it was coincidence or luck that they arrived where they did. He squinted and peered in each direction, trying to catch a glimpse of the other two islands.

“Shall we commence our tour?”

“Yes, please.” William replied.

And with that, Felicity once again proceeded with her steady descent across the island.

Nearing a lushly canopied forest of varying hues, Felicity slowed to a stop. Her long aeriform tail snaked gracefully behind her. Scores of children were now visible, scattered throughout the woods. Some played on land, some in the air and others in the trees.

William watched, intently, a group of three children playing some sort of game in the branches. Two of the children stood high up on a limb with a space between them. The third child was on the ground, with his back toward them. As one of the

children on the limb called out, the grounded child attempted (without looking) to instantaneously trans project himself into the space between the two on the limb. In this particular instance, William noticed with great amusement that the trans-projecting child had missed his mark and materialized right smack into one of the other children, knocking him, laughing and heckling, off the limb. No harm was done, though, as he simply hovered until reclaiming his place on the branch.

Tearing his eyes away from the game, William saw that there were also groups of children with their teachers on what appeared to be field trips or nature hikes. Glancing over these children, he realized that they shared some interesting similarities with Auris. For one, they dressed not in earthly clothes, but in robes and togas of different lengths and styles that seemed to be part of their bodies in some mysterious way. Also, a soft, faint luminescence seemed to radiate from within each of them, not as bright as Auris, but there just the same. William and his group had no such radiance, though their astral bodies were similar in most other respects.

Curious as to this strange phenomenon, William addressed his aerial usher. “Felicity,” he said. *“Why is it everybody and everything here seems to glow?”*

“That is the light of life,” she stated. “Everything in the spirit world is alive to some degree. Even the buildings are made up of living material that responds to the energies of the people and environment around them. As far as people go, the brightness of their internal light reflects their spiritual progression and goodness.”

William sat in silence for a moment, pondering all this newfound information, as Felicity continued their journey.

Up ahead amidst the trees was a bright clearing lit by the golden rays of light emanating from everywhere—and nowhere—like magic. This wondrous clearing was filled with vivid and exotic flowers and plants unknown to material man, and in the middle lay a large, lazy lake, crystal clear to its fun-inspiring, multicolored sand bottom.

As they approached, William witnessed a group of children, in and out of the water, staring out at many small boats gliding freely across its surface.

“What’s going on down there?” he asked.

Felicity soared to the left and circled slowly overhead, giving her guest a bird’s eye view. William watched with intrigue as Felicity explained. *“Here, you are observing a perfect example of thought control. These children below have decided that when they grow up they wish to own full-size boats of their own, which takes a lot of training and concentration to move and maneuver. Here they learn and practice on small-scale models.”*

William burst with excitement. *“You mean they’ll be able to drive real boats with just their minds?”*

“Absolutely!” she said, nodding her fuzzy head. *“With thought being a concrete force here, there is no need for motors, engines or even wind for locomotion.”* She returned to level flight and continued with the tour.

William twisted around and watched the scene until it was out of sight. A little farther on, William saw splotches of color sprinkled far and wide throughout the forest. Felicity once again slowed for her rider’s benefit. William smiled to see thousands of little cottages looking like they’d come straight from the pages of children’s storybooks. These diminutive houses with their beautifully crooked timbers, bright red roofs, and lattice windows were each surrounded by their own charming little garden of colorful spirit flowers.

Williams’s mouth dropped in shocked surprise as he witnessed children running around and playing with pet pumas, tamed tigers, and loving lions.

“Felicity!” William cried, pointing below. *“Those cats, aren’t they dangerous?”*

Felicity grinned. *“No, my young inquirer, nothing is dangerous in the world of love and harmony.”* And with a mighty flap of her wings Felicity proceeded onward once again.

ADVENTURES OF SUNNY ISLAND

Slipping down through the Nabiyali fly zone, Ryan, Lisa and Stacy continued their leisurely descent toward the island, a little way inland from the base of the ringed mountain range. Directly below them was a large, grassy-knolled park filled with children and adorned with fanciful flower gardens, with sculpted plants shaped into fun geometric shapes. Meandering rows of trees grew together, creating long-tunneled pathways. Within these pathways, at intervals, stood ornamental benches created from live intertwining plants.

Throughout the park, hundreds of spirit children frolicked merrily within its confines, playing a multitude of games and activities. On the ground and in the air children zipped about, chasing one another, while others tossed balls and flung disks and other objects back and forth.

Other activities throughout the park were happening as if by magic. In one area, a group of girls stood around in a circle, pointing and laughing as they magically changed one another's outfits. In another section, some children stood in front of a large shrub and—without touching it—somehow mysteriously shaped the flowery bush into a replica of a Nabiyali.

As Ryan, Lisa, and Stacy descended into the middle of the merriment, their interests quickly became divided. Ryan was captivated by a string of kids speedily snaking through the air, one after another. In and out of the covered footpaths they streaked. The object of the game, it appeared, was to stay as close to the person in front of them as possible and follow their movements precisely without breaking the chain.

"Woo! Hoo!" Ryan hollered. *"Look at 'em go!"*

Suddenly, the leader of the chain, shouted, *"Watch out!"* And, one by one, the snaking children flashed past Ryan and vanished, right smack into the side of a small

knoll. Well, most of them that is; the few that lacked proper concentration bounced off the hillside—laughing. The successful children emerged like gophers, a second later, from the other side of the hill.

Uninterested in these aerial shenanigans, Stacy and Lisa decided to roam the park. Passing a series of little hillocks, the girls smiled to see a few younger children playing tuck-and-roll down the grassy slopes.

Stacy pointed ahead. *“What’s going on over there, do you think?”*

Lisa looked to see a translucent structure, made of pastel-colored blocks that were changing colors in a rhythmic fashion. Outside the structure’s entrance stood a group of spirit children. *“How cool is that?”* she exclaimed. *“Let’s go see what it is.”*

Standing near the fluorescent structure, and a short distance from a small group of boisterous boys, stood a young girl of about Stacy’s age, with golden hair and a short yellow tunic. She noticed Lisa and Stacy approaching. *“Hurry!”* she called out with cheerful urgency. *“The next maze is about to begin.”*

“Ooh,” Stacy squeaked, *“I love mazes. Come on, let’s try it.”* Lisa and Stacy hustled up to the young girl.

“Hi,” Lisa said, with a quick wave. *“I’m Lisa, and this is my friend Stacy.”*

“Hi,” the girl greeted back. *“My name is Hannah. Is this your first time to the Randommazer?”*

“Yes,” Lisa replied. *“We just recently arrived here.”*

“I thought so,” Hannah said, proud of her assessment. *“I could tell by the way you two were looking at the building. I, myself, have only done this once before,”* she admitted.

“What exactly is this place?” Lisa asked.

“And, why is the building changing colors like that?” Stacy added.

Hannah laughed. *“This is the Randommazer,”* she replied, putting her hands up as if presenting the structure to an audience. *“It changes colors to indicate that a new labyrinth is in the process of being created.”*

“Why is it called the Randommazer?” Stacy asked, looking the building over. It was then that she noticed something very curious about the structure. It had no doors, or windows, anywhere that she could see. *Strange*, she thought, *I wonder how we’re supposed to get in.*

“Because,” Hannah said, replying to Stacy’s question, *“the building automatically produces random labyrinths.”*

“The building — all by itself?” Lisa asked dubiously.

“Yes,” Hannah said simply, as if it were normal for buildings to do these types of things on their own.

“That’s awesome!” Stacy said, her mind quickly trying to figure out how this process might work.

Just then, the structure halted its multicolored presentation and became a solid blue color. In the very next moment, a portion of the wall at the front of the building magically began dissolving, thereby creating the needed entrance.

“Oh,” Hannah said. *“It’s ready. Come on, let’s go inside.”*

“Wow!” Stacy muttered, looking up and around the vanishing entranceway, *“I can’t even imagine how that was done.”*

After taking a moment to admire the dissolving door herself, as she entered the Randommazer, Lisa asked, *“Hannah? Why did the building suddenly turn blue?”*

“Blue,” Hannah replied, *“means a new maze is ready. Once everyone enters and begins their quest, the building turns pink, informing those on the outside that a game is underway. Now — let’s hurry and find the others before they start the race. I don’t want to come in last place, like I did before.”*



Emerging from the festive forest, Felicity swept high into the sky, allowing William a bird’s-eye view of the island’s massive center.

Looking down, William saw a circular area the size of a small city, looking like a cross between a fancy botanical garden and New York City's Central Park. Radial footpaths branched out from its center, and at the end of each path, around the area's perimeter, was a uniquely shaped structure, each different from the next. The whole area, on the ground and in the air, was filled with bustling children.

It looks like a giant Ferris wheel, William thought, examining the garden's pattern. "Felicity," he said, *"What is that, down there?"*

"That, my young friend," Felicity said, banking around the outskirts of the area, *"is Sunny Island's School of Progression."*

"Wow!" said William, *"That sure is one humongous school."*

"Those structures," Felicity explained, as she glided effortlessly, high above the school, *"are the learning centers. Within those balls of learning,"* she continued, *"students are provided with specialized training in which to prepare them for their progress through eternity."*

"Who would have ever thought that you'd have to attend school after you died," William said with a grin.

Having finished encircling the entirety of the school's perimeter, Felicity leveled off, allowing William a looser grip on her mane. *"Children here are never forced to learn,"* she said over her shoulder. *"They can remain free-spirited youths for as long as they choose, and they can decide for themselves when to begin their spiritual progression. Most of them enjoy learning as much as they do playing games,"* she admitted. *"When they are ready to undertake their education, they are free to choose what and when to study. The only required lessons,"* she added, *"are the general studies dealing with the hierarchy of the spirit realm."*

She looked back at William again. *"Would you like to see some of these learning centers up close?"*

"Absolutely!" William blurted out eagerly.

Without warning, Felicity dropped suddenly into a steep dive.

Without thinking, William quickly locked his knees against Felicity's body and laughed out loud at the feeling of the wind tugging at his hair.

After a few short moments, Felicity slowed and pulled up in front of what appeared to be a huge, futuristic fort of polygonal shape, made from something like translucent alabaster. Inside its walls, throughout the vast space, flourished a myriad of vibrant plant life, species of which exist only in the land of spirit.

"Here," Felicity said, "we have Botany Hall. This is where students learn all about plants and their benefits. This is also where they begin instruction in the basic art of creation."

Williams's forehead wrinkled thoughtfully as he considered, for the first time, the idea that spirits might need to breathe. *"Felicity,"* he said, curiosity in his tone, *"what benefits do plants have in the spirit world? Do they give off oxygen here, as they do on earth?"*

Felicity glided slowly within the walls of the fort. Just ahead was a long bed of splendiferous spirit flowers. William's jaw dropped as he beheld the unbelievable range of superb and vivid colors, some of them not even known on earth.

Continuing, they came to a section of dainty little spirit flowers hued in soft pastels: various shades of pinks, yellows, and soft blues standing out from the rest of the colors. Felicity allowed herself to settle on the ground.

"Oxygen, my young scholar, is an unneeded element here, and therefore unproduced by spirit flora. However, there are a multitude of benefits that plants do share with spirits. In addition to their aesthetically pleasing qualities," she added, flapping her wings gently to agitate the air, *"their fragrances are truly rejuvenating."* She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, enjoying the newly stirred aromas.

Even William reveled in the euphoric effects of the flowers' perfume as he inhaled.

Felicity then sailed deeper into the field of flowers, and only stopped when she reached an even more exotic specimen: a large hybrid flower, consisting of three tubular blooms standing bold atop a green trunk made from the flowers' long,

intertwining stems. Each bloom was a different color (red, gold, and blue) with long bright yellow stamen filaments, completing its splendor.

Felicity moved in closer to the flower, and as she did, the plant moved endearingly toward her. She closed her eyes and nuzzled her soft head against one of its blooms. *“In addition to the uplifting aromas,”* she said, dreamily, *“these living plants have other beneficial qualities also. See for yourself.”* Peeking back at William with one eye, she said encouragingly, *“Go ahead, touch her; she likes it.”*

Excited yet cautious, William leaned out and gingerly placed both hands around the flower so as to hold it in a sort of cup. Instantly, he heard a host of soft musical sounds coming from the flower as his hands stroked the colorful petals. At the same moment, William felt a sort of tingling magnetism running up his arms, an energizing stream of power that flooded his whole body. *“Whoa! What was that?”* he cried, jerking back quickly.

He grinned almost stupidly as his muscles—the muscles in his real body—felt firm and strong. He felt almost superhuman; a feeling he has most definitely never felt before in his life. *“I feel like – like, I could lift a mountain,”* he stammered, his petite astral frame quivering from the rush of what can only be defined as spirit adrenaline.

Felicity delighted in Williams’s enjoyment of this new sensation. *“Water has a similar effect here in the spirit world,”* she informed. *“In lieu of rest itself, instant rejuvenation can be had simply by interacting with the plant life or bathing in the life-giving waters.”* With a gentle downward thrust of her wings, Felicity moved up and away from the exotic flowers.

Williams’s senses were overwhelmed as the tropical scents filled his nostrils and a plethora of color bombarded his vision. Entranced by the floral beauty, William wondered about their creation.

Felicity circled slowly over the immense nursery, *“First,”* she said, picking up on William’s thoughts, *“children are taught about the substances that make up plant life.”* She scanned the grounds, evidently looking for something specific. *“Then,”* she continued.

“They are taught flora design. After that they practice mental visualization and focus so that they can create an accurate thought model. The last step is creating the live plant by learning how to call forth the elements required from the ether around us.”

Seeing an outdoor class of young children, Felicity swooped low and hovered quietly a short distance away. The class was conducted in a clamshell configuration, with students positioned on the convex side of curved touchscreen tables made from a sleek, heavenly, blue-gray material resembling slate rock. The rows of tables became progressively shorter, the closer they get to the teacher, who faced the class from the concave side of her short table. In front of each pupil rested a soil-filled container.

“You are in luck, Master William,” Felicity said. “Here, you can witness the process of creation firsthand.”

William watched anxiously as the teacher addressed the class.

“Remember, everyone,” the teacher said, pointing to a full-grown potted flower in front of her. “First, envision your project completed. Next, concentrate on the elements required for your specific plant. You should have each compiled a list of them for reference.” She tapped a finger on her tabletop, prompting some of her students to glance at their holographic lists of elements and constituents. *“Then, working from the inside outward,”* she said, gesturing with her hands, *“begin summoning your elements. Be careful now, summon them slowly and make sure to concentrate on shaping as you go—Okay, you may begin.”*

As the students commenced to concentrate and focus their mental energies, a mysterious thing began to happen to the surrounding atmosphere. William’s eyes sparkled with fascination as if by magic, fine, colored, glinting grains and granules begin to materialize right out of thin air.

With nothing more than mind control, the students summoned their desired constituents from the multitude of minute particles emerging from the ether around them.

A young girl with long, black hair, closest to Felicity and William, directed her hands at the planter in front of her, as if inviting someone to sit. Instantly, thousands of golden-brown particles of varying shades floated forward and condensed into what looked like a river of sparkling glitter. A giggle slipped from her lips as she mentally coaxed it toward her round, red planter.

William caught his breath in awe as the shimmering particle stream spiraled upward from the pot, depositing and fusing matter as it went, making him think of a 3D printer. Slick, slender branches snaked out horizontally from a stout and sinewy tree trunk. Progress halted momentarily as the little girl conjured up additional matter streams of various colors. Combining them, she squeaked with delight as she finished up her bonsai tree with scores of shiny, multihued leaves.

William sat agape with wonder. His eyes darted between the once-empty planters, now full and brimming with new species of spirit flora. Full-scale and miniaturized versions of multicolored flowers and exotic trees now lined the students' tables.

"How was that for a treat?" Felicity asked, taking flight once again.

"I've never seen anything that remarkable before in my life!" William exclaimed.

"On a material world," Felicity said, *"I should think not. Now then, how would you like to see a few more of Sunny Island's favorites?"*

"Sure," William said, shifting position on Felicity's back. *"But I doubt if anything will beat this."*

"Really?" Felicity said playfully. *"So, the challenge is to outdo Botany Hall, is it?"*

"Yup!" William said, ecstatic at this proposition.

"Well, then, let's just see if I'm up to the task, shall we?" Felicity flapped her wings swiftly, causing the ground to blur beneath them.

William gasped as his glasses flew from his face. Felicity noticed William's facial apparatus plummeting speedily downward. With a quick turn, she dove headlong after

them. *"Gotcha!"* she cried happily a moment later, as the claws of her foot closed quickly yet gently around the fragile spectacles. She pulled them up close to her face for a better look. *"Young William, what is this peculiar device?"* she asked, then raised her leg as close as she could to William to return his strange contraption.

William bent down, retrieved them from her grip, and once again slipped them onto his face. *"They are my glasses,"* he replied. *"I was born with poor eyesight. These improve my vision."*

"Fascinating," Felicity said. *"However, as I've never seen anyone else with such a device over here, I wonder if you are truly in need of them in this world."*

Surprised that he had never considered this before, William removed his glasses and looked around far and wide. *"You are right, Felicity,"* he admitted. *"I can see just fine without them."* He peered through the lenses once again, and discovered to his amazement that whatever spirit materials these lenses were made out of, they were not prescription strength. They were no more corrective than regular glass. However, feeling weird without them, he slipped the glasses back on his face and explained to Felicity that he would wear them just the same.

"As you wish," Felicity said, and with a *less* forceful flap of her wings than before, she returned to their previous altitude and flight path.

William clamped his legs against her neck, pushed his glasses up tighter to his face, and stuck his arms out to the side, hooting and hollering right along with the other children who were in the air on their colorful Nabiyali.

Moments later, after working her way some distance along the academic perimeter, Felicity slowed as she neared a stately structure made of luminous blue marble.

"Prepare to be wowed, my young challenger," she said as she began traversing the massive building. *"Here, we have the Hall of Literature, which I trust will interest you. Have a*

look!” Felicity dropped slowly into the library’s interior courtyard, where a number of children were lounging about.

“*Holy cow!*” William blurted out. “*What are those?*” “*Books,*” Felicity replied simply.

“*No way!*” William exclaimed, leaning forward for a better look. Studying the scene, he saw that each child was engaged with the same type of device, a thin slab of what looked like transparent gypsum. However, the devices were being used in different ways. Some of the children read them; much like children of Earth would read digital tablets or E-readers. Others use them like projectors to view art, 3D graphics and fully animated and lifelike stories in holographic bubbles, called story clouds, which rose out of the futuristic units.

“*This is awesome,*” William said, watching one boy in particular as a soft tenuous mist seeped from his device. In the next instant, a small cloud formed in the space before him, filled with miniature, three-dimensional, animated characters, complete with landscape. The boy made a motion and the book’s story commenced visually. The boy twisted his hand and the story cloud revolved, providing him with a better point of view. He lay back on the grass with his hands behind his head and proceeded to watch the tale.

“*I can’t believe it!*” William said. “*Holographic—books!*” His unblinking eyes, now appearing the size of saucers, were fixed on the cumulus animation. After watching the silent show for a few moments he curiously glanced around at the other children and their soundless story clouds. “*Felicity?*” he said. “*How do they follow the story if they can’t hear anything?*”

Felicity explained, “*When borrowed from the Hall of Literature, the book synchronizes with the individual, allowing them to hear its information in their mind, the same way we hear conversations. In this way there is no chance of disturbing others around them. They can, of course, choose to hear the device audibly, if they wish.*”

“Brilliant!” William said.

Felicity flapped her mighty wings and lifted high into the sky. *“So, what do you think, my young friend? Was the Hall of Literature more to your liking than Botany Hall?”*

William pursed his lips. *“I must admit,”* he said, *“those holo-books were pretty cool, but I think being able to create something with your mind still tops them.”*

“I see,” Felicity said, contemplating another potential place of interest. *“So, the challenge continues?”*

“If you don’t mind,” William said, hopeful to go on with this enjoyable tour a while longer.

“Your wish is my pleasure,” Felicity replied with what sounded like a smile in her voice. And with that and a flap of her mighty wings Felicity proceeded with their quest.

For the next few minutes, yielding to William’s direction, Felicity flew past structure after structure until she finally found one that piqued her rider’s interest.

“What is that?” William asked, pointing to a glistening, transparent, domed, ring-shaped structure made of rainbow-colored glass. *“It looks like a snow cone got stuck inside a glazed donut.”* He chuckled at his own joke.

Felicity, too, laughed at Williams’s colorful description. Then, descending, she circled wide, taking them over the artistic gardens that surrounded the entrancing edifice. Lifelike stone statuary of mythical-looking beings and unique botanical sculptures, from animals to archways, decorated the grounds.

“The domed section,” Felicity said, as she neared its top, *“is the Hall of Art, where students are introduced to the world of creative expression.”* William tried to peer inside while his guide continued. *“The ringed section below, houses the gallery where master artists leave their works for exhibition after their demonstrations. Would you like to see inside?”*

William scrunched up his nose. *“Maybe later,”* he said, remembering the time his parents had taken him and Stacy to an art show, and how boring he’d thought it was.

“Very well,” Felicity said. *“Shall we continue?”* William agreed, and once again they returned to their pursuit of besting Botany Hall.

“Felicity?” William called out against the wind. *“What were those strange statues outside the Hall of Art?”*

“Representations of species from other planets,” Felicity said, her tone matter-of-fact like.

“What? You mean aliens from other planets really exist?”

Felicity laughed. *“Well, they are only alien to you, Master William. If you were to visit their world, they would consider you alien, would they not?”*

“Oh yeah,” William said, feeling a little foolish. *“I never thought about it that way.”*

Reaching the Hall of Music, a round, open-air, pitted Amphitheater (like a great bowl sunk below the level of the ground) with seats rising in circular unbroken tiers from the floor, William decided he didn’t want to stop, even though a concert was about to begin which, as Felicity explained, would result in magical thought forms being produced.

“These colorful art forms,” Felicity explained as they passed by, *“are known as musical architecture. When music is played, beautiful colored rays and clouds appear above the musician. Full-scale orchestras,”* she added, *“can produce majestic bubbles as grand as a Gothic cathedral.”*

Felicity went on to explain to William that color and musical sounds were correlated in the spirit world. Every color produced a note of music, and every note of music produced a corresponding color; and each creation was governed and limited by the skill and proficiency of the artist.

