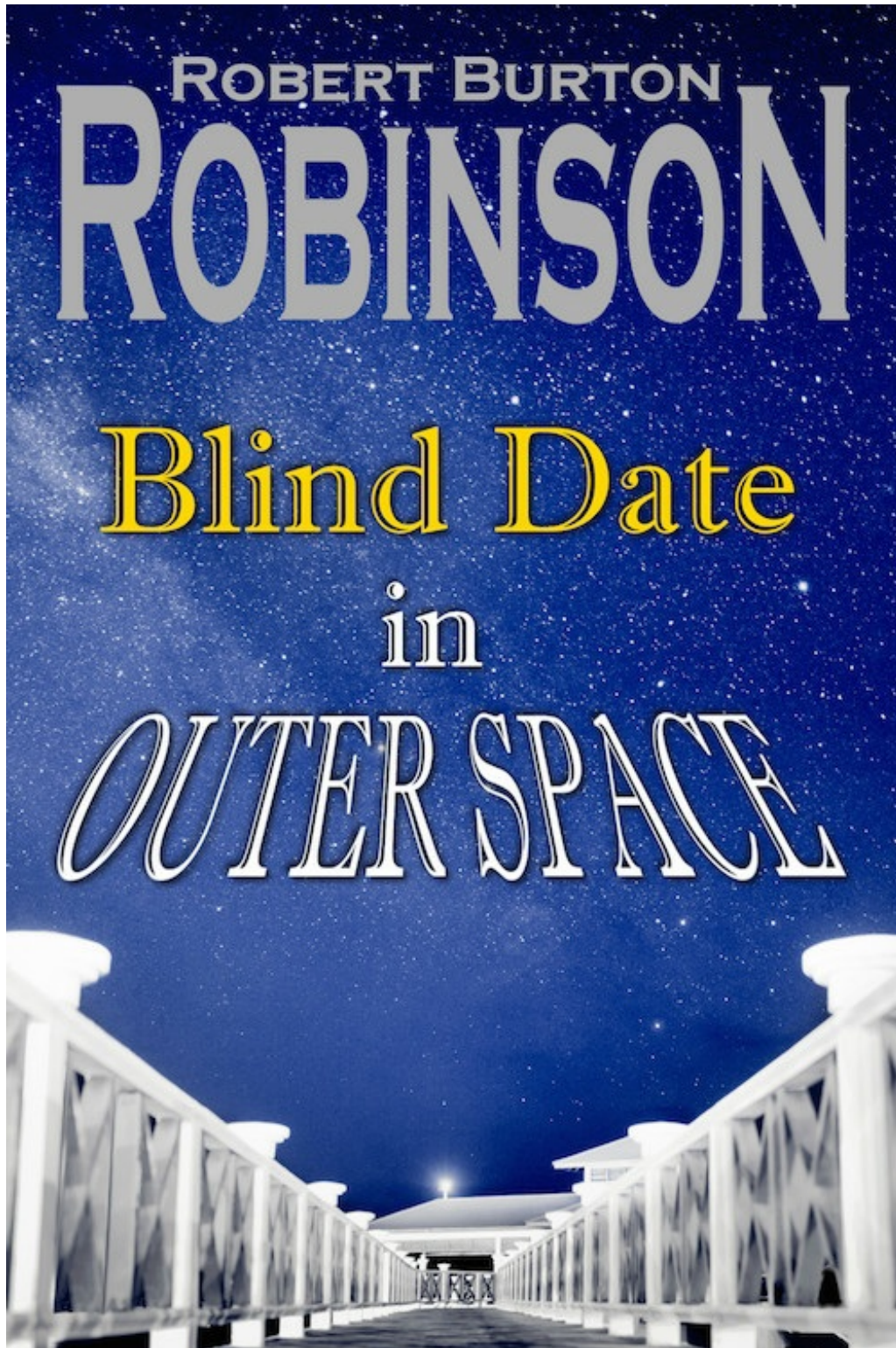


Blind Date in Outer Space



GENRE: Sci-Fi. LENGTH: 17,784 words. SYNOPSIS: Two very bright teenagers, Riley

and Rachel, who are thrust into a treacherous situation by a reclusive, dying scientist. In a last ditch effort to validate the capabilities of his cutting-edge inventions, Doc Himmel uses the teens as guinea pigs, sending them to a planet that's light years away from Earth.