Felicity’s next choice for William—and one she secretly felt would excite him—was the Hall of Progression, another circular building, this one with four winged classrooms, one at each quadrant. The circular section was roofless, and the interior wall resembled what the exterior wall of the Roman Coliseum *used* to look like, with its many alcoves filled with stone statuary of divinities and gods. This particular

facility allowed scholars the opportunity to trace the evolution of earth life from its beginning.

Directly outside, between the classrooms, were a number of tall, broad trees growing higher than the building. At William's request, Felicity stopped and hovered near one of these trees in order to give the boy a better look inside.

Examining the building's interior, William could see that these alcoves didn't contain divinities and gods, but beautiful alabaster figures of Earth animals, and one symbolizing man, and one empty one. Around the entire interior and above these recesses was a balcony with bench seats occupied by many students.

William watched curiously as a man, presumably a teacher, stood on the floor in the center of the space, his hands raised in front of an obelisk-shaped pillar of polished granite, beckoning to an alabaster sphere that floated in the air toward him.

Reaching the center of the space, the sphere halted. Blue mist seeped from the top of the pillar, enveloping the sphere immediately and causing it to enlarge to some eighty feet in diameter. Following this, a ray of light radiated forth from the pillar's top, inducing the sphere to become transparent and luminous.

Intently, William watched as within this sphere a series of sub-spheres materialized, one within another, and each one mapped with patterns of land and water masses similar to those used on 3D earth maps.

Felicity looked back at William—whose eyes appeared as large as the lenses in his glasses. *"Does this interest you, Master William?"*

Gaping in open fascination at what now was obviously a very sophisticated multitier globe, William nodded repeatedly.

"Shall I leave you here to enjoy the rest of the demonstration?"

"Yes," William replied, once again nodding his head. *"This looks very interesting."*

Felicity gave William a heartfelt look. *"Is it safe to say, then, that we have outdone Botany Hall?"*

"It is!" William conceded, grinning. Then, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose for the umpteenth time, he levitated up off of Felicity's back and transferred to the nearby tree. *"Thank you, Felicity, for a wonderful tour!"*

"You are most welcome, my young friend. Have a nice visit here in Summerland. I hope to see you again." Felicity flapped her majestic wings and sailed out of sight.

Turning back to the giant globe, William noticed that the sub-spheres had now taken on their luminescence, each one reduced in brightness, successively, with the smallest sphere being the darkest.

Trying to get comfortable, William chose a branch that would give him the best view and sat with one leg dangling. Having done so, he took a moment to peer beyond the Hall of Progression and delighted in the view of the metropolis' expansive core, which looked a lot like an ornamental garden, with its spoke-like pattern created by flower beds and paths. Hundreds—if not thousands—of children were scattered about, yet it scarcely appeared that the grounds were occupied at all. Behind him in the forest, he could hear many kids rambling around playing various games.

Returning his attention to the futuristic scene, William listened and could hear the teacher addressing the class.

"As we learned yesterday," the teacher was saying, *"all spheres are made up of vibrating energy. Each progressive sphere, and its residents, vibrate at a higher frequency than the one below it; and, as such, become less dense, brighter, and more beautiful in the process. The lighter, more advanced spirits can navigate the darker, denser spheres, unencumbered. However, the lower spirits can neither see nor travel into the lighter, higher frequency spheres without being accompanied by a higher authority, who is able to temporarily condition them to the frequencies of the more ethereal spheres."*

With a wave of the teacher's hand, the spheres suddenly separated one by one and lined up next to each other in ascending order. In the next moment, these spheres began to assume a different aspect. Mountains and hills began to take on a realistic

look, and bodies of water swayed and rippled. William stared in wonder as cities materialized in full detail, with people themselves alive and moving freely about.

“I don’t believe it!” William exploded, his eyes springing open wider than ever. *“There are actually little people floating around, like little fairies.”* He hopped up on the tree branch for a better view and peeked out from behind the leaves. Fixing his gaze on the row of spheres, he noticed that the smallest sphere was very dim, and that there was a dark, thick fog surrounding it—yet somehow this fog was still transparent, allowing the smallest sphere to be seen.

“This,” the teacher said, pointing to the smallest sphere, *“is your home world, Earth, and this fog represents the dark spheres . . .”*

Boy, I sure wish I had a video camera, William thought, *because no one is going to believe me when I try to explain . . .*

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, William felt a *thud* in his side and a ~~zap~~ of electricity course through his body. He cried out in pain, and losing his balance, he fell from the tree. Swiftly he plummeted toward the ground. His mind spun in confusion as his body vibrated in *agony*. Looking down, he fought to gain control. *“Stop!”* he screamed. Instantly, his speedy descent halted, just inches from the ground.

“Phew!” he sighed, and then moaning once again, he gritted his teeth as he realized that the mild, yet annoying, electrical shock was continuing. (It turned out that he wasn’t *really* in agony.) He righted himself, looked down at his side, and saw an object stuck to his ribs. Grimacing, he yanked it off.

DING. And then . . .

“No!” someone yelled.

William looked up to see an older lad dressed in a three-quarter length, gold-trimmed toga approaching.

“I’m sorry about that,” the lad said, pointing to the gossamer ball in William’s hand. He shook his head. *“But you shouldn’t have removed it. You’re not in the game. Only the thrower can remove the ball.”*

William stared blankly at the boy’s short-cropped black hair—and did he see two stubby horns, one behind the other, protruding from his head?

“Now we have to reset it,” the lad said, *“unless—you wish to join the game?”*

“No thanks,” William said, handing the ball to the boy, who quickly pulled his hands back. William scowled and tossed the ball to the ground.

The boy smiled as the ball sprang back as if on a rubber band and hovered next to William.

William hit the ball away with the back of his hand. Once again it returned. He glared down at it and then back at the boy. *“What’s wrong with your ball?”* he huffed.

The boy glided back a bit and sized William up. *“You’re new here.”*

William made a quick gesture to his earthly attire. *“What gave you that idea?”* he sneered, still irritated at being accosted by a possessed ball.

The boy raised his hand shoulder-height, with his palm out and fingers together. *“In that case—Welcome! My name is Lazorus, from Cornus in the Cornicopus Galaxy,”* he said, his smile showcasing his strong facial features.

William considered Lazorus’s hand gesture, but decided to stick to his own custom. He shot his hand straight out. *“I’m William! Ub—from Earth—in the candy bar galaxy,”* he said with a smirk.

Lazorus looked perplexed. *“Earth, is that not in what you call the Milky Way galaxy?”*

“Yeah, Milky Way—candy bar, get it?” William shook his head. *“Never mind; it was an Earth joke.”*

“Ah! You are humorous. Your jocularities will be most welcome by my friends.” Keeping his elbow close to his body, Lazorus repositioned his hand to mimic William’s. *“So, William, of the candy bar galaxy, would you like to play our game with us?”*

Before William could explain the concept of the handshake, the opportunity had passed. Lazorus was already addressing a group of kids hovering in the distance, awaiting their teammate.

“No,” William declined. *“I don’t know the rules.”*

“That, my new friend, need not be a concern.” Lazorus clasped William on the shoulder. *“We will teach you!”*

William looked back at the Hall of Progression, wanting desperately to get back to those cool spheres.

With a playfully pleading look on his face, Lazorus continued, *“If you say no, we will have to reset the game. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”*

Considering the situation that these boys were apparently in, William conceded. *“Okay,”* he said. *“I’ll play.”*



Having lost their race to a cute boy in a flattering toga (according to Lisa) the girls exited the Randomazer and said goodbye to the rest of the competitors.

“I think I’ll pass,” Lisa said to Stacy, referring to an invitation to the animal sanctuary that they’d learned about from some of the others in the group. *“I’d rather go to the beach.”*

“Okay,” Stacy said, *“then I’ll get Ryan to go with me.”*

“All right. Catch up with me when you get back.”

Stacy agreed, waved, and then headed off in search of Ryan.

Lisa took flight in the opposite direction, away from the coast. Upon reaching the mountain range, she saw below her a most impressive sight. Flowing down the alp

and disappearing into the jungle below was a grand waterfall. She descended for a closer look.

Approaching the jungle's canopy, near the base of the mountain, Lisa heard splashing and joyous laughter. Pushing through the foliage, she came to a clearing and the source of the merriment. A large plunge pool lay before her, filled with bathing youngsters, into which flowed the gently cascading multitiered waterfall. The channel and backdrop for these falls was a chiseled, glossy black, rock face marbled with veins of sparkling diamond crystals. Framing the picturesque view, on both sides, were long flowering vines growing from the jungle above.

The atmosphere was exhilarating. Hummingbirds and dragonflies enhanced the beauty of the scene as they fluttered around the brightly-colored bell-shaped flowers. Even the flowers themselves seemed to take delight in visits from their feathered friends, by opening their petals wide upon being approached.

Lisa felt nothing but love and happiness as she stood on the bank, basking in the warm light and watching the friendly flowers welcome their winged guests.

With the dazzling Nabiyali gliding gracefully overhead, Lisa peered out at the mystical scene and wondered if this is what the Garden of Eden looked like.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" a voice said from behind.

Lisa turned to see a lovely, exotic-looking, bronze-skinned girl, a little older than herself, with medium-length hair and deep-set, teardrop-shaped eyes angled slightly upward. Her stunning, white, thigh-length dress looked like it had been spun from a cobweb, and the velvety green vines adorning her arms and legs made her appear as if she was a princess of the jungle.

Wow, she looks like a goddess, Lisa thought. In reply to the girl's comment, she answered, *"Yes, it's magnificent!"*

The girl smiled warmly. *“This is my favorite place on the whole island. I like to come here and think—or just daydream,”* she confessed, and giggled. *“My name is Aphelia,”* she said, with a slight bow.

Lisa attempted a bow of her own. *“Hi, I’m Lisa.”*

“Those are interesting garments you wear,” Aphelia remarked innocently. *“May I assume that you are new here, and have not yet received proper attire?”*

Lisa glanced down at her Earth clothes. *“No,”* she replied, feeling a little self-conscious all of a sudden. *“I’m just visiting.”*

“How wonderful!” Aphelia said. *“I would love to hear your story. Would you like to join me over there, where it is more comfortable?”* She pointed to a large, flat-top, moss-covered boulder off to the side of the waterfall. Then standing, she spread a pair of breathtaking wings, which until now had been folded, unseen, behind her back.

Lisa gasped with delight at these remarkable appendages that looked like they were manufactured from the same gossamer material as Aphelia’s dress. *“Sure,”* Lisa said, gleefully, in acceptance of Aphelia’s invitation.

Aphelia lifted off and fluttered out over the water.

Lisa focused her attention on the cushy rock and instantly trans projected herself there ahead of Aphelia. Waiting for her new friend, she sat and gazed at the water, which was just below the top of the boulder. Being closer to it now, she noticed that its quality somehow looked strange. It seemed almost like liquid crystal, and as the light struck its surface, it scintillated with all the colors of a celestial rainbow. Lisa scooped up a handful, and was astonished to find that it had an electrifying effect which extended from her hand, right up her arm. She giggled at this most exhilarating sensation.

“This is weird,” Lisa said, as Aphelia settled down next to her.

“What is weird?”

“This stuff.” Lisa held her hands out. *“It resembles water but . . .”*

Aphelia swirled her finger in Lisa's puddled possession. *"What do you mean resembles? It is water."*

"But it makes my hands and arms tingle." Lisa said, dumping the small puddle back into the pond. She rubbed her hands together. *"And it's not wet!"*

"No," Aphelia replied. *"It's not wet in the sense you are used to; and why would it be? Spirits have no need for that characteristic. Water here is made up of energy which revitalizes, especially when one is totally submerged."*

Lisa dropped her legs into the water and spent the next few minutes enjoying this new, rejuvenating experience.

Sometime later, and after recounting her story to Aphelia, Lisa lay back on the mossy boulder and reveled in the euphoric sights, sounds, and smells within the tropical setting around her. It was then that she spied something flying rapidly around Aphelia's head. Its wings were emitting a high-pitched buzzing sound. Amused, she watched as it touched one of Aphelia's ears and then quickly zipped around to the other. Lisa could hear it laugh as she tried to focus on the wavering little menace. She sat up. *"There's a bug or something in your hair,"* she said, pointing, as it moved to the top of Aphelia's head and landed.

Aphelia put her hand above her ear. The little creature fluttered over and dropped ever so lightly into her palm. *"This is my friend, Fayette,"* Aphelia said. *"She comes from a planet in my galaxy, called Alida."* She extended her arm, giving Lisa a closer look.

Lisa bent down close and squinted, trying to make out the details of this new visitor.

"Here, let me make it easier for you," a gentle voice resonated in Lisa's mind. All of a sudden, Fayette enlarged herself to about twelve inches tall, about the size of a fashion doll.

“*Remarkable!*” Lisa exclaimed, leaning back out of the way. Then, studying the luminescent little fairy, Lisa saw that she wore a yellow, tight-fitting gown. She also noticed that Fayette’s long, red-orange hair was crowned with a tiny floral garland, and that her dainty, full-length wings were multihued, with exquisite irregularly curved edges, resembling French curves.

“*You are adorable,*” Lisa complemented.

“*Thank you,*” Fayette said. *You are lovely, also.*” Then, returning to her former—and more comfortable for her—size, she said, “*May I ask your name, and which world you hail from?*”

“*My name is Lisa, and I am from Earth.*” It suddenly dawned on her that she was conversing with beings from another planet. This excited her tremendously. “*Do all species, uh, races in the spirit world speak English?*” she asked of Aphelia.

“*No,*” Aphelia answered. “*We speak in our own tongue. A condition of the spirit world is that we all understand each other’s thoughts in our own language.*”

“*Wow! Automatic translation,*” Lisa said, bubbling.

“*I am surprised this concept is new to you,*” Fayette commented. “*Are you new in spirit?*”

“*Uh, no. I am not dead,*” Lisa attempted to explain. “*I am still alive on Earth. I am just—uh—sightseeing, you might say.*”

Fayette giggled. “*Do you mean to infer that we are dead? Do I look dead to you?*”

“*Um, no. I mean . . .*”

Aphelia laughed. “*I think what Lisa is trying to say is that she is still in material form, yet comes to our world as an astral visitor.*”

“*Yes! That’s it.*” Lisa said, thankful that Aphelia had intervened, and thus preventing her from tripping any further over her tongue.

“*Ah! I see,*” remarked Fayette. “*Then I bid you welcome, Lisa!*” She flew from Aphelia’s hand and kissed Lisa on the cheek. “*Enjoy your visit. Maybe we will meet again.*”

And with that, she darted off toward a group of girls hovering in the distance, playing a game of musical ball.

"You know," Lisa said, *"I have never encountered beings from other planets before. She lay down once again on the cushy outcropping. "Does everyone from your galaxy have wings?"*

"Yes," Aphelia replied, her own wings fluttering softly in the light breeze. *"The name of our galaxy, in your language, is called Aldora and means gift of wings. My planet is named Alleta and means winged ones. Fayette's planet, Alida, means small winged ones."* Aphelia twisted around, peered out at the sparkling pond, and then looked back at Lisa. *"I don't see any right now, but there are some other delightful creatures that come from a world in our galaxy called Nixie, meaning water sprite. They too have wings, and can live in and out of water."*

"I wish we had wings on our planet," Lisa admitted, staring out at the jubilant children playing in the plunge pool. *"It sure would solve some of the congestion in our larger cities."*

"I'll be right back," Aphelia said, and without further explanation, she flew off.

Lisa closed her eyes and daydreamed while she awaited her winged friend. In a short span of time Aphelia returned, her arms full of bunches of grape-size, ruby-red fruit. *"Would you like some?"* she asked Lisa, setting them down gingerly atop strings of vines.

Lisa sat up, a look of pleasant surprise on her face. *"They look delicious, thank you."* She picked a couple from the bunch and started to pop them into her mouth.

Aphelia laughed. *"No, no. Like this."* She held a few close to her nose and mouth and inhaled deeply. Instantly the fruit dematerialized, looking like pixie dust as she breathed it in.

Lisa's eyes almost sprang out of her head. *"You just snorted fruit?"*

"That's how it's done here," Aphelia stated. *"Remember, we don't have internal organs anymore, so there's no need to eat them."*

“Then how do you enjoy their flavors?” Lisa said, scrutinizing their luscious-looking bounty.

Aphelia picked another small handful. *“Try it, you’ll see.”*

Lisa rolled the samples she still held between her fingers, squeezing them ever so gently to test their solidity. *“But—how do they just dissolve like that?”*

“Just as there are laws on your world, like the law of gravity, similar laws exist here, and one of those has to deal with the consumption of food.” Aphelia inhaled another handful of the delectable fruit with a satisfied smile.

Looking over at Aphelia, now lying on her back, nestled within her wings, Lisa said, *“Honestly, I’m surprised that spirits require nutrition at all.”*

“We don’t, really. We do it for the pleasure and other benefits it provides us,” Aphelia said. *“Are you going to try it? It’s very refreshing.”*

Lisa took one last look at the berries and raised her hand to her mouth.

“Right, now just inhale,” Aphelia urged.

Lisa took a deep breath, and as she did, the fruit in her hand magically dissolved and flowed effortlessly into her nostrils. Her eyebrows flew high, while her body was filled with a tingling and refreshing energy that spread all the way to her toes. *“Wow!”* she shrieked. *“I feel so—so . . .”*

“Refreshed?”

“ALIVE!” Lisa said passionately. *“It feels like all of my senses have just been awakened.”*

For a few minutes, the girls said nothing while enjoying their snack. Finally, Lisa addressed Aphelia in a more serious tone. *“Do children from all planets come here when they die, uh, I mean leave their material bodies?”*

“Here, to Summerland?”

Lisa nodded.

“No. This place is for the children of your world. It teaches them what they should have learned on Earth, and what they will need to know in order to progress in this world. Each planet has its own spirit world of progression.”

Lisa looked around the area, studying the various children. Many of these kids were from other planets, as was evident by their outwardly appearance. *“If Summerland is only for Earth children . . .”*

“Then why am I, and others like me, here in Summerland?” Aphelia said, finishing Lisa’s question.

“Yes.”

Aphelia slid up behind Lisa and began tying her hair with one of the vines from their snack. She added a small leaf for decoration. *“Part of our education,”* she began, *“is spent visiting other schools in order to learn about other races. Think of it as a foreign exchange program, except that we visit many schools, and not just one or two.”* She finished Lisa’s makeover by wrapping another vine around the girl’s ankle as an accent. *“There! What do you think?”*

Lisa smiled as she admired her new look in the reflection of the pool. Looking up, she saw the group of girls from the musical ball game descending all around her. It was a bit crowded, but they all found space atop the mossy boulder.

“Are you Lisa?” one of the girls asked.

Lisa looked surprised. *“Yes, but how . . .?”*

“Fayette told us,” Another girl chimed in. *“She said that you are an astral visitor, and still live on Earth. Is that true?”*

Lisa nodded. *“Yes, I do.”*

Quickly the girls sat themselves all around Lisa and Aphelia and scrunched in tightly. Lisa noticed that they seemed to arrange themselves in order from oldest to youngest.

“Hi, I’m Julia,” said the oldest girl, the one who had approached Lisa first.

“And I’m Ann,” the second one introduced.

The rest of the girls quickly took their turn in order.

“I’m Lily.”

“I’m Sophia, but my birth name was Rebecca. I changed it,” this one whispered shyly. *“I like Sophia better.”*

“I like Sophia better, too,” Lisa whispered back with a warm smile.

The last girl leaned forward. She was adorable, and appeared to be about eight years old. *“I didn’t have a name when I was on Earth, because I left as soon as I was born, so the angels named me Olivia. Do you like it?”*

“I love it!” Lisa said with a wink.

Nonstop chattering broke out, and Lisa couldn’t believe the questions or the curiosity of these poor, information-deprived children.

“Please tell us about our world,” Julia asked. *“We don’t know much about it. Can you tell us about the time you live in?”*

“Um, ok. Where should I start?”

“Do all of the girls wear those types of garments?” Ann asked, pointing to Lisa’s clothes.

“What topics are you learning in school?” Julia asked, without waiting for answers to the previous questions.

“Is it true that you aren’t able to play with some kids on your world because of distance and language barriers?” Sophia inquired.

Lisa tried to answer. *“Yes, but . . .”*

“That’s so sad,” Sophia added.

“Well, they’re so far away that . . .”

“Why are there language barriers?” Lily asked. *“Can’t you all understand each other’s thoughts?”*

“We don’t communicate by thought.”

“I don’t think I would like it there,” Lily admitted.

“Can you tell us about family?” Olivia asked softly.

Suddenly all the girls became silent. *“Yes, tell us about family,”* they all probed. Lisa felt a sudden stab of emotion, and a tear tugged at her eye, at the thought of what these children had missed out on. Taking a deep breath, she settled in and began to indulge their curiosities, as best she could.

SPAZ IS NOT JUST A GAME

“Where’re we headin’ Stacy?” Ryan asked, holding onto his hat with one hand while Stacy dragged him through the air by his other.

“There’s some sort of festival on the other side of the island,” she said. *“I want to check it out, and you’re coming with me.”*

Ryan chuckled. *“Sure, why not? I’ve got nothing better to do.”*

Side-by-side Ryan and Stacy soared through the air as weightless, wispy, astral travelers, over the expansive and beautifully variegated Sunny Island. Nearing the other side, they saw in the distance a bustle of activity.

Stacy pointed. *“There,”* she said, *“That must be the place.”*

They arrived, a minute later, at the edge of what looked like a very packed Renaissance fair. They continued on floating slowly overhead until reaching the center of the fairgrounds, where finding it a great vantage point to the majority of the festivities they stopped and hovered above the boisterous merriment. Everything was so pristine—no dirt, garbage or ugliness anywhere. The expansive grounds were bordered by perfectly trimmed hedges, and covered by an immaculately manicured lawn, not that you could see much of it, mind you, through the crowds, attractions and amusements.

Trailing off into the distance, on both sides of the main grounds, were winding pathways leading off in opposite directions. At the end of one pathway lay an expansive fenced in wilderness area. From this distance, it was hard to tell if any life forms were occupying this area. The other pathway terminated at a large lake being enjoyed by scores of people, in and out of the water. Straight ahead, beyond the festival, were the mountains that surrounded the island, and beyond that, the ocean.

Below, the grounds were filled with children and some very strange-looking animals. Most of the children were spectators, while a number of them seemed to be

the owners and presenters of these performing animals. A number of the fantastical creatures whizzed about through the air, while the rest scampered over the ground, around their owner's feet.

"*Let's go down there,*" Stacy said, indicating a small group of children crowding around a boy and his dancing pet.

Ryan followed, and together he and Stacy joined the kids who were now laughing and pointing at the encircled pair.

"*Have you ever seen anything so crazy-looking?*" Stacy said of the performing critter.

Ryan poked fun at the chimp-like animal that also sported a long trunk, big ears, and wings. "*What is it, a flying monkey—or an elephant-bird?*"

Stacy laughed, as did some of the other kids.

The boy, dressed in a green knee length tunic, smiled at their mockery as his Monkeyphant sniffed the crowd. He grabbed the creature's snout as it gazed back at him with large, welcoming eyes. "*If you think the trunk is too much,*" he said, looking at Ryan, "*I can get rid of it.*" He raised the animal's snakelike appendage into the air and held a threatening pose. A mischievous grin crossed his lips.

"*Go for it,*" Ryan said jokingly.

Stacy threw her hands on her hips. "*Don't you dare!*"

The boy looked back at his pet. "*I'm sorry, Wimbley. The cowboy said get rid of it.*" Suddenly, the boy jerked down hard on the poor critter's trunk.

Stacy screamed.

In the boy's other hand, unseen by Ryan or Stacy, he simultaneously manipulated a palm-sized device. *Poof!* The long snout vanished.

Stacy stood horrified; hands cupped over her mouth.

"*Whoa!*" Ryan exhaled. "*I didn't see that coming.*"

Stacy backhanded Ryan's shoulder. "*You told him to do it!*" Then, expecting to see the poor animal in agony, she looked back, only to see the boy grinning cheerfully.

What *had* been a solid, lifelike animal a moment ago, was now a floating light image, something like a hologram.

Ryan passed his hand through the airy model. *“Neat toy,”* he said.

“I’m sorry,” the boy said, smiling at Stacy, *“it’s not real. It’s just a model. I could tell you two were new, and thought I’d have a little fun with you.”*

“Well—that was just mean,” Stacy huffed.

The boy manipulated his control once again, and the monkey’s trunk reappeared. Then, wagging his finger between Ryan and Stacy, he said, *“Why are you two still in your Earth clothes? Didn’t your guardians supply you with new attire upon arrival?”* Before Ryan or Stacy could answer, a small flash of light appeared before the boy. *“Will you excuse me?”* he asked apologetically. *“I’m being summoned.”* He shut down his simulation and took his leave.

“Come on,” Ryan said, *“let’s mosey around and see what other cool stuff we can find.”*

Stacy’s face was aglow with delight as she followed Ryan through the festive crowd.

Up ahead was a model of what looked like a hybrid of a dog, a lion and a scorpion. *“That’d sure make one great guard dog, don’t you think?”* Ryan said, hurrying up to it.

Stacy winced at the thought of that thing in the house. She shook her head in disapproval and turned away to survey more attractions. It’s then that she saw an object that pulled at her heart strings. *“You can keep your watchdog. I want one of those,”* she said, watching a fuzzy red panda with rabbit feet hop around under the control of a young girl.

Near Ryan, a different boy manipulated a whimsical-looking creature with a pointed head, pointed ears, pointed chin, and a long, pointed nose that looked like it had crawled right out of some fantasy novel. Even its tail and the back of its feet were pointed.

On Stacy's left, sniffing its way toward her, was a cute Aardvark-type animal with two snouts, balloon feet, and two long narrow tails that ended in thorny balls. She watched with intrigue as it approached.

Ryan touched Stacy's shoulder. "*Come on,*" he said. "*Let's see what else we can find.*" They left the central part of the grounds, with all the real-life models, and headed toward the exhibit and display section.

Stacy was full of wonder as she glanced around the various animal design simulators and holographic displays. Every booth and stand they passed was surrounded by groups of children crowding to see. Some kids even hovered overhead for a better view.

Stacy approached one exhibit that didn't have too many spectators. Hovering above the counter was a lifelike model of a comical-looking Manta Ray with oversized eyes and a goofy smile. A sign read: *Moody the Air Fish – Stroke my back and I'll cheer you up.*

"*May I?*" Stacy asked of an older boy who was attending the display.

"*Absolutely,*" the boy replied, stepping forward. "*That's what it's there for.*" Stacy stroked the model's back, and giggled as its face contorted into many comical expressions. Its body and wings also animated amusingly.

"*My proposal,*" the boy said, "*is to incorporate these into the Orientation Department, to be used as a mood enhancement therapy for new arrivals.*"

Stacy looked confused. "*Why would children need mood enhancement therapy here in Summerland?*"

"*Most children, when they first arrive,*" the boy said seriously, "*are not in a good place, emotionally. They miss their family, their friends, and their entire life. They are all alone and lost, initially. They do receive orientation by their guardian angels, and counseling by their spirit guides, and after a while they accept the inevitable and eventually thrive here. This,*" he said, stroking Moody the Air Fish, "*is just another tool to help them.*"

Stacy's face suddenly drooped. *"I never thought about that,"* she said sadly. *"I sure hope your project gets accepted. Good luck."* She raised her hand in a quick goodbye and walked away, feeling very disheartened about all the children who were torn away from their families. For a few moments, she wandered about aimlessly, considering how she, herself, felt at having lost her parents. *At least, with the Frequency Glasses, she thought, I can see my parents whenever I want.*

A little way ahead, and just beyond the exhibits area, Ryan stood staring at an oddly shaped, futuristic building, constructed from a substance resembling shimmering pewter. Seeing Stacy wandering his way, he called to her. *"Stacy, take a gander at this!"*

Stacy strolled up slowly next to Ryan. *"What?"*

With a tilt of his head, Ryan indicated the sign attached to the building. *"I reckon this'll explain the reason for this-here festival."*

Looking up at the sign, Stacy read:

CENTER FOR ZOOLOGICAL STUDIES – DESIGN AND CREATION

After pondering the sign's meaning for a minute, Stacy said, *"Everything we saw in the festival was just models and holograms. You don't think they create real animals here, do you?"*

"We certainly do," a voice said from behind.

Ryan and Stacy turned to find a tall man with wavy black hair, who looked about thirty years of age looking at them. His eyes, however, suggested wisdom beyond his years. The bright glow emanating from his inner light indicated a highly progressed soul, and his formal, full-length purple robe denoted intellect and academia.

The man smiled heartily and put out his hand in greeting. *"Welcome,"* he said. *"Forgive the intrusion. My name is Brian. I am the custodian here."*

Ryan thrust forth an arm and firmly shook Brian's hand. *"I'm Ryan, and this here's my friend Stacy."*

Brian, using two hands, shook Stacy's hand graciously, and then cupped his hands behind his back. His stance and mannerisms resembled deity more than authority. *"I'm pleased to meet you both,"* he said cordially. Then, noticing their clothes, he added, *"I take it you two are new arrivals."*

"I reckon that depends on what ya mean by new arrivals," Ryan said with a chortle. *"We're new here, all right, but we ain't what you'd call permanent."*

"We're just visiting," Stacy clarified.

"Ah, I see. You're astral visitors then," Brian said, both delighted and surprised.

"That's about the size of it," Ryan said, with a hardy nod and a wide grin.

"I'm always fascinated by the methods that allow a person to astral travel," Brian said. *"I think, though, that this is the first time I've ever seen two people traveling together. Can you tell me how you both managed . . .?"*

Unable to contain her excitement any further, Stacy interrupted Brian. *"So,"* she said, fidgeting with excitement, *"can kids truly create REAL animals here?"*

Brian chuckled at Stacy's exhilaration. *"They learn to design real animals here,"* he clarified. *"Some of our top achievers are selected to have real animals created from their designs. Those specimens live here in Summerland for the enjoyment of the children. The marine animals are housed in that large body of water referred to as the Aquarium, over on that side of the property."* He pointed to the lake that Stacy and Ryan had noticed upon arrival. *"The land animals reside in the Zoo on the other side of the property."* He indicated the wilderness area, off in the other direction.

"Sometimes, a few of our animals," Brian continued, *"are specially selected to help populate other worlds. How that happens, however, is too advanced for this school. The main purpose here is to begin the education of those students who wish to grow up to be designers and populators of developing new worlds."*

Brian paused, the corners of his mouth turning up slightly and his eyes sparkling as he reflected on something. *“When I first created this animal park,”* he said, *“it was intended to be a therapeutic aid for new arrivals. It still is, mind you, but with the addition of the learning center, the main focus, now, is on the education for animal life creation.”*

Brian put a hand forward. *“How would you two like to accompany me around the Student Park? You can tell me all about yourselves.”*

The kids agreed, and as Brian led them out onto a new path, he put his arms around their shoulders. *“So, tell me,”* He said, with a curious smile, *“how did you two manage to astral travel simultaneously?”*

With the musical sounds of birds in the trees and the aromatic scents of the park’s flowers wafting through the air, Ryan and Stacy related their story.

Brian listened intently, and on the completion of the tale he rubbed his chin. *“So, you kids found ol’ Davy’s magic spectacles, did you?”*

Ryan and Stacy shot surprised looks at each other, and then at Brian.

“You, you – know about the Frequency Glasses?” Stacy stammered.

“Indeed, I do,” Brian exclaimed. *“You see, David Finch, the inventor of the glasses, is my oldest and dearest friend. We have been friends ever since we were kids, around your age,”* he said, looking at Stacy. *“After I died in a scuba diving accident, he invented the Frequency Glasses in order to see me again. And, through that wonderful invention of his, I was not only able to stay in touch with him, but also my wife and daughter.”*

“Brian,” Ryan said, *“since you and Mr. Finch were best friends, I don’t suppose, then, that you’d know anything about a ship’s wheel that was stored in his safe.”*

“Ah!” Brian breathed. *“The old ship’s wheel; I had nearly forgotten about that. We found it diving off of Key West, Florida when we were youngsters.”* He smiled as he reminisced. *“I remember the news media did a story on us. Everyone thought it came from some famous pirate ship. For years, people seemed to come out of the woodwork, looking for the rest of the ship and any*

treasure that it might have carried. As far as I know, nothing of the ship that that wheel belonged to has ever been found.”

Ryan, now ready to jump out of his skin with excitement, said, *“There’s a sketch of a place called Blood Island engraved on the hub. Do you know anything about it?”*

“Yes,” Brian replied. “We tried to research it. We checked all of the maps that we could get our hands on for an island with that name, without success. We even tried to match its shape to the shape of other islands, but finally gave up. I suppose with today’s computer technology and that thing you call the internet, you might have better luck finding it, if it actually exists.”

Brian regarded Ryan earnestly. *“Be careful, though,”* he warned. *“If the public finds out you have that wheel, they’ll bound you for a glimpse of it.”*

Stacy stood silently off to the side, letting her mind wander, and taking in the sights while Brian and Ryan talked treasure. Something began to occur to her. She looked back at the learning center, and then around the Student Park at all the different mock animals. She then considered the lake and the wilderness area where they kept the live animals. The realization hit her like a blast of cold air to the face.

She yanked Ryan’s arm, pulling him off to the side. *“Ryan! Do you know what this is?”* she whispered. *“This is the real-life version of your grandmother’s game!”*

Ryan tilted his hat back with a finger. *“What’re you going on about, Stacy?”*

“Look,” she said, indicating the grounds in front of them. *“This is the Spirit Park.”*

“You mean, Student Park,” Ryan corrected, remembering what Brian had called it. *“Student Park – Spirit Park, same thing,”* she huffed impatiently. *“They both start with SP.”* Stacy pointed off to the left. *“Over there is the Aquarium. And over that way,”* she added, pointing to the right, *“is the Zoo.”* She looked intently at Ryan. *“Don’t you see?”* she said, her face all aglow. *“This is the real SPAZI!”*

“That is the same name my daughter gave for this place when she would visit as a young girl.” Brian said, overhearing Stacy. He stepped closer. *“She liked to use this park as inspiration for some computer project she was working on at the time.”*

“Wait!” Stacy said, suddenly losing her smile as her mind struggled to make sense of something. *“Did her computer project happen to be a 3D game?”*

“Yes, I believe it was,” Brian answered thoughtfully.

“Oh, my gosh!” Stacy cried, staring at Ryan, who being a little slow to grasp things simply stared blankly at his overexcited friend. *“Don’t you know what this means, Ryan?”*

“Uh, no, I can’t rightly say as I do,” he uttered.

Stacy leaned in close and whispered something in his ear.

Ryan stumbled back. *“What!?”* he exploded, quickly turning his gaze on Brian, and then back to Stacy. *“You’re saying that Brian is my – my great-granddad?”*

THE RETURN HOME

With the joyous sounds of SPAZ fading off behind Ryan and Stacy as they headed toward the other side of the island, to where they'd left William and Lisa, they decided to take a slow, low-altitude, scenic route back, in order to reminisce about their most recent experiences and discoveries.

"Well, it certainly makes sense now," Stacy said as she and Ryan, in a carefree manner, followed a babbling brook as it ran between two opposing hillsides covered with soft velvety green grass and interspersed with decorative patches of variegated wildflowers. They approached a small group of children flying in the opposite direction and waving merrily. Stacy waved back as the children passed by.

"What makes sense?" Ryan asked, being pulled from his thoughts and the pleasant memory of meeting his great-grandfather for the first time.

"The reason that your grandmother's journal was in the safe," Stacy replied. *"And the connection that she has with David Finch—that, of course, being Brian, your great-grandfather."* Stacy looked over warmly at Ryan. *"I also think I know why she made a game mimicking her father's park,"* she added, thinking about her own deceased parents. *"I bet she was trying to honor him."*

Ryan remained silent as he considered Stacy's comments, and the remainder of their trip across the island was peaceful and quiet as both children, individually, reflected on their adventures thus far.



At the edge of a woodsy area a boy flew a zigzag pattern through the trees. Quickly, he ducked behind a large, leafy one, when at the same instant, *SMASH!* A spherical object hit the tree, sending sparks flying in all directions. Taking advantage of the pause between attacks, the boy raced off once again into the forest.

A moment later, William's wispy form flashed onto the scene of the attack. Yanking the ball from the tree, he darted a few feet into the forest, cocked his arm back, and launched it after a different unsuspecting target whose head and back weren't quite protected by the bush he was hiding behind. The aim was wide and *SWISH* was the sound the ball made as it nearly grazed the boy's ear. The youngster gasped and quickly zipped off.

Noticing Ryan and Stacy arrive, William zipped up next to them. "*Hi, guys,*" he said, holding an open hand out at his side.

Ryan and Stacy returned the greeting and then watched, with great interest, as a glimmering translucent ball far ahead made a U-turn around a clump of trees and returned on its own to William's outstretched hand.

Just as Ryan was about to inquire, of William, as to the nature of this fascinating game the astral links of himself, Stacy, and William were broken by the sound of someone yelling.

"Dinnertime!" Lisa shouted from the hallway. "Mom says wash up and come downstairs!"

Ryan, Stacy and William returned to their physical bodies with such an abrupt and unpleasant force that it felt like it might knock them out of their chairs. Groans, moans and sounds of shock were heard from each of them.

"Welcome back," Lisa said, as she entered Stacy's room.

Stacy rubbed her dry eyes and then looked at Lisa. "Oof! I feel so heavy," she said, trying to stand.

Lisa sat down on the corner of Stacy's bed, holding her dead arm on her lap and remembering her own unpleasant return, and also thinking how wonderful it was to be free of her disabled body for a while. "Don't worry, it passes quickly," she said reassuringly. "So, how was your trip to see the animals?"

“Great!” Stacy said, stretching her stiff body. “You’re not going to believe what Ryan and I found out.”

“Kids!” Mrs. Walborg called from the stairway. “Supper’s on the table!”

Lisa sprang off the bed. “Come on,” she said, heading for the door. “Let’s go eat. We can swap stories later.”



In an old, Western-style tavern, where the local riffraff hung out playing pool and ignoring the no-smoking sign that doubled as a dart board, Mr. Smith and Bubba sat at a booth in a dimly lit corner of the smoke-filled pub. This particular and most-desired table, away from eavesdropping, had been graciously surrendered by a couple of lovebirds with minimal persuasion from Mr. Smith and the ivory-handled knife that was normally concealed in the top of his walking stick.

Now on his third pitcher of beer, Mr. Smith once again chugged directly from the serving vessel. Upon setting the pitcher back down on the table he wiped the froth from his mouth with the back of his hand.

“When I was a young cuss,” he slurred gruffly, “I was a hustler and very street-smart. I could always get what I wanted.” His speech trailed off unintelligibly.

Bubba sat quietly on the other side of the table, slowly sipping his beer from a bottle and listening intently to his otherwise tightlipped and secretive employer. Having been with Mr. Smith for only three months, Bubba still hadn’t been given a clue as to what they were after.

His head wobbling, Mr. Smith returned his gaze to his henchman. “As a lad, I used to go to the shipyards,” he said, rather abruptly. “I’d help the dockhands for spare change.” He pointed a shaky finger at Bubba. “That’s where I heard stories about it.”

This is what I've been waiting for, Bubba thought, leaning in a little closer and hoping that the belly full of beer would loosen his boss's lips. "Really?" he said, feigning casual interest so as not to raise suspicions about his probing. "What did the dockhands say about it?"

"Not the dockhands, you fool," Mr. Smith slurred, "the sailors. They said they saw pictures of it in the US newspapers." He slammed his fist on the table. "I knew right then I had to have it!"

Bubba took a slug of his beer, sighting raptly down the bottle at his employer as if it were a gun barrel. "What did they say *it* was?"

Mr. Smith stammered, "They—said—it was . . ." but suddenly realizing that he was about to give away his secret, he caught himself and paused. Then, with blurry vision and an inebriated slouch he once again pointed unsteadily at Bubba. "They said it was—none of your business!" He laughed drunkenly and fell back against his seat, his hand dropping beside him with a thud.

Bubba leaned back slowly against his seat, resigned to the probability that his companion wouldn't be revealing his secrets any time soon. Taking another sip of his beer, he stared at the slumped-over, pathetic excuse for a human being sitting across from him. *I may be a thug*, Bubba thought, *but at least I'm a classy thug*. He tugged absentmindedly at the lapels of his sports jacket.

Mr. Smith snapped upright, like a man suddenly possessed. "I t-taught myself English," he stuttered. "And then—then—stowed away on a cargo ship for America." He took another swig from his half-full pitcher of beer. "But—every time," he continued, his head drooping as he held the pitcher of beer in the air in front of him, "that—that—I made it to this blessed country . . ." His arm instantly gave way, causing the pitcher to land with a bang on the table. Without further interruption, he proceeded with his drunken ramblings, "Homeland—S'curity—s-sent me back." He began to lift the pitcher once again, but stopped and stared, blurry-eyed, into the

golden effervescent liquid. Suddenly the thought of another drink repulsed him. He pushed it away and sank into the corner of the booth.

Bubba ordered two coffees, and watched silently as his boss tried to regain his composure.

“Finally,” Mr. Smith said, after a lengthy silence and a full cup of coffee, “after all these years, hundreds of newspaper articles, and that photo,” (he pointed loosely toward the car outside), “the trail *ends* here. So, this is where we *start*.”



Having finished supper and the cleanup chores, Lisa, Stacy, William, and Ryan retired to the game room, where they lounged about playing video games and discussing their escapades of the day, which they decided had been absolutely and undeniably the most wondrous adventure anyone, on earth, could ever undertake.

Stacy recounted, for the most part, hers and Ryan’s discovery of the real SPAZ, with Ryan weighing in from time to time about Brian, its originator, being his great-grandfather. Lisa told of her visit with Aphelia, and William, being in the middle of a racing game with Ryan, related a spotty account of his tour by the Nabiyali, Felicity.

Eventually the conversation turned melancholy as the topic changed from their celestial recreations to the sad and suffering victims of life’s transition process, called death.

“Did you know,” William said, matter-of-factly, while trying to catch Ryan’s car on a straightaway, “that approximately twenty thousand kids die per day?”

“Hogwash!” Ryan blurted out, leading William’s car over a series of whoop-de-dos. “There’s no way that many kids die in one day.”

With his face twisted tight in concentration, William fiercely worked the controls in his hands. “Felicity told me so,” he declared, overtaking Ryan around a bend. “And I saw the nonstop stream of kids entering Summerland, myself.”

“How sad,” Lisa said, somberly. “If that many kids die per day, can you imagine how many people there are that are heartbroken, and mourn the loss of those kids.”

Stacy shifted in her seat. “Not to mention the kids themselves. They go through a mourning process also,” she shared. “In fact, Ryan’s great-grandfather told us that a lot of spirit children, when they first arrive in Summerland, miss their family so badly that they won’t play or talk with anyone for a long time.”

Hey, no cheating,” Ryan shouted, shoving Willy over on the couch.

“All right, guys,” Mrs. Walborg’s voice resonated up the stairs, “bedtime!”

A PLAN IS HATCHED

Sunlight glared into the dining room, and the front door wavered slightly in the warm dusty breeze that blew in through the new screen door. An occasional chirp was heard from the few birds that had yet to take shelter from the blazing sun.

It was still early as the boys sat down to breakfast, yet the heat was already causing Ryan's tight-fitting jeans to become uncomfortable.

William, on the other hand, was prepared for today's scorcher, being dressed in loose-fitting shorts and an oversized, button-up shirt. He, however, no longer buttoned the top button of his shirt, ever since Ryan had told him it looked too geeky.

"Good morning, boys," Mrs. Walborg greeted on entering the kitchen. "How are we today?"

"Good!" William replied.

With his cheeks full of cereal, Ryan just smiled and nodded.

"Mr. Walborg and I have to go into town today. Do you boys want to come along?"

William shook his head while shoveling a spoonful of oatmeal into his mouth.

"No ma'am," Ryan replied. "If it's okay, I reckon I'd like to stay here and go for a dip in y'all's lake."

Mrs. Walborg poured coffee for her and Mr. Walborg. "Of course, dear," she said. "I hear it's supposed to be a record-breaker today, over a hundred and fifteen!" She walked over and set the cups of coffee on the dining room table. "We'll leave the phone number of the neighbors; in case you need anything."

Ryan gulped down the last of his cereal milk. "Hurry up, Willy," he urged. "I wanna take the new RC boats out for a spin."

William gobbled down the rest of his oatmeal and raced Ryan upstairs to the game room, where the boxes that Granny had sent over had been relocated.

Just down the hallway, Stacy slowly awakened with a stretch and a yawn. Her room glowed dimly with the suffused light that squeezed in around the drawn blinds. Suddenly, it hit her. She sat up swiftly. “I’ve got it!” she blurted out. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of this last night.”

Next door, Lisa was humming to herself and brushing her hair, when in burst Stacy, nightgown-attired and hair all disheveled. “I know how to help them!” she exclaimed, hopping onto the bed next to Lisa.

Lisa looked at Stacy’s reflection in the mirror. “You know how to help who?” she asked calmly, while continuing to brush her hair.

“All of them,” Stacy said passionately. “The spirit kids—the spirit parents—the people on earth mourning those who died—everyone!”

Lisa finished with her own hair and turned to Stacy. “Turn around. Let’s see if we can make you presentable.” Stacy obeyed, and Lisa started in on the rat’s nest that was Stacy’s hair. “Now, tell me your idea.”



Somewhere outside the Walborg property, on a lowly hilltop, Bubba sat sideways in the car’s open passenger doorway, breathing hard and fanning himself with a newspaper while his stomach growled unmercifully. He removed his sports jacket and draped it over his knees, exposing a one-of-a-kind, leather-handled, wooden persuader that he kept tucked in his waistband.

“Boss!” he called out. “Why don’t we go get a bite to eat? We can come back and watch these brats later.”

Just then Mr. and Mrs. Walborg appeared at the front door, dressed for town.

With his binoculars trained on the front of the house, Mr. Smith smiled evilly at the pleasant turn of events. “Your stomach can wait!” he demanded. “I think we’re

going to be paying these youngsters a visit real soon.” Then, looking even more sinister, he turned his spy glasses to the activity down at the lake.

At the end of the dock, William rejoiced after having just won the boat race around the lake. “Woo! Hoo!” he shouted, dancing up and down. Beads of sweat pooled on his face as the merciless sun blazed down through the cloudless blue sky.

“Quit your whooping and hollering,” Ryan squawked. “You only won by a horse's hair.” He made for the shade of the butte and placed his controller, cowboy hat, shirt, and undersized borrowed flip-flops on the dry grass.

William retrieved the boats and secured everything in the shade, next to Ryan's clothes. “It doesn't matter,” he gloated. “A win is a win.”

“It's easy to win with a toy. Let's see if you can do it for real. Come on, I'll race ya in the water from the end of the dock to shore.” Ryan hopped barefoot along the scorching wood planks and dropped to sit at the end of the pier, allowing his singed feet to dangle over the edge.

Seeing Ryan inspecting his burnt feet, William charged silently forward and tackled his friend from his perch. *SPLASH!* They hit the surface of the rippling lake and quickly submerged as a tangled mass.

The boys wrestled briefly underwater, where Ryan, being the stronger of the two, quickly got the upper hand and bear hugged William until he quit squirming. William emerged, spitting and sputtering.

Ryan surfaced victoriously behind William and laughed. “Give it up, squirt. You're never gonna beat me when it comes to a physical challenge.”

“You got lucky, is all.” William said, splashing Ryan.

Ryan snorted. “You just don't learn, do you?” He swam over and positioned himself near the end of the dock. “Let's go. I'll make it two for two.”

Cunningly—and with an omniscient grin—William dog paddled over beside Ryan.

Ryan shook his head in disbelief. “You *do* know how to swim, don’t ya?” William treaded water next to Ryan. “I’ll manage,” he retorted. “Just count off.”

The boys turned toward the shore.

“On your mark!” Ryan called. “Get set—go!”

Both boys immediately plunged forward into the gentle waves.

Ryan splashed his way through the water, using an unskilled freestyle stroke. He powered on forcefully, his head turning back and forth above water with each stroke.

William, on the other hand, glided up next to Ryan effortlessly with a scientifically calculated, drag-reducing, streamlined freestyle. Breathing minimally, he reached the shore first and stood in waist-deep water awaiting Ryan. “You were saying?”

Ryan stumbled to the shore and plopped down on the dirt bank, panting. “I gotta say,” he said, breathing heavily. “For a scrawny thing, you sure can move through the water.”

“I just swim smart,” William said, sitting down next to Ryan. “No need exerting more energy than necessary.”

“Okay boys we’re leaving,” Mrs. Walborg called down from atop the terrace. “The phone numbers are on the refrigerator. We’ll be home this evening. Be sure to drink plenty of water.”

The boys waved in acknowledgment.

A short while later, as the Walborgs’ pickup truck turned off the private dirt road and onto the two-lane thoroughfare toward town, neither Mr. nor Mrs. Walborg noticed the two shady characters keeping tabs on the boys from the nearby hilltop. Mrs. Walborg settled in for an enjoyable Sunday afternoon ride into town.

Back at the house, Ryan and William had come in, to get out of the heat, and to check on Stacy and Lisa. After stopping by the kitchen for a quick snack, they found the girls in Stacy's room on the bed, hunkered over a tablet, writing notes of some sort.

Ryan leaned against the dresser, chewing on a toothpick. "What're y'all doing?" he asked.

Lisa looked up. "We're working on a plan to share the Frequency Glasses with other kids."

William shot a hard look at Lisa, and with thoughts of pushy town's kids lining up outside the house, or worse yet, groups of kids overrunning their bedrooms in order to gain access to the home network, he asked nervously, "What other kids?"

"All kids," Stacy offered, smiling proudly.

Ryan folded his arms tight to his chest. "Why would ya wanna do that?"

"Because of what we talked about last night," Lisa said, "because of all the sorrow that exists on earth and in the spirit world when someone dies."

Stacy tapped her notebook. "We've come up with a way to alleviate all that pain and suffering."

Ryan looked puzzled. "How is sharing the Frequency Glasses gonna do that?"

"By reuniting the living with the dead, uh, I mean transitioned," Stacy said, correcting herself. "Think about it. Sadness over death would be eliminated, and the mourning process would become a thing of the past when people realize that nobody really dies, and that they would be able to see those in the spirit world anytime they want."

William stood silently off to the side, wrinkles forming between his brows as he listened with focused attention.

Glancing at her brother, Stacy noticed the pensive look on his face and knew that he was trying to figure out what her plan was. She returned her attention to Ryan.

“Let’s not forget,” she continued, “all of the kids facing death due to illness. Most of them are afraid of dying. But being able to see, ahead of time, what to expect will relieve their fear and make their transition much easier.”

“The spirit children in Summerland would also benefit from this,” Lisa added. “A lot of them crossed over when they were very young, and know nothing of the world they come from. They are very curious. When I was with Alphelia, I met a group of kids that badgered me silly about earth life.” She chuckled. “They wanted to know everything—from what we study, to the way we dress, to what we do in our spare time. What better way to learn about their home world, than from kids who are still here?”

Lisa stood up and stretched. “I also have a personal reason for wanting to share the glasses,” she said, glancing down at her dangling arm and reflecting on the joy she felt at having the use of it again while in astral form. “There are millions of disabled people who, I think, would love to have an opportunity to be free of their broken bodies for a while, and this would give it to them.”

“Okay,” Ryan said. “So just how do you figure on accomplishing this momentous task?”

William rubbed his chin and grinned. “You’re going to use the internet.”

“Right!” Stacy exclaimed. “I’m going to create a network over the internet, similar to what I did here, and then design a simple website to be a portal to the frequencies.”

Ryan looked around at the others in astonishment. “Are you saying that *everyone* with a computer could then astral travel?”

“Everyone with a computer *and* an internet connection,” Stacy expounded.

“Hot diggety!” Ryan exclaimed, envisioning millions of kids gathering on the astral plane at the same time. “That means,” he said, sticking his toothpick behind his

ear for later, “that we would be able to meet kids from all around the world, face-to-face.”

“That would be better than pen pals,” Lisa squeaked. “They would be space pals.”

“That just gave me another idea,” Stacy said, bubbling with excitement. “I could expand the simple FG portal into a full-fledged social networking site. Kids could keep a blog of, and share, their astral traveling experiences with other celestial adventurers. They could even schedule their future visits so others could meet up with them.” She immediately jotted a few notes on her notepad.

William clapped his hands together. “We could call the website—Spacebook.” And with a look of triumph, he added, “This is going to be bigger than the internet itself!”

THE PLAN UNFOLDS

“All right,” Stacy said, waving her notepad in the air. “Let’s get started.”

It was high noon, and Stacy’s room was now brightly lit as she, William, and Lisa crowded cross-legged atop the bed to begin laying out the specific details for the Spacebook website.

Leaving the brainwork to the experts, Ryan took this opportunity to resume his search for Blood Island. His recent conversation with his great-grandfather had reignited his belief that the ship’s wheel might indeed hold a secret to lost treasure.

Sitting now in front of the computer screen in his room, his eyes glazed over dreamily while waiting for the system to boot, Ryan envisioned a mysterious and secluded island, within which a pirate’s booty must surely be buried.

At that very moment, looking down from the nearby hilltop, Mr. Smith was also envisioning fame and fortune as he stood, wiping perspiration from his forehead under the blazing midday sun, while trying to concoct a scheme for entering the Walborg residence.

In the car, a few feet away, Bubba sat in sweat-drenched clothes, aggravated by the desert-like heat, and bored over this cat-and-mouse game that Mr. Smith insisted on playing with the Walborg residents.

Staring at the picture resting on the seat next to him, Bubba flipped it over. “Hey boss,” he called out, his voice sounding parched and hoarse, “it says *Finch* on the back of this photo, but the mailbox said *Walborg*. Maybe the person you’re looking for doesn’t live here anymore.”

“For all I know, the guy’s probably dead,” Mr. Smith snarled. “But since this was the last place, he was known to be, it’s possible that what I’m looking for is still here.”

“Why don’t we just wait until the parents return, and ask them if the previous owners left anything behind when they moved?”

“You lunkhead!” Mr. Smith snapped. “If they’re not aware of it, I don’t want to bring it to their attention. And, even if they are, they probably don’t realize the value it holds. No,” he said. “With the parents out of the way, we can easily get past the kids and have a look for ourselves.”



Elected note-taker, Lisa, sat, pencil in hand and poised over her notepad, while Stacy started the meeting.

“The home page of the website,” Stacy began, “should be kept to a minimum. All we really need is an introduction, instructions, a warning about the dark realm, and a couple of links; one which will open a window broadcasting the audio and video frequencies, and the other to the social networking page.”

Lisa quickly jotted down Stacy’s requisites.

“The next thing we need,” Stacy continued, “is the social networking page itself—and lastly, is to visit the other social networking sites and spread the word about our site.”

“I’ll write the copy for the homepage, if you want,” Lisa offered.

“Good,” Stacy said. “I’ll begin creating the code for the website while you’re doing that.”

“You know,” William said, “I’m thinking we should probably keep the location of the Frequency Glasses a secret, especially since they were hidden in the first place, and also since they’re not rightfully ours, anyway.”

“I agree,” Lisa said. “But couldn’t people simply discover where the signals are coming from, if they wanted to?” she asked of Stacy.

Stacy shook her head. “No,” she said. “I’ll use an online hosting service for the website itself. Then I’ll apply encryption techniques and special software to block anyone from tracking the IP address to the server. I have a few other tricks up my sleeve, also, that will send any hackers chasing ghost signals all over the world,” she added, with a soft chuckle.

“We are also going to need a dedicated computer, running continuously, with constant internet access to the glasses,” William advised.

“I know,” Stacy replied. “I have an extra laptop we can use. We can put it somewhere where it won’t get disturbed.”

“It would have to be quiet and stable,” William added. “The boom arm speaker couplings aren’t soundproof—nor are they very secure. If the computer gets bumped, the glasses would fall off or get knocked out of position.”

Stacy nodded again. “It would also have to be dark. Any light would interfere with the video signal.”

“Right, so where do we put it?” William wondered aloud.

“We could put it in the cave,” Stacy suggested. “There’s electricity out there.”

William wrinkled his nose, “I’m not too fond of subjecting the fine electronics to the weather. Tree Root Cavern isn’t exactly moisture-proof.”

“Hey!” Lisa chimed. “Ryan said there was an electrical outlet *inside* the safe, remember? We could set it up in there. It would be safe and secure, and nobody would ever be able to find it.”

“Hmm,” William muttered. “That just might work. I think the compartment was large enough to house everything. Stacy, do you have a tape measure?”

“I think so—let me check.” Stacy slid off the bed and searched through a few desk drawers, finally pulling out a twelve-foot tape measure. “Here,” she said, tossing it to William.

William caught it and slid off the bed. “Is the other laptop about the same size as this one?” he asked, tearing a piece of paper from Stacy’s tablet.

“Yeah, basically,” Stacy answered.

William began taking quick measurements of the laptop and other required equipment. Then, finished with his task, he folded the paper and stuck it in his pocket. “I’ll be back,” he said. “I’ll just go and make sure there’s enough room in the safe for all this stuff.”

Unknown to William or the other kids, as he headed down the hallway toward the attic staircase, just outside an old clunker of a car was creeping slowly past the front of their house.

With the gravel crunching softly under the jalopy’s tires, Mr. Smith pulled up and parked near the end of the scrapyard. Seeing no one around, he and Bubba exited the car and slipped quietly in amongst the junk.

Stealthily, they crept up and down the irregular and untidy aisles of discarded debris, peering under, around, and behind antiquated machinery, piles of pipes, old wheels and tires, rusty tools, stacks of lumber and bricks, and various other grungy odds and ends.

Not knowing what they were searching for, Bubba constantly consulted Mr. Smith with every curious thing he found.

At the same time the goons were rummaging through the junk yard, William completed his verification of the safe for compatibility as a secure location for the secret network. Leaving Tree Root Cavern, he decided to seek out Ryan for help with the next phase of his self-appointed task.

“Hey! I need your help,” William said, upon entering Ryan’s room.

Ryan didn’t answer; he just stared at the computer screen with his chin in his hands.

“What’s wrong with *you*?” William said, puzzled by Ryan’s forlorn expression.

Ryan leaned back in his chair; his face twisted in frustration. He looked at William. “I can’t find a blasted thing on Captain Blood *or* his island,” he grumbled.

“I told you that you probably wouldn’t. Now, come on, give me a hand. We need to move some computer equipment down to the cave and set it up for the FG network.”

Ryan, disheartened, abandoned his quest for riches and stood up, straightened his cowboy hat, and gestured toward the door. “All right,” he said, “let’s go.”

As the boys sauntered into Stacy’s room, the girls were working fervently at two separate computers. Stacy was hunched over a laptop, inspecting lines of programming code, while Lisa busied herself, one-hand, on the desktop computer with the text portion of the website.

Ryan followed William to the end of the bed where Stacy had stacked most of the equipment to be taken to the cave. Among the items were the spare laptop and power cable, the Frequency Glasses in their case, Ryan’s fabricated mounting bracket, and William’s modified cable, complete with couplings.

“William,” Stacy said, having a sudden thought, “there are three repeaters in the closet. Take two of them with you. Set one up in the attic and the other in the cave. We’re probably going to need them to extend the Wi-Fi signal.”

“You might as well take the journals back down, also,” Lisa recommended.

William retrieved the electronic devices from among the stacks of computer equipment in Stacy’s closet. Then, commandeering an empty box from the closet shelf, he inserted the repeaters and added the equipment from the bed.

Filling the rest of the box with the journals, Ryan then lifted it to his waist. “Ready?” he said to William.

“Yup,” William said. “But—should I get a rope to lower the box down?” “Nah, I can handle it.”

With his hands in his pockets William whistled to himself while he and Ryan set off once again for Tree Root Cavern.

Reaching the pruning platform, Ryan set the box down and descended the first few rungs. Halting momentarily, he hoisted the box to his shoulder and continued slowly, rung by creaky rung, into the dark and dingy hollow. About a minute later, he reached the bottom.

“Come-on Willy,” he hollered. “I’m down.”

“I’m right here,” William said, just two rungs above Ryan.

Tilting his head to see around the box, Ryan looked up. “Oh, I didn’t see ya there.” Entering the cavern, he deposited the box on the settee and switched on the light.

William followed a few paces behind, dry-spitting the stale, earthy-tasting air from his mouth.

Ryan poked a thumb toward the safe. “Do you remember the combo?”

“I was just down here,” William answered. “I left it unlocked. Just press the button.” While William waited for the safe to open, he turned his attention to the box they just brought down. “Now that we’re going to use this place,” he said, removing the journals, “maybe we should decorate a little.” Holding the stack of notebooks, he considered placing them on one of the shelves above the settee, thinking they might provide a good look to the cave— “like a little library,” he murmured to himself. Ultimately, though, he decided against it, due to the moisture in the air, and resigned himself to place them back into the safety of the safe from whence they came.

“What’d ya have in mind?” Ryan asked, after pushing the UP button on the control box.

“Well for starters, I thought *that* thing might look good hanging down here,” William said, indicating the ship’s wheel that sat in the dirt against the far wall.

“That’s a good idea, Willy.” Ryan said, as the safe came to life and its vault rose toward the ceiling. “Tell ya what, you start setting up this computer stuff, and I’ll go look for a hammer and nail.”

After returning the journals, William set the laptop in the opened safe and plugged it in. “There’s a toolbox in the laundry room,” he said. “You should be able to find what you need there.”



Striking out in the scrapyard, Bubba leaned against the trunk of the car, playing with an orange-and-black monarch butterfly that had landed on his arm, while Mr. Smith scanned the area.

“The children are all inside now, just where I want them, and I don’t see anyone else around,” Mr. Smith said. “It’s time we have a look in that attic.” He turned to Bubba. “Quit playing with bugs, you nincompoop!” He slapped the butterfly off Bubba’s arm. It landed on the ground, fluttering. “Come! Let us introduce ourselves.”



“I’m back,” Ryan said, entering the cave.

William looked over his shoulder. “Good! I’m almost done.”

“I reckon these oughts to do it.” Ryan displayed a couple of twelve-inch-long, galvanized, spike nails. “I had to go to Mr. Walborg’s shop to find them, though. I reckon he won’t mind.”

While Ryan spoke, William finished connecting the cabling to the boom arm speakers and the portable computer. Then, after positioning the Frequency Glasses into their support bracket, which was fitted along the top edge of the laptop’s screen, he powered up the system. “There!” he announced triumphantly. “It’s ready for the

girls.” He then carefully pushed the fragile computer system further into the safe for protection.

“Where do you think we should hang it?” Ryan said, after retrieving the ship’s wheel from the floor.

William took a moment to glance around the bumpy and pitted walls of the cavern. “On that wall, I think,” he said, pointing behind the safe. “That way, it will be seen upon entering.”

“Okay, hold it up to where you think it should go, and I’ll nail ‘er in place.” Ryan handed William the wheel.

William, grunting under the weight of the wheel, lifted and held the artifact in place, while Ryan banged in the first spike. As Ryan started to drive in the second one, his hammer missed its mark and thudded against the wheel, knocking the golden metal disk loose. It hit the ground with a heavy thump!

“What was that?” Ryan said, glancing down. “Did I break something?”

“Nah,” William replied. “You just knocked the cap loose, is all.”

Ryan finished driving in the last nail and moved back to admire his handiwork. “There! What do ya think?”

Absently, William bent down and scooped up what was really more of a slug than a cap, and stepped back beside Ryan. “I like it,” he admitted. “A few more nautical relics and we’ll have this place looking like a pirate’s den.”



Far off in the lower levels of the spirit realm, Captain Blood companied with his crew and some local wenches, singing and dancing to their favorite sea shanty. His grog of blood rum splashed over the rim of his cracked mug, and his beaded dreadlocks flailed about his face as he hopped and jigged. The wooden slats of the ship’s floor creaked and groaned under the merrymaking. In a corner of the cargo

hold, the musicians played their squeeze boxes and braginhos, while clapping and stomping to the sea shanty's lyrics:

*“Avast ye! Ye bilge-sucking pigs
Listen up whilst we sing ye
this jig . . .*

*We aargh pirates
And pirates we'll be
We plunder and pillage
The seven seas*

*We sail by ship
To hornswoggle others
Then scour its crew
Enlisting its brothers*

*We take yur booty
And even yur wenches
We'll take them from
Yur dying clenches*

*Sooo . . .
Surrender yur treasure
Or be run thru
'cause we'll spill yur blood
To make our brew*

*Then off we'll be
Back to the sea
In search of more bounty
Fer pirates are we!"*

Laughing, cursing, and the slamming of mugs echoed far across the rocky peninsula. Then, in the midst of it all, everyone simultaneously broke into chorus:

*"Heave ho into the fog
Give us a mug of blood rum grog
Mean and fierce it'll make us be
So we can conquer this blessed sea."*

Suddenly, Captain Blood clutched his chest. "*Argh!*" he cried, wincing at the stabbing pain through his heart. "*Me map!*" He slammed his mug down, sloshing the blood ale about, and shot out through the ceiling of the schooner's belly.



"Hand me that, Willy, and I'll tap 'er back in," Ryan said, waggling the hammer.

William looked down at the hub's cap in his hand, and wiped the dirt from its surface. It was then that he made a surprising discovery. "Hey, there's something written on the back of this," he remarked.

Ryan glanced at the cap. "What's it say?"

Removing his glasses, William pulled the disk up close to his face and squinted. "I can't quite make it out, but it looks like numbers. Here you take a look." He handed the disk to Ryan, who bounced the solid slug in his hand, feeling its weight.

"Willy," Ryan said, "I think Stacy was right. I think this *is* gold. And — it looks more like a coin or medallion than a hubcap."

“That must’ve been why it was in the safe, then,” William said, wiping the lenses of his glasses with his shirttail — a constant task in the dusty environment of the San Joaquin Valley. “Though, it makes no sense to me why they put the *whole* ship’s wheel in there.”

Ryan carried the golden slug closer to the light and held it out. Scratched in its back side was an inscription that read: Blood Island: 24-34-45 N lat / 81-38-33 W long ‘X’ marks the spot at 2-6 & 8-3. He frowned. “What in tarnation does all that mean?”

“Well,” William said, holding up his index finger, “the first part sounds like map coordinates.”

“Yee haw!” Ryan thundered. “I *knew* it was a treasure map. Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“Not so fast,” William warned. “We still need to figure out the rest of it.”

Just then, from the bowels of the dark realm, Captain Blood, with a look of evil vengeance on his face, tore through space, through Earth’s atmosphere, through the ground, and finally across the small subterranean cavern, all in the matter of a split second.

“Curses, ye fool-headed lad! It’ll be Davy Jones’ locker wi’ ye, this time!”

At that same instant, a blast of wind quickly blew past Ryan’s hands, as the invisible Captain Blood grabbed for the encrypted medallion.

Feeling the swift breeze, Ryan glanced about with a start. Then, figuring it was just another gust from above, he shrugged it off and returned to the enigma at hand. “I think ‘X’ is supposed to be the location of the treasure!”

“That’s obvious,” William stated matter-of-factly. “What’s not,” he tapped his finger on the second part of the cipher, “are *these* numbers.”

Still holding the metal map, Ryan turned to the wall-mounted wheel in hopes of discovering some additional clues, while unbeknownst to him, Captain Blood stood beside him, unwavering in his attempt at reclaiming *his* property.

Desperately, the ghostly pirate swiped both hands in rapid succession at the glittering hubcap. “*Those numbers be none of yur blasted concern!*” he bellowed. Finally, mustering up all the emotion and strength he could, he swept quickly upward at Ryan’s hands, causing them to jerk. The gold slug sailed upward, flipped in the air, and landed with a splat in the damp earth.

William peered curiously at Ryan.

“Why’d ya do that?” Ryan asked, scowling.

William eyes seem twice their normal size as he stared, defensively, through his glasses. “Do what?”

“Hit my hand.”

“I didn’t hit your hand.”

“Well, *somebody* hit my . . .”

“Are you guys down there?” Stacy’s voice echoed from above.

“Yeah! Come on down!” William answered.

Knowing that he and William were about to be interrupted, Ryan decided to temporarily break from the Blood Island mystery, in order that he might provide assistance to the girls’ more noble task. He returned the hubcap to the ship’s wheel and tapped it in place with the rubber handle of the hammer.

“The hardware is all set up,” William told Stacy as she entered.

“Great! The website’s ready also.” Stacy approached the open Cryptex and inspected the FG computer. “Now all I have to do is write a small program to send the signals from the Frequency Glasses to the website.” She pulled some notes from her pocket and began tapping away at the laptop’s keyboard.

Ryan finished replacing the hubcap, just as Lisa stepped from the ladder and hurried in.

“Hey! There’s someone here!” she said, anxiously. “I saw a strange car parked by the scrapyard.”

THE INTRUDERS

Using his walking stick, Mr. Smith hobbled to the gate in the white picket fence. Coming up behind him Bubba swayed like a Weebles Wobble toy.

“Hurry up!” Mr. Smith commanded. “This gate isn’t going to open itself.”

Bubba hustled to catch up. “You want me to go first, boss, just in case?”

“In case of what? You ninny! They’re a bunch of kids.” Pushing past his hired hand, Mr. Smith reached the front door and pressed the button. The doorbell rang. He straightened his tie while he waited for an answer, but none came. He rang it again, nothing. “Look in the window, you buffoon. Do I have to tell you everything?”

Bubba cupped his eyes with his hands and peeked in through the living room window, while Mr. Smith looked in through the window on the opposite side of the door. Seeing no signs of the children, Mr. Smith tried the knob. Finding it unlocked, he slowly pushed the door open with his cane. Smoothly and quietly, it swung inward. He entered.

“Are we going in, Boss?” Bubba whispered.

“How else are we supposed to get a look at that attic?” Mr. Smith croaked. “Now, get in here and keep watch!”

Upstairs, Ryan was just coming down from the attic when he heard what sounded like someone bumping into a kitchen chair downstairs. It made a short, dragging sound on the hardwood floor.

“Oops!” Bubba whispered.

Mr. Smith scowled.

Ryan paused.

“What’s wrong?” William asked, squatting on the steps behind Ryan.

Ryan put a finger to his lips. “Shh!” he whispered. “It sounds like someone’s in the house. Stay here, I’ll take a gander.” He quietly moved down the last few steps and

tip-toed his way across the carpeted hallway and through the spacious game room. Peering over the railing of the stairway to the secondary landing, he listened.

Hearing shuffling sounds downstairs in the living room, he considered making for the phone in the game room, but rethought this strategy when he heard the intruders coming his way. He hastily moved back to William, who was now waiting at the bottom of the attic's pull-down ladder.

Ryan pointed sharply upward. "Go! They're coming."

William snapped a one-eighty and rushed up the creaky wooden steps.

Ryan was right behind, his hand on William's backside pushing him up and into the attic, where they both toppled onto the wooden floor. Panting, they quickly joined forces and pulled the hinged ladder up behind them, and listened.

William's heart raced as he gazed anxiously at his friend. "Who are they?" Ryan shrugged. "I don't know. But I don't reckon we oughta stick around to find out. Come on." He pulled his cowboy hat down tighter on his head and hopped to his feet. "Let's see if we can find something to cover that window, so they don't see the gangplank, just in case they get this far."

Peering through the beam of light coming in from the open window, the boys scanned the dingy, semi-cluttered space, looking for something large enough for their purpose. Ryan eventually spotted a dusty, old, fold-up Ping-Pong table, shoved up against a far wall, surrounded by stacks of boxes. "Willy," he said, approaching the table. "Give me a hand with this, will ya?"

Treading across the arid room, Williams's nostrils filled with thick dust particles, forcing him to breathe through his mouth. He grimaced as he rubbed his tongue against his teeth and tasted the layer of grime that was forming. "It's nasty in here," he griped. "Let's hurry this up!"

“Keep your shirt on pard, and keep it down,” Ryan whispered. “We don’t want them to hear us.” He pointed to a small stack of odds and ends blocking their path. “Move those out of the way, Willy, while I take care of the rest of this stuff.”

Ryan and William spent the next three or four *long* minutes displacing boxes, bags and other miscellanea from in front of and around the Ping-Pong table, all the while listening carefully for the two prowlers.

“Okay,” Ryan said, taking hold of the back of the table, “now, grab that end and pull ‘er your way.”

William frowned at the thought of having to exert that much effort. *At least it’s on wheels*, he thought, grabbing the wobbly aluminum frame. He tugged. The wheels of the rickety structure squeaked as they began to roll.

“Quietly!” Ryan mouthed.

William glared indignantly at Ryan and jabbed a finger toward the noisy wheels.

“Okay, okay, just take it slow and easy and guide ‘er over yonder.” Ryan indicated the proper direction with a nod of his head.

“I know where to go!” William muttered tensely.

A moment later, from the floor below, they heard thrashing, and voices coming from the direction of the game room. They stopped moving.

William held his breath.

Ryan stared at the wall closest to the noise and turned an ear in its direction in order to hear better. His hand went up, indicating for William to hold fast. Motionless, he weighed the situation. *If we move now, there’s a good chance they’ll hear us*, he considered. *But if we try to wait it out, we run the risk of being caught*. His mind made up, he waited a few more seconds for just the right moment.

Thud! Crash!

“Now! Hurry,” Ryan whispered.

The boys hustled to get the shaky, squeaking table to the window before the noise downstairs died down.

“You big oaf!” Mr. Smith moaned. “Why don’t you watch where you’re going?”

Bubba didn’t respond. Something had caught his attention, and he now stood rigid and fixated on the ceiling.

“Are you listening to me, you buffoon?”

“Yeah, boss,” Bubba replied, but it was obvious his attention was elsewhere. “Well, look at me!”

“Sorry, Boss. I thought I heard a mouse.”

“A mouse?” Mr. Smith barked sarcastically. “There are probably lots of mice in these old walls, you dunce. Now, quit loafing around, and let’s find those kids.”

Unknown to Mr. Smith or Bubba, just a few inches above their heads, Ryan and William were on to them. The boys finished positioning the table in front of the window, leaving just enough space to squeeze behind it, and moved out onto the gangway, where they slid the window down and closed the shutters.

“There, that should do it,” Ryan said. “Now, let’s get on back to the girls and fill them in on the situation.”

William followed Ryan across the walkway and up the ladder to the tree pruning platform. Once at the opening, however, Ryan let William descend first and followed, pausing momentarily to secure the hatch in place. As the bolt slid shut, a hidden sensor sent a signal to an unknown location.

“Sir, we just received a *hatch lock engaged* alarm at the Walborg property.” A young man in a plain black uniform sat at a bank of monitors, referring to a flashing indicator on one of his screens. He looked behind him to an older, distinguished-looking, gray-haired gentleman dressed in casual civvies.

The supervisor continued peering at the dossier in his hands. “Is there any threat noticed on camera?” he asked calmly.

The young man scanned the video feed coming into the monitor. “No, sir,” he reported.

Checking the time on his Rolex, the supervisor glanced at the monitor showing the Baobab tree. *If the kids felt like they had to engage the lock, he thought, there must be a reason.* “Ok, soldier,” he said aloud, “keep a watchful eye. This one’s personal.”

“Yes sir.”



“Man, I sure wish we had a phone down here,” William said upon rejoining the girls in Tree Root Cavern.

Lisa stood up from the settee, her face tight with concern. “Why? What’s going on?”

“Just some burglars,” Ryan said nonchalantly, as he moseyed in behind William. “We’ll be all right here until they leave.”

Stacy remained seated; her knuckles white under the strain of her tightly clasped hands. “What if they see the gangway and come out here?” Her voice cracked nervously.

“We blocked the window, so hopefully they won’t see it,” William replied.

“But if they do,” Ryan said, “they’ll just figure it leads to the tree-trimming platform, like we did. They have no reason to come out here,” he added in a reassuring tone.

Just then, Stacy had a thought. She stood up quickly. “Wait! We don’t need a phone. We can use the computer to call the police.” She rushed to the laptop and hurried to bring up a web browser. After a few seconds, she looked up with a strained look on her face. “I can’t get an internet connection.”

“What?” William exploded, taking the comment personally. He hurried over to the safe and re-examined the setup and configuration of the laptop. “There should be no reason . . .” he began, but remembering something, he stopped and stepped around behind the safe to where the box they’d carried down had gotten pushed. Peering into it, he saw two electronic devices. He slapped his forehead. “Shoot!” he cried. “I forgot to set up the repeaters.” Upset with himself, he leaned back against the wall and hung his head.

Ryan patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t sweat it, Willy. Like I said, those thugs will probably . . .”

Without warning, William instantly bolted upright. “I’ve got it!” he declared, pushing past Ryan and Stacy. Stripping the Frequency Glasses from the mounting bracket, he unplugged the cabling and dropped onto the settee, swapping out his glasses for the ones he just snagged. Taking a deep breath, he rotated the boom arm speakers down over his ears and leaned back. An abrupt vacuum effect overcame his soul, and in the next instant he found himself, once again, in astral form, standing next to his physical self. “I’m going to follow them from here,” he called out from behind the Frequency Glasses.

In a flash, he took the path of least resistance and zoomed up through the hollow tree trunk and out onto the tree-trimming platform. Just as he started to make for the house, he found the point of a sword at his throat.

“Hold on thar, lad!” bellowed Captain Blood. *“Ye be one of them scoundrels what’s been tampering wi’ me treasure map, and now yur going to pay fer it!”*

Nervously, William choked back his fear as he felt the physical sensation of the sword at his throat. Then, suddenly, out of nowhere, annoyance rose in him and he slapped the sword away, glaring defiantly into Captain Blood’s hateful eyes. *“I don’t have time for your nonsense!”* he shouted. *“I have real trouble to deal with. Now, get out of my*

way!” William shoved past the phantom pirate and disappeared through the attic’s wall, leaving the fuming marauder hopping mad and cursing.

Finding the thugs, William floated invisibly nearby. “They’re going through the bedrooms now,” he narrated to the others. “They’re not taking anything, though. They’re just looking around.”

“How many are there, Willy?” Ryan asked.

“Two,” William responded, “one big guy and one mean-looking guy with a scar on his face. I think he’s the leader.”

“Hey! I saw those guys when Granny first brought me here. They were across the street, standing next to a broken-down car.”

Stacy sat down next to William, pulled her feet up and wrapped her arms around her knees. “I’m scared,” she moaned. “What if they find us?”

Watching from behind the safe’s control box, Lisa leaned with her good arm resting upon its top. “It’ll be all right, Stacy,” she said. “I think Ryan is right; they don’t have any reason to come out here. Everything those thieves could want is in the house. Once they get their fill, they’ll leave. You’ll see.”

Not feeling all that comforted by Lisa’s words of encouragement, Stacy put her head against her knees and tried to hold back the tears that were welling up in her eyes.

In the meantime, Bubba, finally reaching the last of the children’s rooms, peered under the bed. “They’re not under this one either, Boss,” he said, grunting, as he heaved himself off the floor.

Mr. Smith searched the top shelf of the closet, examining all of its contents, and then poked his walking stick through the hanging clothes. “They’ve got to be here, somewhere,” he grumbled. “Come out, little kiddies,” he said, sounding as innocent as he could. “We just want to ask you a few questions.” He turned back to Bubba. “Maybe they went out back. Go check, while I go up and search the attic.”

“Boss,” Bubba said, “there are no witnesses yet. Maybe we just check the attic real quick like, and get outta here before we’re seen.”

“No,” Mr. Smith snarled. “If I don’t find what I’m looking for, I’m going to want to question them runts. Kids always know the nooks and crannies of a house. If *it’s* here, there’s a good chance they know where it is. Besides, I don’t like not knowing what those little buggers are up to,” he added, glancing about suspiciously. “If they’ve already seen us and called for help, were going to need a hostage in order to escape.”

“Uh oh!” William exclaimed. “This isn’t good.” Ryan leaned in close to William. “What’s up, Willy?”

William removed the Frequency Glasses from his face, thereby disconnecting from the astral plane, and after a brief moment of re-acclimation to his real body, he said, “They’re looking for — *us*.”

Ryan snapped his fingers and looked at Lisa. “That must have been why they were parked alongside the road; the day Granny brought me here. They were waiting for your parents to leave, so they could get to y’all without interference from them.”

“But why would they be looking for us?” Lisa asked, still leaning against the back of the control box.

Stacy became terrified. “I knew it, I just knew it!” she sobbed. “They’re probably kidnappers.” She pulled her knees tighter to her chest and rocked nervously back and forth.

“I don’t think so, Sis,” William said. “The ugly guy seems to be looking for something specific. He said he just wants to ask us some questions.” (He decided to keep the part about being taken hostage to himself, lest he worry Stacy even more.)

Ryan shot a worried glance toward the ship’s wheel. “I bet they’re after our treasure map!”

“What treasure map?” Lisa scowled. “All you have is a picture of an island on a stupid ship’s wheel.”

“Not so,” Ryan snapped. “Me and Willy found coordinates and a secret code on the back of the hubcap. We think it’s directions to a buried treasure.”

“Sheesh!” Lisa shook her head defiantly. “You sure have some imagination, Ryan.”

“I’m going back in!” William decided, donning the Frequency Glasses once again. “I’m going to find out *exactly* what they’re after.” Within seconds, spectral William once again returned to spying on Mr. Smith.

With all of the shutters closed on the attic windows, the little light there was filtered in from the thin cracks between the shutters’ boards. Mr. Smith squinted and cursed as he rummaged fruitlessly through the various boxes, cupboards, and cabinets.

Invisible and floating near the ceiling, astral William followed Mr. Smith around the attic. “Scarface is talking to himself,” William said to his friends from behind the Frequency Glasses. “Whatever he’s looking for is supposed to make him rich and famous.”

“I was right!” Ryan boomed. “He *is* after the treasure map.”

“Put it back in the safe,” William advised. “If those thugs get this far, we’ll lock it in there and pretend we don’t know the combination.”

Bubba, meanwhile, wandered around outside the back of the house, looking for the kids. Finding no one there, he moseyed over to the side yard, where he spied the gnarly Baobab tree. *I swear*, he thought. *That’s got to be the strangest sight ever*. Looking up, he noticed the pruning platform, as well as the walkway from the house to the tree. He pointed, thoughtfully, toward the platform. *Maybe that’s why we haven’t been able to find them*.

Bubba made his way up to the attic, where he found Mr. Smith violently poking through boxes and bags with his walking stick. “They’re not out back, Boss,” he said. “But I may know where they are.”

“Then why didn’t you round them up, ninny?” Mr. Smith barked.

In an attempt to get his bearings, Bubba looked around at the various windows. “That’s what I intend on doing right now,” he said, walking over to the Ping-Pong table. After pulling the wobbly table, scraping and screeching, away from the wall, he opened the window and shutters.

“What are you doing?” Mr. Smith said, exasperated.

Bubba pointed toward the top of the tree. “I think those little monkeys are up there,” he answered. “I’m going to go take a look.”

Back down in the damp, earthen cavern, Lisa rested her head on the back of her hand, atop the control box, worrying about the advancing intruders. All of a sudden, she screamed.

Ryan leapt and spun mid-air, swinging and hollering. He landed legs bent, feet apart, and fists at the ready. His hat, bounced from his head, plopped into the dust on the other side of the cave. “Wha — What?” he hollered, his head swiveling back and forth, looking for trouble.

Lisa slapped the top of the control box with the flat of her hand. *SQUISH!* “Darn spider scared me.” With the back of her fingers, she wiped away its smashed remains. “Gross,” she said, her face scrunched up in disgust.

“You pert near caused my heart to jump outta my chest!” Ryan scolded. Stacy giggled. “Some protector you’ll be.”

Ryan fidgeted a bit and scraped the ground with the tip of his cowboy boot. “She caught me off guard, is all. I’m still ready for them,” he insisted, putting his fists back up in the air.

As she inspected her hands for bug guts, Lisa's gaze fell on the *rear* of the control box. "Hey," she announced. "There's something etched on the back of this box." She wiped away the dust. "Here, listen." She read the inscription aloud:

"Aviators egress skyward.

"Tunnel rats to ground;

"But their WAY to elusion

"Is really turned upside down."

"Great," Stacy sulks, "just what we need right now — more cryptic messages." "What do you think it means?" Lisa asked, to no one in particular.

Ryan strolled over and retrieved his hat from the floor. "I don't know," he said, dusting it off. "But I came across that word before."

Lisa looked back at the inscription, puzzled. "Which word?"

"That *egress* word," he said, sauntering up to the safe. "I don't know what it means, but I saw it before in one of these-here books." He poked a thumb toward the stack of journals that he and Willy had returned to the safe earlier.

"It means exit, or sometimes emergency exit," William volunteered, without looking away from the Frequency Glasses or breaking from his astral sleuthing.

"Like the escape systems used on military aircraft and such," he added.

Lisa's face lit up. "Do you think there's an emergency exit — out of here?" "Well, if there is," William replied, "you might want to hurry up and find it, because the big guy has just moved the Ping-Pong table and is looking over here."

Upon the announcement of this alarming news, the small cavern suddenly became alive with activity. Ryan flipped frantically through the maintenance journal, trying to find the *egress* reference he'd seen previously, in hopes there might be a clue to the anticipated *secret exit*.

Stacy, on the other hand, wasted no time in hurrying over to Lisa, where together they began scrutinizing the cryptic inscription in an attempt to decipher its

mystic meaning. “Well,” she said, “if this riddle *is* talking about an emergency exit, it certainly doesn’t tell us where to find it.”

“Maybe it does,” Lisa suggested. “Let’s break it down.” Following along with her finger, she again read the first line out loud: “Aviators egress skyward. Okay,” she said, pausing. “The only thing relevant in that sentence is the word egress, which as we have discovered may mean emergency exit.”

Lisa read the second line: “Tunnel rats to ground. This sentence,” she said, her eyes scanning the ground and lower walls of the cavern, “is suggestive of a tunnel in the ground.”

Stacy looked around as well. She kicked the front of the settee next to William. “Maybe it’s in here?”

Ryan overheard the girls’ discussion. “No,” he said, his eyes still focused on the pages of the maintenance journal. “That area is full of pumps, motors, hoses — that kind of stuff.”

Lisa walked over to the tree’s hollow and looked down at the floor drain. Realizing that there was nothing there besides a small pipe for water runoff, she peered up. “What about the boarded-up door you guys found behind the ladder?” she asked, directing her question to Ryan.

Ryan looked over and shook his head. “No way! It’s boarded up tight, and we have no tools to open ‘er up with. Besides, Willy said it’s surrounded by that wicked thorn bush. We’d never get through it.”

“I hate to rush you all,” William said anxiously. “But that brute will be coming this way any second.”

Just then Ryan came across the sketch of the safe. He studied it. “By gumption, that’s it!” he blurted out. Then laughing, he tapped his finger on the page in front of him. “Here it is! This here space ain’t for maintenance as I first reckoned. It’s the *escape tunnel*.”

“What space?” Lisa questioned.

Ryan reached into the opened safe and knocked on the shelf. A hollow echo returned. “There’s a space below here. I noticed it in this-here sketch before, but figured it was for equipment access.”

Moving away from the control box, Stacy pushed her long blond hair behind her ears and stepped over to the safe. “What makes you think it’s an escape tunnel, now?” she asked.

Ryan looked up. “The riddle, for starters,” he said frankly. “Also, the word *egress* is written in the space below the safe in this-here sketch; but like I said, I didn’t know what it meant at the time.” He pointed to an area on the page as he handed the book to Stacy.

Stacy examined the sketch. “It does look like the space goes into the ground,” she admitted, passing the journal to Lisa.

“Yeah,” Lisa agreed. “It looks like a tube. In fact, it looks like a slide—look.” She indicated the long, narrow space for the other two to see. “It starts to bend as it leaves the safe.” She looked up excitedly. “I think you’re right, Ryan. I think it *is* an escape tunnel!”

Stacy cleared her throat, prompting the attention of her friends. “So,” she said, her questioning eyes big and round. “How do we access it?”

“Good question,” Ryan said, regarding Stacy. “I doubt that the designer would have made it obvious.” He examined the control box in detail, and cycled through various settings, all unsuccessfully. “No luck here,” he said, “Lisa, you and Stacy continue working the riddle. See if you can find any clues for accessing the tunnel. I’ll look around for hidden controls.”



“What are you babbling about?” Mr. Smith bellowed. “Where could they go?”

Bubba looked at Mr. Smith and then out the attic window to the Baobab tree.

Mr. Smith grumbled under his breath as he hobbled to Bubba's side. Shading his eyes from the bright daylight, he stared out at the massive and gnarly tree. His upper lip curled. "So? What? You think they went where?" He pointed his walking stick at the tree. "You can see there's no one on that platform."

"They could be lying down, Boss. It's worth a look."

Mr. Smith growled low in his throat, annoyed that Bubba would come up with an idea of his own. He waved his hand half heartily. "Go. Check it out then, if you want to waste your time."

Bubba scrambled clumsily out onto the gangway and jogged across to the ladder. Looking more like a gorilla than a man, he heaved himself effortlessly up the ladder mostly by his arms, using his feet just to keep his knees from slamming into the steel rungs.

"Gotcha!" he cried, landing with a heavy thud on the pruning platform. But alas, to his great disappointment, it was empty.

Thirty feet below, hearing Bubba's weighty frame crash down on the deck above, the girls hunched together next to William on the settee, covering their mouths with their hands (Lisa with one, Stacy with two).

Ryan turned the lights off and stepped quietly over to the cavern's entrance, holding one of the journals as a weapon, while William, continuing to use the Frequency Glasses, whispered updates on the perpetrator's activities.

The platform above creaked under Bubba's lumbering movements as he positioned himself for the descent back down the ladder. That's when he saw them — miscellaneous scratch and pry marks between some of the center boards. Kneeling down, he attempted to peer between the cracks, but it was too dark. He jammed his fingers between two of the boards and pulled, causing the hatch to rattle against the internal locks.

“Boss!” Bubba shouted. “There’s a hatch here! But it’s locked from the *inside*.” The kids had been discovered. They began to panic.

“A hatch?” Mr. Smith croaked incredulously. “To where?”

“I think the tree’s hollow, Boss. I think those kids are hiding inside it.”

“Wait there!” Mr. Smith barked. “I’ll try to find something to break it in with.”

After scrounging through the attic for a few minutes, he found a toolbox full of old tools. Removing a rusted hammer, he stuffed it in his waistband and then made his way precariously across the gangway and up the ladder to the pruning platform.

“Here, take this!” he growled, passing his staff to Bubba.

Bubba took the walking stick, laid it on the deck, and reached over the edge to offer a hand to his employer.

Mr. Smith slapped him away. “I can do it, you fool!”

Bubba stomped on the hatch. “Here it is, Boss,” he said, once Mr. Smith had had a chance to reclaim his staff and stand up.

The girls gasped.

“A secret and secure hideout like this,” Mr. Smith said with a triumphant grin, “could lead a person to believe there’s something of *value* hidden down there.” He inspected the hatch. “The little brainiacs are too ingenious for their own good,” he grumbled. “But, now they’ve got nowhere to run.”

Bubba noticed the hammer in Mr. Smith’s waistband. “You want me to rip it up, Boss?”

Mr. Smith handed Bubba the hammer and shook his head. “That may not be necessary,” he replied. Then, using his walking stick he thumped loudly on the hatch. “Hello, down there! My name is Mr. Smith. Your parents asked me to come by and check on you,” he lied. “Is everybody okay?”

Inside the cave, no one answered. The girls held their breath, shaking nervously.

William, seeing everything from his astral perspective, removed the glasses and slunk his way through the dark toward Ryan, who still stood at the bottom of the hollow tree trunk with slits of sun light streaking in on top of him through the hatch above. “They have a hammer,” William whispered. “They’re going to try and break in.”

“Ok,” Ryan said, trying to remain calm, although he could already feel the adrenaline building up inside him. He looked up at the hatch and saw the shadows of the thugs shifting around on the other side.

Mr. Smith tried again, “Hellooo! Can you hear me down there? Don’t be afraid. I just want to make sure you kids are all right so I can inform your parents.”

Ryan decided there was no longer any need to pretend that they weren’t there, since it was obvious that the hatch was locked from the inside. He switched on the light. “Yeah, we’re all right,” he hollered, up. “What’d ya say your name was? I got me a cell phone. How about I make a call to see if you’re really supposed to be here?” Ryan bluffed, hoping this would cause the intruders to leave.

Mr. Smith cursed. “Go ahead! Smash that thing in — quickly!”

Using the claw of the hammer, Bubba began tearing at the hatch. Small splinters of wood started to fly through the air. As progress continued, the splinters turned to chips and the chips to chunks of wood which bounced menacingly off the deck.

Panic heightened in the cave. The girls were too scared to think or move.

Going to the girls, Ryan gently grabbed both of them by the arms. “Come on — concentrate! I need y’all to help me figure out how to access that tunnel.” Lisa pulled herself together and returned to the riddle.

Stacy remained frozen with fear, her eyes staring blankly straight ahead.

Bubba began kicking at the loose boards.

Ryan threw a fearful glance at the gold hubcap on the safe's shelf, wondering if he should close the Cryptex in order to protect the precious treasure map from the vicious intruders. But doing so now, he considered, could mean the end to finding a way into the escape tunnel.

The hatch boards began to give. Bubba continued kicking at the loose hatch, until one of the boards broke free and fell, slamming to the ground at the cave's entrance.

The girls screamed!

William jumped back.

Ryan rushed over and retrieved the fallen board to use as a defensive weapon in place of the journal, which he quickly tossed back into the safe.

Remembering something he'd read the previous night on astral traveling, about lowering one's vibratory rate to appear as an apparition, William ignored the commotion around him, hurried back to the settee and slipped the Frequency Glasses back on, and again entered the astral plane.

After a minute of concentration, he succeeded in slowing his breathing and thus his vibratory rate.

"Tell me if you see what looks like a ghost," William said blindly to his sister, who now sat hunched nervously next to him.

"What are you talking about?" Stacy said with a scowl.

"It's something I read. I'm going to try it. If it works you should be able to see a ghost image of me. Just let me know if it happens."

Perplexed, Stacy glanced over to Lisa, who, hearing William's idea, just shrugged. Stacy returned her attention to her brother as he sat relaxed against the cool cave wall, staring into the twinkling glasses.

"Nothing's happening," Stacy said, tensely.

Continuing his painstaking search of the Cryptex safe for some means of access to the escape tunnel, Ryan happened to glance past the safe to the back section of the cave. Taken aback for a moment in surprise, he smiled and called Stacy's attention to the spectral figure hovering near the wall.

Both girls looked to where Ryan was pointing.

Stacy gasped and clutched William's arm. "That *is* you, right?" she asked, keeping a cautious eye on the apparition.

William stared at the group through his ghostly eyes. "You can see me?"

"Yes, and it's pretty spooky!" Lisa said, walking over and passing her hand through his wispy body. "Just what do you plan on accomplishing by this?"

"I have an idea!" William proclaimed. "I'm going to try and slow those goons down."

Just then, another board hit the floor and bounced past Ryan. He jumped, swinging his two-by-four wildly at the space behind him. "Whoo-ee! That scared me." He rushed over to the hollow and peered up cautiously, to the hatch. A squat and hairy leg stuck through the few remaining boards. A sense of dread overtook him.

Now, as an astral *ghost*, William took off and rushed up through the hollow tree trunk toward Bubba, both fists clenched out in front of him, screaming as eerily as he could manage.

Catching sight of this rapidly approaching phantom, panic swept over Bubba, and with flailing arms he jumped back, knocking his boss over the railing. The walking stick rocketed to the ground thirty feet below, while Mr. Smith somehow managed to hang on to the platform by one hand, yelling like a scared schoolgirl.

Taking advantage of the pause in the invasion, William snatched off the Frequency Glasses, set them on the settee's shelf, and hastened over to help with the search for the escape tunnel.

Ryan, just then, was poking around inside the safe trying to determine if there was any way to remove the vault's metal floor plate in order to access the tunnel below.

Not wanting to be left alone, Stacy leapt off the settee after William. "Wait for me!" she cried.

Seeing the twins heading in her direction, Lisa waved them over. "I need your help with something," she said as they hurried over. "I'm confused by this." She indicated the third sentence of the riddle. "Why do you think the word *way* stands out like that?"

"You're confused by that?" Stacy challenged. "I'm confused by the upside-down part. How can an exit be upside down?"

"I don't think it means the exit is upside down," William said, his face scrunched up in thought. "I think it means the approach, or path, to the exit is upside down."

"How can either of those be upside down?" Lisa said, now more confused than she had been a moment ago.

Stacy tapped her chin thoughtfully. "The *way* could mean the *method* in which to access the entrance."

At Stacy's comment, William's face lit up. He snapped his fingers, remembering that turning the light switch box at the cave's entrance released the settee's shelf. He stepped around to the front of the control box and tried to rotate the button box. It didn't move. He attempted to move it from side to side. This didn't work, either. He then endeavored to slide it up and down, also to no avail.

Having had no success with accessing the escape tunnel from within the safe, Ryan slunk over to the entrance to check on the situation topside. Hearing the tone of the conversation between the crooks on the platform, he whispered to his friends, "It sounds like they're getting ready to try again."

Tensely, Stacy and Lisa stood behind the control box, silently praying that William was on to something.

William looked at them apologetically and shook his head.

Just then another board slammed to the ground next to Ryan. He jumped back.

Lisa gasped.

Stacy shrieked.

William snapped a look over his shoulder at the commotion. He knew that any minute now, the intruders would be upon them. He couldn't give up. He returned to his prior endeavor and stared at the box, the riddle going over and over in his mind. His gaze on the box was so intense that if it had been a laser, it would have burned a hole right through the whole thing. He fixated on the buttons. The top one was labeled *UP*, the bottom one, *DOWN*.

It doesn't make sense, William thought. Why use such a big panel for two buttons? There's enough space at the bottom of this box for another button . . .

Just then, it hit him. "Wait a minute!" He grabbed hold of the button box. Then, working against spring resistance, he pulled and turned the rectangular box upside down. "Ahaa!" he cried, letting go. The box sprang back into place.

He jabbed his thumb against the Up button (which, of course, was now at the *bottom* of the box). Instantly the pneumatic cylinders came to life and the safe's vault began to rise beyond its normal opened position.

CRASH! The last hatch board bounced end over end at the bottom of the hollow tree trunk.

"Hurry up, get down there!" Mr. Smith shouted at Bubba.

The girls began to panic as they watched the top of the safe stop just inches below the cave's ceiling. The vault's bottom shelf was now four feet higher than it had been previously, with empty space now revealed underneath.

“Quick! Hand me one of those flashlights!” William said, thrusting out his hand.

Lisa jumped and fetched one from the pile of flashlights and headlamps that were lying in a corner of the cave, and quickly slapped it into William’s opened palm.

William clicked the flashlight on and pointed it over the edge of the safe, into the dark recess below. The beam reflected off of sheet metal, illuminating a tube that ran down, bending out of sight.

“It’s a slide!” William said to the girls. “Come on, hurry—get in!” “Not me!” Stacy asserted, shaking her head. “I’m not going first!” Considering the short free-fall, she would have to take before reaching the mouth of the tube, Lisa, too, remained reluctant.

Suddenly, creaking and cracking sounds from the hollow’s wooden ladder resonated into the cavern.

“They’re coming!” Ryan called out. “If you’re gonna go, you’d better go now!”

Quickly, William spun the rings on the Cryptex, mixing up the combination. He then reset the button box. “Fine!” he snapped. “I’ll go first.” He hopped up on to the edge of the safe and called quietly to Ryan, “Make sure you close the safe on your way out.”

Ryan looked back over his shoulder, “Will do. Now go!”

William nodded, dropped into the darkness, and was gone.

“What’re y’all waiting for?” Ryan yelled to the girls. “Go!” He grabbed one of the broken boards, and with all his might, threw it at Bubba.

Bull’s-eye! The end of the board caught Bubba square in the seat of his pants.

Bubba screamed and tried to scramble over Mr. Smith.

From behind, Ryan could hear William call to the girls from below the Cryptex safe. Then the sounds of shuffling, banging, and tumbling echoed from inside its void.

“Get off of me and get down there, you overgrown lummoX!” Mr. Smith bellowed.

“But they’re throwing boards at me!” Bubba complained.

“I don’t care if they’re throwing *harpoons* at you! Get down there before I kick you off this ladder!”

Bubba began to descend again, this time a bit faster; in hopes of getting to the bottom before too many more boards came his way.

Ryan launched another board. This one hit its target sharply in the elbow.

Bubba cried out in agony.

Ryan peeked over his shoulder. The girls were gone. He hurled one last board and ran for the safe. Jumping up onto its edge he reached in behind the computer and retrieved the gold hubcap. “I’m not leaving you,” he muttered greedily. Then dropping to his seat, he reached over to the control box, punched the down button, and lunged forward into the darkness. Above him, fading from earshot, he heard the pneumatic pump come to life, and the safe closing.

Bubba stopped about six feet from the bottom. “Kid, if you toss another board up here, I am going jump on top of you and smash you flat as a pancake!” He waited for an answer. The only sound he heard was the hissing of air. “Kid! You hear me!”

No reply.

“Get down there!” Mr. Smith yelled.

Bubba didn’t even bother to descend the remaining rungs. He simply turned and dropped to the bottom, yelling and growling like a bear. Once on the ground, all he saw was the top of the safe lock in place. He ran to the back of the safe, thinking the kids were hunkered down there. “Got you this time!” he roared to the empty space.

Mr. Smith stepped off the ladder and entered the cavern. “Well? Where are they?”

Bubba shrugged and pointed to the safe. “I think the little tykes locked themselves inside—*that*.”

THE GETAWAY

Freefalling momentarily into darkness, William watched as his flashlight beam reflected off the shiny sheet metal tube, illuminating the steep, smooth descent ahead. Seconds later, he slowed as the tube curved to a gentle end, not unlike a child's slide, allowing him to simply stand up on the subterranean cavern floor. His movement triggered an unseen sensor that automatically activated the sub-cavern's lighting system. A soft, eerie glow revealed a narrow, earthy chamber about a hundred feet long, ending in what looked like a perpendicular tunnel.

William turned his attention back to the slide and hollered up, "Come on! It's safe!" A moment later, the clanging of flashlights and headlamps were heard tumbling noisily down the chute. They slid right up to the edge. Stacy appeared next, knocking the gear to the ground at William's feet. She hopped up just ahead of Lisa, who was following close behind.

"Wow! Look at this — how eerie," Stacy said, glancing about the cavernous chamber.

Stepping from the slide, Lisa picked up the lighting gear and distributed it. "I can't believe all of this is right beneath my house, and no one ever knew it." With one of the headlamps, she examined the dense earthen wall close up. "I wonder how much more there is that we don't know about."

"I think we're about to find out," William said, using his flashlight as a pointer and directing Lisa's attention to the tunnel ahead.

"Super!" she squealed. "This is getting exciting! I think we should go exploring."

Stacy threw her hands up and glared at Lisa, her forehead deeply wrinkled. "Have you lost your mind?" She pointed upward. "Have you forgotten that there are men up there, trying to find us?"

Lisa waved nonchalantly. “We’re safe now; they’ll never find us down here.” Stacy couldn’t believe Lisa’s sudden blithe attitude. “How can you be so calm?” she scolded. “We don’t even know if we can get out of here!” “Relax, Sis,” William said. “The clues have led us safely so far.”

The very next moment, Lisa and the twins heard a faint hissing of air, followed by Ryan arriving feet first and holding his cowboy hat tight to his head with one hand, while clutching the hubcap from the ship’s wheel in the other.

Staying on the slide Ryan turned quickly on his knees and peered up into the dark tube, listening. A moment later he heard the safe’s top locking into place and then nothing but silence. “Good!” he said, dismounting the slide. “They’re not following.” His eyes darted quickly about as he sized up their new hideout.

“What is that in your hand?” Stacy asked, pointing.

Ryan proudly displayed his prized possession. “The map!” he said, grinning ear to ear. “No sense taking any chances. This thing’s gonna make us rich — once we figure it out.”

“Even if it is a treasure map,” Lisa huffed, “how do you know someone hasn’t already found the treasure? It may be nothing but a useless ornament.”

“If the treasure’s already been found, then why are those two clowns still looking for it?” Ryan said defensively. “Willy heard them say it *is going* to make someone rich and famous, which means it *hasn’t* already.”

Just then muffled voices were heard coming from above.

William scrambled up the slide as far as he could, and listened.

“You let them get away?” Mr. Smith raged.

“There was nothing I could do,” Bubba maintained. “It was already closing when I got here.”

“Why didn’t you stick your arm in and stop it?”

Bubba's eyes almost popped out of his head as he looked over at the safe. "It's not an elevator, Boss. I would have lost my arm."

"Hmm, no great loss," Mr. Smith muttered. "Well, open it, you idiot!" "I tried," Bubba replied. "It won't open. I think they changed the combo before they went in."

"Drats!" Mr. Smith slammed his fist on top of the safe.

"Maybe we can break in," Bubba suggested. "Do you want me to see if I can find some tools?"

Mr. Smith considered his options. "No," he said, finally. "If they *were* able to call for help then we probably don't have much time. We'll come back later and blast this thing open, if we have to." He turned and headed toward the ladder.

Bubba had started after Mr. Smith, when out of the corner of his eye, something caught his attention. He stepped over to the settee and pulled from its recessed shelf — the Frequency Glasses.

From part way up the ladder, Mr. Smith looked down to find Bubba wasn't behind him. "What the devil are you doing?" he hollered down.

Bubba set the glasses down and hustled to the ladder. "Sorry, Boss. I was just looking at something."

Mr. Smith resumed gimping his way up the ladder. "You are just like a child, always gawking at things."

Bubba started up the ladder after him. "It's just that they were the weirdest-looking glasses I've ever seen."

Hearing the word *glasses*, Mr. Smith stopped dead, and looked back so quickly that he almost fell off the ladder. "Glasses? What did they look like?"

Stopping just below Mr. Smith, Bubba looked up and shrugged. "I don't know. Like some antique 3D video glasses. You know, with blacked-out lenses and a boxy compartment on top for circuitry and such."

“Hurry, you dunce, go back down!” Mr. Smith nearly kicked Bubba off the ladder in his haste to return to the cave.

Bubba obeyed and moved down the rungs as quickly as he could, but ended up constantly losing his grip, trying to stay ahead of his boss’s hot-footed descent.

Reaching the bottom, Bubba hustled to retrieve the glasses. “Here, Boss,” he said, handing them over.

Mr. Smith snatched the glasses out of Bubba’s hand and looked them over. Having memorized their image from an old newspaper photo, his hateful expression slowly turned to elation. “I can’t believe it!” he thundered. “I’ve finally found them. I’m going to be rich! Quick now,” he bellowed, shoving Bubba toward the ladder. “Let’s get out of here!”

“What about them kids, Boss?” Bubba asked, now thinking about the limited air they must have within such a confined space. “They might suffocate in there.” Bubba looked back. “Maybe we should help them out first.”

“Nonsense!” Mr. Smith growled. “They got themselves in there, they can get themselves out. Besides, it serves them right for not coming out when I gave them the chance. Now, go!”

RYAN SAVES THE DAY

Still standing on the slide with his ear turned upward, William quickly looked back at the others, his face wrought with fear. “They weren’t after the map!” he said, pointing to the hubcap that Ryan still held, guardedly. “They were after the glasses — and they got them!”

The girls gasped.

“What?” Ryan said, perplexed. “Why in tarnation would they think they could get rich off them?”

“Weren’t they in the safe?” Stacy asked.

William hung his head. “I left them on the shelf next to the bench and forgot all about them.”

Devastated, Stacy slumped down to the ground, her hands on her head, mourning the loss of what she felt was the greatest gift to mankind. “How are we going to unite the two worlds now?” she said glumly. “Just think of all the kids we could have benefitted, both on Earth and in the spirit world.”

Feeling despair also, Lisa dropped down next to Stacy. “*We* won’t be able to go back, either,” she added. “We won’t be able to see the new friends we’ve made. We won’t be able to visit SPAZ anymore. And Ryan,” she said, looking up at him, “you won’t be able to see your great-grandfather anymore.”

“It’s worse than that,” William interjected. “We lost something that doesn’t even belong to us.”

Ryan leaned back against the wall, letting his arm go limp, and dropped his treasured gold slug to the ground. He stared down at his boots, contemplating their predicament and his selfishness concerning the map. *What was I thinking?* he pondered. *The Frequency Glasses are more important than any stupid treasure map. Besides, I reckon Lisa is right; any treasure there might have been is probably long gone.*

“That’s it!” he declared. “I’m getting them back!” He grabbed a flashlight and tore off down the narrow sub-cavern.

“Wait for me!” William yelled, bolting out after his friend.

Seconds later, with William on his heels, Ryan made a right turn into the perpendicular exit tunnel and raced onward, toward the small dot of dim sunlight in the distance.

Momentarily stunned, Stacy and Lisa looked blankly at one another. Then, without a word they shrugged, jumped up, and chased after the boys.

With his yellow flashlight beam streaking wildly ahead, Ryan sprinted down the long, dark passageway. Dust flew from his boots. Their echoing sounds reverberated off the walls around him.

Behind Ryan, William ran his short little legs flat out trying to catch up, with the girls racing after him. All three huffed, puffed and choked on the clouds of dust that preceded them.

Finally, reaching the end of the tunnel, Ryan skidded to a halt and quickly fought his way through the brush-covered opening in the right side of the wall. Stumbling out into the bright sunlit meadow, right next to the descending road from God’s Thumb, he dove to the ground, gritting his teeth and grunting in pain as gravel pelted him from the tires of the thugs’ old clunker careening past.

William broke through the brush next, and stopped dead as he saw the goons driving away. “That’s it!” he said, kicking the weeds. “There’s no hope of getting them back now.”

Ryan, now on his feet and scanning the extent of the Walborgs’ property, remained quiet while he evaluated the situation. “We’re not through yet,” he finally said. “I have an idea, but we have to act fast. Come on, I’ll tell you on the way.”

Together the boys raced up the road toward the house, panting, sweating, and hurriedly discussing Ryan’s plan.

Stacy and Lisa eventually pushed their way through the thicket and emerged from the tunnel, breathless and coughing.

Lisa, bent over, leaned against her knees as she attempted to slow her breathing. Looking up, she saw the goons' car working its way down the property's long, gravelly road in one direction, and Ryan and William racing across the backyard in the opposite direction. "What are they up to now?" she said, watching the boys. "It's too late to do anything more."

Stacy finally caught her breath. "I guess we'd better go find out."



Barreling along the Walborgs' private road, dirt and dust spraying out from behind his car, Mr. Smith was jubilant as he took triumphant glances at the Frequency Glasses lying next to him on the seat. "I can't believe my luck!" he boasted. "Those brainless kids must not have known what they had, to just leave them sitting there. They didn't even bother to take them along into that safe thingy."

Bubba started to pick up the Frequency Glasses, but Mr. Smith slapped his hand away. "Nobody touches those. They're mine and mine alone!" he barked.

"What's so special about them, Boss?" Bubba asked, gazing down at the homemade oddity.

Mr. Smith returned his attention to the road. "They're the answer to mankind's greatest mystery."

"What's that, understanding women?" Bubba snickered at his own joke.

Mr. Smith scowled at Bubba. "Life after death, you idiot," he said.

Bubba tried again. This time he snatched the Frequency Glasses up quickly, before Mr. Smith could stop him. He turned them over in his hand. "Are you trying to tell me that these glasses see into the spirit world?"

“That’s *exactly* what I’m telling you. Now put those down, you lummoX, before you break them.”

Bubba ignored the order and continued examining the glasses. “I don’t believe it. No one can see into the spirit world.”

Mr. Smith glared at Bubba. “Who cares what you believe?” he snapped. “Now give me those.” He reached out to take the glasses from Bubba.

Bubba pulled back, keeping the glasses out of Mr. Smith’s reach. “Even if that was true,” he said, “how do you expect to get rich from them?”

“I will mass-produce and sell them,” Mr. Smith said, with an ear-to-ear grin. “The demand will be incredible. How can it not be, when everyone since the beginning of time has wondered about the existence of life after death? People will finally be able to prove for themselves that life doesn’t end, and I’ll be the one responsible for that. I’ll be rich and famous!” Mr. Smith began imagining his fame and fortune as he turned right, off of the private gravel road and onto the paved road back past the Walborgs’ property and toward town.

I’ll believe it when I see it, Bubba thought. Without a word, or being noticed by Mr. Smith, he slipped the Frequency Glasses on.



“Remember!” Ryan shouted, running out the front door, “right in front of those trees.” He pointed to a small group of trees near the edge of the main road at the end of the lake. “We’ve only got one shot at this.”

“I know!” William said, dragging his newly built *electric* glider and remote-control unit out the door behind Ryan. “You’re going to owe me another glider for this!”

“As many as you want, pard!” Ryan hollered, stuffing a plastic shopping bag, the type with handles, into his back pocket. Shoeless and hatless, he streaked across

the grass, then, wincing from the pain in his feet, he crossed the gravel road, down the wooden stairs to the dock, and onto the Jet Ski. Throwing the anchor rope off the watercraft, he fired it up and took off down the lake in an attempt to beat the thugs' car to the main road. Unable to see the car or the main road over the shore's bank, Ryan could only hope that he'd get there first.

Midway down the lake, he suddenly saw a shadow appear on the water's surface. Looking up, he saw Williams's electric glider. He watched as it banked right and headed away from the lake. "Wait!" he yelled into the wind, "I need more time." He lay down tight against the aerodynamic body of the Jet Ski and cranked the throttle for all it was worth. The machine pitched high in the water, accelerated to max speed, and bucked like a baby bronco as it bounced off the gentle waves.

Ryan watched the shoreline slowly approach. He checked the plane's position. It was beginning its loop back. He knew this meant the goons' car must be close. He looked forward — twenty yards to go. "Come on!" he cried. "A few seconds more . . . Bingo!" He beached the watercraft and jumped to the shore.

Scrambling up the embankment, he scaled the top rail of the short wooden fence and dashed over behind the small clump of trees. He yelped as the dry weeds and sandspurs pierced his feet.

To his left Ryan saw his target barreling along the main road toward him. He shaded the afternoon sun from his eyes and looked up and to the right. William's glider was lined up over the road and descending fast. Ryan glanced between the car and the plane, quickly evaluating the situation. *Oh no*, he thought, *not yet. I'm gonna be exposed!*

He looked right — the plane was speeding closer. He looked left — the car was about a hundred feet away, now. He looked right again — the plane was five feet off the ground. It passed the clump of trees in front of him. "Shoot!" he shouted. "It's too soon!"



“Whoa! That was weird,” Bubba muttered at the feeling of being pulled from his body. “I don’t see any dead people,” he announced, “but I can see me sitting next to — *me*. This is very strange,” he added.

At Bubba’s comment Mr. Smith glanced over. “Give me those, you ninny,” he yelled, grabbing for the glasses.

Through his astral eyes Bubba saw Mr. Smith’s hand approaching, and threw up his own *real* arm to block him. “Not so fast, Boss. Let me try them out for a minute.” Then noticing that Mr. Smith was still glaring at him, Bubba said, “You might want to keep your eyes on the road.”

Mr. Smith looked back just in time to see something drop out of the sky, heading straight toward them. “What’s that?” he screamed, throwing his hands up and slamming on the brakes.

Bubba turned his astral head to look out the windshield. Seeing the rapidly approaching danger, he screamed as well, as both his astral self and his physical self quickly threw their hands up in front of their faces.



Kneeling behind the clump of trees, Ryan peered through the windshield of the approaching car and saw both thugs throw their hands up over their faces, just as the glider hit the windshield. *CRASH!* The glass shattered, and the car screeched as it skidded past Ryan.

“Bull’s-eye!” Ryan hollered, watching the car come to a stop a few feet to his right—right on target. *You’re a genius, Willy!* he thought.

Suddenly, the car doors flew open.

Ryan heard Mr. Smith shouting at Bubba to get out and clear the windshield.

Bubba removed the glasses, dropped them on the seat and exited the car. He looked around for the culprits, cursing under his breath and shaking his fist in the air. Then, lumbering around the front of the automobile, to the driver's side, he pulled the remains of the shattered plane from the windshield and tossed it to the side of the road.

Struggling with his gimp leg, Mr. Smith pulled himself out of the driver's-side door and shook debris from his clothes.

I reckon now's my chance, Ryan thought. Staying low to the ground, he hustled to the open passenger door and peeked inside. *There they are!* The Frequency Glasses lay haphazardly in the center of the bench-style seat. Without waiting another second, he reached in, grabbed the glasses, and rushed off the road and out of sight.

Seconds later, Ryan had ducked behind the clump of trees, vaulted the fence, and was scurrying across the short section of weed-infested meadow, once again grimacing from the pain in his feet. Then it was a short slide back down the embankment to the shoreline—and his waiting Jet Ski.

Before placing the Frequency Glasses into the plastic bag he'd brought with him, Ryan looked back to make sure the coast was clear, and brushed the sandspurs from his feet. He then deposited the glasses in the bag and hung the bag over the handlebars of his watercraft. As quietly as he could he pushed the small vessel off the shore and into the rippling, glistening lake. He fired it up and was off, laughing as he wondered how long it would take the thugs to realize they've been had.

The Jet Ski danced rhythmically across the surface of the lake on Ryan's trip back to his friends. Behind him he heard a chuffing sound in the sky and turned to see a big, black, low-flying helicopter pass over the lake, heading in the general direction of town. *I wonder if that's one of them aerial firefighters Granny told me they use out here.*



Meanwhile, back on the road, Mr. Smith was frantically searching the car for the missing Frequency Glasses. “Where are they?” he screamed at Bubba, who was dusting broken glass from his seat.

“I don’t know, Boss,” Bubba said, just as confused over their disappearance as his employer. “I think I set them on the seat when that airplane hit us.”

“Well they couldn’t have just vanished,” Mr. Smith screamed. “Now find them!”

Bubba pushed the passenger door full open and kneeled on the ground in order to peer under his seat. As he did, he heard a chuffing sound in the distance. He looked up and listened. It was coming closer. Squinting, he could just make out its silhouette. *It must be one of those Air National Guard choppers*, he thought, returning his attention to his search.

“Well, are they down there?” Mr. Smith barked.

Bubba swung his arm back and forth under the seat probing for the glasses. “No, Boss. I don’t feel them under here,” he called back.

“Blast it! You imbecile, what did you do with them?” Mr. Smith ranted. Just then an idea hit him like a ton of bricks. He stared suspiciously at Bubba. “You hid them. You’re trying to steal them from me,” he accused.

“No, Boss,” Bubba insisted. “Really, I don’t know what happened to them. Maybe they fell out on the street. Let me have a look.” Bubba stood up and began searching the area around the car. As he stooped down to peer underneath the automobile, a large, loud object suddenly blocked out the sun, casting an ominous shadow over the immediate area. Bubba looked up to see a stealthy looking black helicopter hovering above them.

“Now what?!” Mr. Smith blared, climbing back out of the driver’s seat. “What in blazes is this?” he shouted, shaking his walking stick at the noisy menace above him.

The Black Hawk helicopter drifted sideways and landed on the other side of the road in a neighbor’s field. Then, with the slamming open of sliding doors, two men dressed in camouflage uniforms and carrying MP4 assault rifles rushed across the field, hopped the short fence bordering the property, and were on Mr. Smith and Bubba in mere seconds.

“Freeze!” one of the soldiers yelled as he approached. “Drop your weapons!”

“What weapons?” Mr. Smith barked. “This is my walking stick, you idiot! Who are you guys? And what do you want?”

“Shut up and drop the stick!” the soldier ordered. “Get up against the car. I’ll ask the questions, here.”

Seeing what his employer was going through, Bubba didn’t hesitate in the least when approached by the other soldier. He immediately pulled out and dropped his blackjack and the pistol he had hidden in the waistband at his back.

“You too!” The other soldier barked at Bubba. “Up against the car!”



At the other end of the lake, William, Stacy and Lisa were all waiting apprehensively on the dock for Ryan’s return. As he neared close enough to see them, he grabbed the bag from his handlebars and held it up. The strong afternoon breeze whipped it around in his hand. “Mission accomplished!” he hollered.

“Woo! Hoo!” William shouted.

The girls both jumped up and down, cheering.

Upon docking and securing the Jet Ski, Ryan handed the plastic shopping bag containing the Frequency Glasses to Stacy. “Here you go, missy,” he said. “Project Space book is a go once again.”

“Thank you, Ryan,” Stacy said, the bag held close to her chest. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“My pleasure,” Ryan replied. “But now we’d better hurry and hide these glasses just in case those goons decide to return.” With wet-sloshing jeans, Ryan led the group back to the house where he quickly retrieved his hat and boots from where he’d left them.

“You know,” William said, as Ryan slipped his boots back on, “Not only should we lock these glasses back in the safe, but after what just happened, maybe we should also disconnect the network until we can find the rightful owner and get their permission.”

“Disconnect the network?” Stacy said indignantly. “Are you kidding? People everywhere have a right to know that the spirit world really exists. And now that we’ve found these glasses, we have a responsibility to humanity to share them.”

“Responsibility maybe, but not the right,” William argued. “We just came close to losing something that isn’t ours. And who are we to decide, anyway? Maybe there’s a reason these glasses were locked away. Maybe they weren’t meant to be shared.”

Having just rejoiced in the return of the Frequency Glasses, as well as the belief that the unification of the living with the *transitioned* would be universally momentous, Stacy suddenly felt like it was all being stripped away, as if a great injustice was about to be incurred on two worlds. She dropped her head sadly.

“Maybe William’s right,” Lisa said. “Maybe we should try to find out who has legal claim to these before we make them public.”

Stacy lifted her head. “And just how do you suggest we do that?” she asked gloomily. “The inventor is dead and the journals didn’t mention any family. We can’t just start calling everybody named Finch—there’s probably thousands.”

Lisa put her arm around Stacy’s shoulders, trying to cheer her up. “Well, there’s still Ryan’s grandmother. She knew Mr. Finch when she was young—maybe she’ll know if he has any living relatives we can contact.”

Ryan stomped his cowboy boots on tight. “Why do they have to be living? Lest y’all forgot, my great-granddad’s his best friend. I say we use the glasses again and go see if he can put us in touch with this Mr. Finch, himself, and ask for his permission personally.”

Stacy’s demeanor instantly changed. “That’s a great idea! I should have thought of that.”

Comforted by this new plan, Stacy plopped down on a nearby sofa and relaxed, all the while holding her prized possession close to her chest.

“So, hero,” Lisa said to Ryan, “tell me, just how exactly did you manage to get the glasses back from those crooks?”

“Y’all have Willy to thank for that,” he said, looking over and giving his friend a congratulatory nod.

NEW GUARDIANS

Unbeknownst to the children as they talked downstairs in the living room, a stranger approached the house from the meadow. “Hello!” he called out, as he reached the porch.

The kids halted their conversation and gazed with nervous suspicion through the screen door at the tall shadowy figure on the veranda.

Thinking the thugs had returned, Stacy quickly hid the Frequency Glasses, still wrapped in the shopping bag, behind her back.

Hesitantly, Ryan walked over to the front door and peered through the screen. “Who are you, mister?” he asked, squinting against the bright afternoon sun.

William and Lisa, wanting to hear better, slinked unseen, closer to Ryan. Stacy stayed right where she was and was already mentally plotting an escape route through the house in case the intruders were back.

Waiting for a reply, Ryan quickly looked the stranger over, as best he could through his filtered view. In the man’s right hand was a pair of dark sunglasses, and on his left wrist a highly technical-looking watch. His stature was tall and his build, lean and fit, with ruggedly handsome facial features.

Ryan also noticed that he was about Granny’s age, casually attired, appearing respectful and composed—definitely not one of the goons that stole the Frequency Glasses.

“Don’t be afraid,” the man said, noticing the apprehension in Ryan’s voice. “My name is Jamie Finch.”

Hearing the name Finch, shock and surprise appeared on each of the children’s faces. For a long moment no one could speak. They simply stared at one another, unsure of what to say or do.

Jamie chuckled. "I can tell by your expression," he said peering through the screen door at Ryan, "that you recognize the name, which is why I am here: to talk about someone else with that surname, my father, David Finch."

"How do I know you are who you say you are?" Ryan challenged.

Jamie grinned approvingly at Ryan's cautious nature as he pulled his wallet from his back pocket. "Here, see for yourself." Flipping to his identification, he stepped closer to the door and displayed his driver's license for inspection.

Keeping the screen door between himself and the suspicious stranger, Ryan scrutinized the information and photo. "Okay," Ryan finally conceded, "I reckon you are who you say you are."

Jamie put his wallet away. "Would it be all right if I came inside to talk?" Ryan looked to Lisa for approval. Lisa nodded.

Ryan opened the door and let Jamie in and proceeded to lead him into the living room, where the other children were now waiting.

The living room was a long room, combining a sitting room at the front and a formal dining area at the rear. In the sitting area, two sofas faced each other with a coffee table in between and end tables at either side of the sofas. Jamie sat on one of the sofas and Lisa, Stacy, and William sat across from him on the other. Ryan brought a chair from the dining area, placed it by the end of the sofa near William, and mounted it like a horse, with his chest against the back rest.

"It's been a long time since I've been in this house, Lisa," Jamie said, looking around as if reminiscing.

"How do you know my name?" Lisa asked.

Jamie grinned omnisciently. "I know all of your names," he admitted. "But I'm getting ahead of myself." He put a hand up. "Let me start at the beginning." Leaning back against the sofa, he got comfortable and proceeded to tell his story.

“As I’m sure you know by now,” he began, “David Finch, my father, invented the Frequency Glasses, which you all found. He originally created them to get in touch with his best friend, who had died . . .”

“Yeah,” Stacy chimed in, “that was Ryan’s great-grandfather.”

Jamie looked pleased. “I take it you’ve met Brian, then?”

“Ryan and I have,” Stacy again spoke up. “He runs SPAZ. Did you know that Ryan’s grandmother wrote a computer game based on his park?”

“I did,” Jamie acknowledged. “Ryan’s grandmother, Mary, and I are close friends. We pretty much grew up together. I know your grandmother, too,” he said to Lisa.

Lisa sat up attentively on the edge of her seat. “Really? You know Nana?”

“I sure do,” Jamie said. “It just so happens that your *great*-grandmother, Kim, was another good friend of my father’s, and when your grandmother, Sarah, was young, she was very sick and near death. Seeing she was afraid of dying, my father allowed her to use the Frequency Glasses to witness for herself that there was nothing to fear in the spirit world. This is how Ryan’s grandmother, Mary, and I became acquainted with her. She eventually recovered from her illness and the three of us became good friends.”

Delighted by one particular aspect of this information, Lisa grinned at Ryan. “*Our* grandmothers know each other. How grand is that?”

Ryan reached around and rubbed the back of his neck. “What a small world.” “So what happened next?” Stacy blurted out anxiously, her expectant gaze fixed on Jamie.

Jamie paused for a moment, trying to recall where he was in the story. “Well,” he said, “after numerous visits to the spirit world, to visit Brian, Dad realized that the real potential of the glasses would be to serve mankind, and he decided that he wanted to share them with the world.”

Stacy and Lisa exchange excited glances. Stacy pointed to Lisa. “That was our idea, too!”

“Yeah,” Lisa said. “We were going to put a website on the internet and share the signal from the glasses with the whole world.”

“Very ingenious,” Jamie complemented.

The girls smiled proudly.

Jamie continued, “A spirit organization known as the Spirits for Mankind, the SFM, in short, asked him to postpone his plan, on account the world was not yet ready for this revelation. They prophesied that there would be a better time for the unveiling of the spirit world, and at that time, a better-suited group of people to exhibit and maintain the glasses.”

Stacy and Lisa suddenly became disheartened at the thought of losing the opportunity of creating the Space book world network.

A silence fell.

Ryan took this moment to hop up from his chair. “Be right back,” he muttered.

Jamie waited patiently for Ryan’s return, while the others sat solemnly reflecting on this last bit of news.

A few moments later and hugging an armload of water bottles, Ryan strolled back in. “Thought y’all might be thirsty,” he said. “I know *I* am!” He set the bottles down on the coffee table, all but one that he proceeded to open and gulp down.

“So, like I was saying,” Jamie said, “at the request of the SFM, my father hid the glasses away until such time as mankind was ready — and the right group of people came along.” Jamie stopped, picked up one of the bottles from the coffee table, opened it, and took a few swallows. “Thank you,” he said, setting the bottle down again.

“If David was told by the SFM to hide the glasses away,” Ryan said, taking his seat, “how do ya reckon those thugs today knew about them?”

“Ah, yes, good question, Ryan,” Jamie said, after another drink of water. “Before my father ever met the SFM, before he even had the idea to share the glasses with the world, a janitor at his laboratory had seen them on a workbench during their development. They were temporarily left hooked to a testing machine while Dad went out for coffee. The janitor, being curious, looked through them and to his amazement witnessed his deceased parents. Needless to say, he told whoever would listen, including the media, who spread the story far and wide.”

“Nosy old janitor,” William muttered.

“After his meeting with the SFM,” Jamie said, moving on, “Dad left the public’s eye and went underground, hoping people would forget. For a few years, stories of his miracle glasses kept popping up as various people and reporters kept trying to find them. After enough time, however, interest finally died out, for the most part. There are, of course, a number of diehards who continue to look for them.”

Jamie sat forward and stretched. “Because of this, and at the request of the SFM, I became steward over the Frequency Glasses after my father passed. And needing to keep an eye on the glasses, I installed a surveillance system around the property and in Tree Root Cavern.” He smiled at Lisa. “That’s how I knew your names,” he admitted. “I’ve been waiting a long time for this long-ago-predicted group to present themselves.”

Stacy suddenly remembered that she still had the Frequency Glasses, and reached for the bag containing them. “Mr. Finch,” she said, “I guess we had better return these to you, then.” She walked over to Jamie and handed him the bag.

Jamie peeked inside and grinned in admiration. “I saw on the surveillance camera that you kids had lost these to the intruders.”

“We did,” Stacy said, her tone apologetic.

“We got them back, though,” William said proudly.

“Well then, that makes what I’m about to say, and do, that much easier.”

Jamie closed the bag and handed it back to Stacy.

Stacy looked confused. “I don’t understand . . .”

Jamie suddenly put up his hand, halting all conversation, and tapped the earpiece he was wearing. “Go ahead,” he said. “Yes, that’s okay, they’re safe. Apprehend and return. Right, out.”

“You see,” Jamie said, resuming his conversation, “I came here today for two reasons. The first was to recover the Frequency Glasses.” He glanced around at the curious faces staring back at him. “It appears, however, that my help wasn’t needed. You four proved that you are perfectly capable of solving your own problems.” He smiled and gave the kids an encouraging nod. “And that makes me feel very confident in the second purpose of my visit, which is to turn stewardship of the glasses over to you. That is, of course, if you want it.”

“But, you said it was foretold that a *better suited* group of people were to take over,” Lisa said.

“Indeed, I did,” Jamie said, checking the time on his watch. “And you four *are* that group.”

“How do ya figure that?” Ryan asked, thinking about how they’d messed things up so far.

Jamie took another swig from his bottle of water. “The SFM provided me with a number of criteria with which to identify the proper group. One was that the group was to be young. I’d say you meet that criterion.” He held up a finger and continued. “The next was that they were to get past all of the clues and security and actually gain access to the glasses. You’ve definitely done that.” He raised a second finger. “The third,” he said, with three fingers now in the air, “is that they have my father’s desire to share the glasses freely with mankind.” Jamie looked at Stacy and Lisa. “You girls

have recently shared with me that you have such a desire — and a plan already in place, also.”

The girls smiled and nodded.

“And finally,” Jamie said, snapping his last finger up and then lowering his hand, “is that they willingly desire to *be* the new guardians.” He gazed inquisitively at each of the children, who by the looks on their faces and the nodding of their heads all seemed to be heartily accepting of the position and duty.

“Wonderful!” Jamie exclaimed. “Because I’m getting too old for this stuff.”

“But what are we supposed to do with them?” Lisa asked, looking at the shopping bag.

“Continue with your plan. The time is right, now. Just keep them safe. There will be a lot of people wanting to get their hands on them, once they find out they exist.”

“Why?” Lisa asked, once again fearful. “If we share them freely with the world, why would anyone want to take them?”

Jamie turned to Lisa. “I’m afraid that not everyone will like the idea of this technology being shared *freely* with the world. There’s a lot of greed and corruption that still exists in our society, and these glasses will represent power to anyone who controls them. You kids have good hearts and want to use the glasses the way my father had intended. Just stay true to that mission, and with the guidance of the SFM, you will succeed.”

“But what if somebody else comes and tries to take them?” Stacy asked nervously.

“Don’t worry, little one, I will still be around, and acting as overseer.” Jamie pulled out a business card and handed it to Stacy. “This is my private number. You kids can contact me anytime you need to.”

With a finger, Ryan pushed his hat up higher on his forehead. “Uh, what happens when you’re no longer able to watch over us?”

Jamie grinned confidently, “By then Ryan, maybe you’ll be ready to take over as overseer, and . . .” Just then a chuffing sound was heard outside. “Perfect timing,” Jamie said, interrupting his own sentence. “It sounds like my ride is here.” He stood and donned his sunglasses.

William ran to the screen door and pushed it open. The sound was loud now, as the rough shape of a helicopter’s shadow formed in the meadow below the butte. “You have your own helicopter?” he asked, almost choking on his question.

Jamie stepped out onto the porch with William. The rest of the kids hustled out behind him, gawking at the black, stealthy chopper as it descended. “Would you like to take a look?” he invited.

“Would we?” Ryan boomed.

Jamie led the way to a path in front of the garage that headed down to the meadow. This was the same path that Lisa had used in the past to access her dirt bike track. In fact, the helicopter had landed in the middle of the overgrown track, and was idling down.

As they approached the chopper, the side door slid open. Two armed men in camos sat guarding two other gentlemen with hanging heads.

William froze. “Those are the guys . . .!” Ryan and Lisa moved forward, wanting a better look at the intruders. Stacy decided she’d rather hang back with her brother.

An air of calm and confidence emanated from Jamie as he looked at the kids. “You don’t have to worry about them,” he said. “They won’t be bothering *anyone* anymore.”

Hearing Jamie near the helicopter, Mr. Smith looked up.

“It’s been a long time, Musrat — that’s Mr. Smith’s real name,” Jamie said aside to the kids. “I thought we deported you, years ago.”

“Argh!” Mr. Smith groaned. “What are you doing here, Ghost? This isn’t a matter for Homeland Security. I’m legal now. And my name is Mr. Smith.”

“Did you hear that?” Lisa whispered excitedly to Ryan.

Being preoccupied by the sheer awesomeness of the stealthy copter, Ryan didn’t reply.

Lisa continued to listen to Jamie’s conversation as he moved closer to the chopper.

“Well, what you just attempted is certainly not legal,” Jamie said, staring menacingly into Mr. Smith’s glowering face. “And you’re right about this not being a homeland security matter. This is personal.”

Mr. Smith glared out the door and scanned the immediate area. “So, where are your two cohorts, the dames with the fish names?” he growled.

“They retired. They decided they’d had enough of chasing people like you. Don’t worry though — Falcon and Raptor, here, will take good care of you.” Jamie grabbed the handle to the door and as he slid it closed, Lisa got a look at the arm patch of one of the soldiers. “Okay now, kids, step back!” Jamie said, taking his seat next to the pilot.

Lisa and Ryan moved back. William and Stacy, having kept their distance from the beginning, were already clear of the helicopter’s blades.

Looking at the pilot, Jamie rotated a finger in the air. Seconds later the engine whined to life and the blades began to rotate. “Remember,” he said, raising his voice over the increasing noise, “if you ever need me, just call. Good luck on your mission.” He gave a quick wave and shut his door. The rotors chuffed aggressively, causing the dry foliage to flatten out and wave wildly.

The kids covered their faces and moved even farther away from the stirring dust and debris as the chopper lifted off. In mere seconds, the monochrome

whirlybird was simply a small dark speck against the bright yellow backdrop of the sun.

“I don’t believe it!” Lisa squealed, on their return to the house. “Jamie is Ghost.”

The kids tromped along a section of dusty, dirt-bike track that was mostly free of overgrowth. William and Stacy were in the lead, discussing the recent turn of events, with Lisa and Ryan following a number of yards behind.

Ryan, strolling along next to Lisa, pulled a dried reed from the ground. “I think you’ve been spending too much time in the spirit world,” he scoffed, the long stem sticking out the corner of his mouth. “Ya can’t even tell the difference between spirits and real people, anymore.”

Lisa glared at Ryan. “I didn’t say Jamie is *a* ghost,” she said sternly. “I said Jamie *is* Ghost. You know — the head of Pyramid.”

“Ha!” Ryan gibed. “Now, I think you’ve been reading too much of Jamie’s journal. You’re letting your imagination run away with ya — as Granny would say.”

“I am not!” Lisa snapped. “I heard that thug call him Ghost, and I saw an arm patch on one of the soldiers. It said Homeland Security, and it even had an image of a pyramid in the center of it.”

“Are you sure about all of this?” Ryan asked thoughtfully, his brows knitted close together and his eyes fixed searchingly on Lisa’s insistent gaze.

“I am absolutely — one hundred percent — positive!” Lisa said firmly. “Yee!

Haw!” Ryan suddenly exploded. “This means Granny is friends with a real-life secret spy. I wonder why she never told me — probably top-secret and all that. Do you think his life is as exciting as James Bond?”

With Ryan ranting away, Lisa walked along silently. Something Ryan had said about his granny knowing a spy had caused her subconscious to kick into overdrive.

Her mind raced as it attempted to connect pieces of information, like a super computer putting together a complex jigsaw puzzle.

Jamie is Ghost, head of Pyramid. She thought back to Jamie's journal: *Pyramid is shown as a three-person team — Ghost, shark, and eel.* Her mind quickly recalled the comment made by Mr. Smith: *His two cohorts are "dames" with fish names, retired. So, Eel and Shark must be women, who no longer work with him.* Recalling the conversation with Jamie in the house, she thought: *Granny and Nana have both known Jamie for a long time.* Her mind reeled back to when Ryan had first arrived, to her first meeting with Granny, to the snake bracelet she wore. *What if that wasn't a snake? What if it was an — eel?* Consciously now, she thought back to when she was a little girl, to the few times she had seen her Nana's fish bracelet. Suddenly it hit her. *What if that wasn't a fish, but a . . .* She stopped abruptly and turned to Ryan. "Our grandmothers are spies!"

Ryan coughed out his reed in surprise. "Now wouldn't that be something; both our grannies being spies with Jamie."

"I'm not joking," Lisa said to a dubious Ryan. "Do you remember that Pyramid drawing in the journal that shows Ghost at the top position and Eel and Shark as other agents?"

Ryan nodded.

"Well, your granny wears a bracelet with an image of what I originally thought was a snake, but I'm sure now is an eel."

Ryan snorted and shook his head. "That doesn't mean anything . . ."

Lisa quickly continued, "No, but get this, my nana wears an identical bracelet, except that its image is of a — *shark.*"

EXILED

Three days later

“Thanks for the lift, Lieutenant,” Jamie shouted to the US Navy Seal team leader standing with him near the bulkhead of the loud, in-flight, military C-130 cargo plane. Sitting in web seats along one side of the aircraft’s fuselage was a platoon of Navy SEALs on their way to a top-secret training mission somewhere in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

“My pleasure, Commander,” the team leader hollered back over the four noisy turboprop engines. He pointed to the two unconscious thugs lying in one of the two Zodiac inflatable raiding crafts in the center of the large, open cargo bay. “What’s their story?”

“Sorry, Lieutenant, ‘need-to-know’.”

“Yes, sir,” the team leader said, fully understanding the meaning and importance of that special security classification.

Just then the aircraft bucked hard under turbulence. Mr. Smith’s eyes popped open, and to his vexation he found himself bound and being jostled about so severely that it was nearly impossible to sit up in the bouncing rubber craft. After multiple attempts, he finally struggled to an upright position. As he did, he noticed the cargo bay ramp slowly opening. The soldiers in their special ops wet water gear watched him without expression.

“Where are you taking us?” Mr. Smith demanded, his pleading eyes glancing searchingly at the hardened faces staring silently back at him.

“Home,” he heard from behind.

He spun around, as best he could amongst all the gear in the watercraft, and saw Jamie sitting in a single webbed seat against the forward bulkhead, legs crossed at the ankles, smoking a cigar.

Mr. Smith glowered. “My home is the United States now, Ghost!” “Not anymore,” Jamie replied.

Mr. Smith started to object, when suddenly a yellow light on the bulkhead lit up. An audible indicator sounded at the same time.

Jamie glanced at the light and then nodded to the team leader.

“You four,” the team leader said, pointing to the four Seals closest to the exit ramp. “Prepare two for deployment.”

The four soldiers immediately stood and approached the Zodiacs.

“Out of the boat!” a soldier ordered, and with his help and the assistance of one other soldier, Mr. Smith stumbled out of the dinghy as obligingly as he could, thinking that the two men needed to prepare their watercraft for deployment.

The other two soldiers aroused Bubba, who was still out cold, and escorted him out of the dinghy.

In the next instant, in a whirlwind of activity, the prisoners’ hands were freed, parachutes were strapped to their backs, static lines attached to an overhead cable, and they were escorted onto the now opened loading ramp.

“Hold!” The loadmaster said, presenting a closed fist.

Bubba and Mr. Smith were stopped and held in position at the hinged edge of the ramp. The team leader pointed to the handles atop the reserve chutes attached to their chests and shouted over the thundering engines: “This is your emergency ripcord — should you need it. After you jump, count to ten and look up. If your main chute isn’t open, pull this.”

“Huh? What?” Bubba mumbled, still groggy from the sedative.

Mr. Smith glared past the team leader to Jamie. “What’s the meaning of this, Ghost?” he shouted.

Jamie didn't answer — he simply stared out a small window in the fuselage, his hands cupped behind his back. His stubby stogie hung from his lips, and a thin trail of smoke from the end of the cigar swirled upward.

Bubba sleepily crumpled to the floor under the weight of the parachute, and sat bent over, trying to clear his head.

Mr. Smith peered out the back of the aircraft past the open ramp. The whole panoramic view was devoid of everything except the dark blue ocean below and the light blue sky above. "Where is my country?" he demanded. "I refuse to be dropped out the middle of the sea in nothing more than a rubber dinghy," he protested.

Jamie, still looking out the window, now saw what he had been waiting for. He turned and faced Mr. Smith. "I'm afraid, Musrat, that you are sadly disillusioned. Those inflatables are not for you."

"What?" Mr. Smith exclaimed, a look of fear on his face. "You're just going to drop us into the ocean?"

Jamie smirked. "Look again."

Mr. Smith peered out the back of the aircraft once again. This time he saw the irregular shape of a craggy, forest-covered, tropical island coastline.

A bell sounded and the yellow bulkhead light turned green.

"GO!" the loadmaster shouted, pointing straight-armed out the back of the aircraft.

Bubba was lifted to his feet, and both goons were shoved onto the level ramp. "Move!" ordered one of the soldiers, jabbing his rifle forward. As Bubba and Mr. Smith were forced back, the loadmaster hit a switch, causing the ramp to decline slowly.

Mr. Smith's feet began to slip on the sloping ramp. "Wait!" he shrieked. "We can make a deal."

The loadmaster jogged the switch causing the ramp to drop quickly a few inches. The thugs fell and tumbled out of the aircraft.

Mr. Smith screamed through the whistling wind as he streaked earthward at a hundred and twenty miles per hour, “I’ll get you for this, I swearrrrr!”

Curled up like a cannonball, Bubba was heard sobbing like a baby as gravity pulled him speedily downward.

With their voices trailing off into the distance, their round canopies could be seen fluttering open. Two large crates were shoved off the plane after them. The gigantic freight chutes open almost instantly, sounding like gun shots.

Bubba threw his arms over his head. “Don’t shoot!” he screamed. Moments later, the two men splashed down in the shallow waters along the coastline. Shaken, but now wide awake, they staggered to the other end of the beach, toward the parachute-enshrouded crates. Beyond the small, crescent-shaped, white sandy beach was a wild jungle-like forest, alive with all manner of strange animal and bird sounds.

“I sure hope there’s something to eat in those crates,” Bubba groaned, holding his growling gut.

“I hope there’s something we can use to get off this foul island,” Mr. Smith squawked.

Motivated by the emptiness in his stomach, Bubba hastened to the nearest box. Pulling the parachute free, he read the single word painted on the wooden lid. “Boss, I was right,” he said. “This one is labeled *Provisions*. What do you think they left us — fruits, vegetables, meat?”

Mr. Smith, exhausted from the heat and the weight of his water-soaked and sand-covered trousers, stopped and dropped to his knees. “Knowing Ghost,” he growled, “they’re probably military rations.”

“Yuck!” Bubba grimaced, “anything but that.” Finding a rock, he smashed through the lid. Within the crate, half a dozen cardboard boxes were neatly stacked and labeled. He began reading off the labels aloud, while rubbing his hands together in anticipation. “Tomatoes, watermelon, potatoes, onions, beets, lettuce . . . Whew’ee! I can make one heck of a salad with this stuff,” he boasted, his mouth watering as he pulled out and tore into the first box.

Mr. Smith now lay sprawled out on the sand, parched and panting. “Break out one of those watermelons,” he said, his voice rasping.

“Uh, Boss, we’ve got a slight problem here.”

“I don’t care right now, just give me something wet.”

Bubba carried the cardboard box over to Mr. Smith and dropped it in the sand next to him. Stamped in various places on the box was the word: Tomato.

“Hurry up! Give me one.” Mr. Smith groped at the top of the box causing it to tip over. His jaw dropped as bags and bags of tomato *seeds* spilled out in front of him. “Ghost!” he screamed, with fists pointed at the sky, “I — hate — you!”

A FELLOWSHIP IS FORMED

Everything looks good, Stacy thought, sitting at her computer and making a final inspection of the Spacebook website. *Now all we have to do is wait to see if anyone will come.*

With the FG network finally operational and all of the notices sent to the various social networking sites to introduce their celestial portal, Stacy removed her headphones, turned off her computer, and headed to the attic to join the others. Upon entering, she saw a bustle of activity. Mr. Walborg was over by one of the windows, installing an air conditioner. William was escorting two deliverymen who carried the first of four futuristic-looking chase lounge chairs over to where Lisa was singlehandedly sweeping the floor for their placement.

Over the last few days, a lot had happened. The kids explained everything to Lisa's parents, who had been remarkably supportive. Mr. Walborg, with the help of Ryan and William, had already repaired the broken hatch in the pruning platform and installed an early warning system around the property, which the kids could monitor from any of the computers connected to the home network. He also configured the Frequency Glasses to accept constant power from the laptop, in order to prevent the FG network from going down due to depleted batteries. In addition, he'd installed a backup generator to supply power for the network, in case of electrical power failure. Lisa and Stacy, all the while were cleaning out the attic, throwing away all garbage and consolidating everything else to one end of the room. Mrs. Walborg, having enough on her plate with running the household, declined to help with their project. "I can't see why you kids would want your clubhouse up in that filthy old attic, anyway," she had said.

William pointed to Lisa as he and the delivery men approached. "She's the one you're looking for," he said. "She's in charge of furniture placement."

“Thank you, Sonny,” the lead deliveryman said to William. Then, addressing Lisa, he asked, “Where would you like this, miss?”

“Could you set the four of them in a semicircular arrangement here in this corner?” Lisa asked, stepping out of the way. “This is going to be our lounge area,” she added cheerfully.

“Sure thing,” the jolly, rotund fella replied. Then, together with his tall, lanky partner, he positioned the first chair in place and headed downstairs for the next one.

Mr. Walborg followed the two men downstairs in order to switch the power back on to the attic.

Not even waiting for the plastic cover to be removed, William plopped down in the chair with his hands behind his head. “This is going to be great!” he declared. “We’re going to be able to astral travel in style, now.”

“I don’t get it,” Ryan said, positioning the ship’s wheel in its new home on one of the walls near the lounge area. “How’re we supposed to see the computer monitors if we’re lying down in those things?”

“No more computer monitors for us,” William said, staring dreamily up at the ceiling. “Your granny sent over the new Hologoggles . . .”

William proceeded to explain to Ryan the principles of augmented and virtual reality, where everything that used to be seen on a monitor and controlled with a mouse would now be seen floating in space before one’s eyes and controlled with aerial hand movements. Even the signals from the Frequency Glasses could be seen and heard through these. No more sitting up uncomfortably, while staring at a flashing computer screen.

While the boys discussed new technology and leisurely astral travel, Lisa and Stacy discussed a matter of greater import.

“I think we should call it Protectors of the Frequency Glasses Club,” Stacy contended.

“That’s a pretty long name for a club,” Lisa argued, setting her broom aside. “Maybe we should shorten it to FG Protectors or FG Overseers. Or even, The Stewardship of the FGG.”

Ryan, now schooled on holographic computer technology, sauntered over and joined in on the girls’ conversation. “What do ya think about The FG Guardians?” he proposed, thinking this sounded a might bit better than protectors or overseers.

“In case you’ve all forgotten,” William said, strolling up behind Ryan, “this is supposed to be a private club. Shouldn’t we have that in the name?”

Using a dustpan and Lisa’s broom, Stacy swept up the small pile of dirt that Lisa had left on the floor and dumped it in a nearby trash can for her. “It’s also supposed to be secret,” she said, returning. “We could call it The Secret FGG Club.”

“Maybe something more clandestine,” Lisa advised, wiping her dirty hands on her baby-blue cover-all shorts, “like Secret Society instead of club?”

“Yeah!” William agreed. “That makes us sound more like secret agents — like Jamie.”

“With a slight modification,” Stacy suggested, “We could call it The Secret Society of the FGG.”

“That’s it!” Lisa cried with a finger in the air. “That’s perfect.” Glancing around, she saw that her friends were all nodding in agreement.

Within moments, their clubhouse was filled with chatter and the echoing of their newly adopted fellowship name.

“What’s all the commotion?” Mr. Walborg asked, poking his head up through the stairwell.

“Dad, we just came up with a name for our club,” Lisa said. “We’re calling it the Secret Society of the FGG.”

Mr. Walborg continued up the stairway and entered the attic, a manila envelope in his hand. “FGG.?” he said curiously.

“Yeah, that stands for Frequency Glasses Guardians,” Lisa explained.

“It has a nice ring to it. I like it,” Mr. Walborg said. “That reminds me. I have something I want to talk to you kids about.” He took a seat at the table. “Everyone, come over here for a minute.”

The group gathered around Mr. Walborg.

“Mrs. Walborg and I would like to come up with an emergency family code word,” Mr. Walborg began. “In an event that we ever have to summon you through a stranger, we would give them this code word so that you would know that it was all right to be escorted by them.” Mr. Walborg looked around at each of the young faces that stared eagerly back at him as he considered an appropriate word. “I know,” he said, at last. “Since you kids are considering yourselves guardians, what do you say we use *guardian* as the code word?”

The kids enthusiastically agreed, and with the matter settled, Mr. Walborg stood to leave. “Oh yeah, before I forget,” he added, looking at his daughter, “this just came for you, honey.” He handed Lisa the manila envelope and headed back over to the air-conditioner to test his handiwork.

Lisa read the return address. “Wow! This is from Jamie. What on earth would he be sending me?” Opening the envelope, she pulled out a note and a journal. She read the note aloud: “Lisa, I thought you kids might be interested in this, and I felt that you would be the best person to take charge of it. Thanks, Jamie.”

“What is it?” Stacy asked.

Lisa flipped through some of the journal’s pages. “His dad’s memoirs,” she answered. “It looks like it covers from the time he graduated college to the time he hid the Frequency Glasses away.”

Ryan peered over Lisa’s shoulder at the journal. “What in tarnation is a memoir?”

“It’s an account of the author’s personal experiences,” Lisa explained.

“So, it’s like a diary. I figur’d only silly girls kept those things,” Ryan said, sitting back down. “Why do ya reckon he thought we’d be interested in *that*?”

Passing by the kids once again on his way downstairs, Mr. Walborg overheard Ryan’s comment. “Maybe Jamie just wanted you kids to know the story and history behind the glasses,” he offered. “After all, you are the new guardians; you probably should know everything about them, don’t you think?” Stepping onto the staircase he looked back. “Remember kids,” he said. “The code word is . . .?”

“Guardian!” everyone said in unison.



Weeks later

About twenty-eight hundred miles east of the Walborg property, an advisor met with the President of the United States in the Oval Office.

“Mr. President,” he said. “Do you remember, decades ago, a story about a pair of glasses that could see into the spirit world?”

The president stood and peered out the rightmost window of three behind the famous Resolute desk, his hands clasped behind his back, thinking back to when he had been a younger man in Congress. “Yes, but that was never substantiated. The *alleged* glasses were never found.”

“Well sir, that may have changed,” the advisor stated frankly. “It appears that someone is claiming to have the technology, and is purporting astral travels to the spirit realm via a website called Spacebook.”

“Is anyone claiming responsibility?”

“Yes sir, a group by the name of the Secret Society of the FGG.” Deep in thought, the president silently gazed out the window for a long moment. Then turning, he said to his aide, “Start an investigation.”

EPILOGUE

Hi, everyone, Lisa here.

The summer is now over and Ryan is back in Texas for school. We sure are going to miss him, but he'll be back next summer. We do see him regularly on the astral plane, however, where we all meet up before heading out on new celestial adventures.

I thought I would fill you in on some of the activities that rounded out the rest of our summer.

First off, Ryan and William finally cracked the code to the location of Captain Blood's booty. Apparently, the solution had something to do with the number of spokes on the ship's wheel and using them to pinpoint the treasure's location. (Maybe you, too, can figure out how they did it.) Upon this discovery, my father and the boys took scuba diving lessons and went on their own adventure to seek out this treasure. Their trip was a success, but fraught with its own perils and hazards — however, that's a story for another time.

The proceeds from Captain Blood's trove we used to form the Secret Society of the FGG, and to upgrade our hardware and improve the surveillance system around the property. Ryan, William, and Stacy all voted to use some of the money to pay for my operation. Yes — it's great! I have the use of both my arms again, thanks to my friends. We also used a large portion of the money to fund a special project that Stacy and I came up with; to help public libraries pay for computer equipment so that children who could not afford their own would also be able to access Space book and the spirit realm.

Do you remember the journal that Jamie sent me — the one that holds his father's memoirs? Well from it, and visits with David Finch himself at the SFM headquarters, we learned that William and Stacy are actually related to David and

Jamie Finch. It turns out that David's sister (now in spirit) is William's and Stacy's great-grandmother. Isn't that something? With Jamie, they still have a living relative on earth after all. That also means that they will be the ones to inherit the Frequency Glasses when the time comes.

Thanks to my dad, Ryan, William, Stacy and I are all sporting custom-designed fellowship rings. They are made of gold and really cool!

Well, the Space book website is a hit! The astral plane has never been so alive with activity. Emails and blog posts continue to abound from grateful children around the world. They all seem so happy at being able to visit family and friends who have already transitioned to the spirit world, as well as making new Space pals, living and in spirit. Other messages we continually receive tell of disabled children thankful for the opportunity to function wholly again, even if only temporarily. There seem to be thousands of astral visitors to Summerland already, with more coming every day.

This summer has been so exciting, and as Ryan would say, too much fun! Well, I guess that's all for now. See you next time. Lisa.

END