Their mission is to gather data about the planet Sorella Uno and somehow survive until he brings them back to Earth. He has equipped the teens with slightly different bodies so they can fit in with the planet's inhabitants. But it may take a while for Riley and Rachel to adapt to having extra arms.

However, that's the least of their worries because even if they manage to stay alive long enough to complete their mission, there may be no way to return to Earth.

Fourteen year-old Riley Rangle told his mom he was going to Jake's house to shoot hoops. He couldn't tell her the truth. She never would have allowed him to go to crazy old Doc Himmel's house. And Riley had never *wanted* to go near the creepy-looking place until now.

He'd never met the man, or even seen a picture of him. But he'd heard the stories. Years ago, Hilbert Himmel, a dentist, who was surprisingly also a chiropractor, claimed he could cure just about any medical condition by working on your teeth and gums. But if that didn't do the trick, he'd lay you out on his chiropractic table and start popping your bones. His last resort was to inject you with some voodoo concoction he'd mixed up in his lab.

Most people thought Doc Himmel was a quack—yet he'd stayed in business for nearly forty years. Obviously, a lot of people believed in his strange methods of doctoring.

Riley didn't know what to believe. After the doctor retired twenty years ago, he became a hermit. Nobody had any idea what the crazy old man was doing alone in that big house.

But Riley was about to find out.

His property occupied a huge corner lot, bordered on the back and sides by an eight-foot iron fence. In the front was a large pond that provided twenty-five feet of separation from the street. It was like a moat, protecting the castle from the king's enemies. But there was no drawbridge—just a wooden bridge that looked like it might collapse if you were foolish enough to try to walk across it.

Riley paused. Was he really going to do this? He instinctively reached for his phone. Why? To check with his mommy? He was not a kid anymore. At fourteen, Riley was well on his way to becoming a man.

He wished he could have called Doc Himmel and talked to him about this. Maybe that

would have reassured him. But Riley didn't have his phone number, and he wasn't even sure he had the correct email address. When he'd replied to the doctor's email, it had bounced.

Maybe this was a prank, and he'd being an idiot for taking it seriously. Some buttheads from his school were probably hiding in the bushes, capturing his gullibility on video for all the world to see.

Riley decided to put those thoughts out of his mind. Dr. Himmel had emailed him about some cool inventions the doctor was working on. He said he'd read about Riley's science fair project, and how it had won first place in the national competition. According to his email, Riley was just the kind of smart young man with whom the doctor wanted to share his amazing inventions—that had something to do with space travel. Riley would be the first one to see them.

He took one step onto the bridge and it creaked. With the second step, it began to sway slightly. What was the worst thing that could happen? The bridge might collapse and dump Riley into the water. So what? He would swim to the other side, climb up to the grass, and run to the front door. The doctor would commend him for his bravery, and offer him a towel and a change of clothes.

Riley took another step. The board under his foot felt spongy. Could it hold his weight? He took a deep breath. *Don't be a wimp—be a warrior.* He charged forward at full speed, knowing he was putting more stress on the old bridge by running, but he couldn't stand the suspense. If it meant he would fall into the water, so be it. An image flashed across his mind: dozens of snakes wrapped around his arms and legs, pulling him under—to a harrowing watery death.

When he was nearly to the other side, a board cracked and his leg fell through, stopping him dead in his tracks. The bridge swayed from side to side, creaking and popping. He held his breath and carefully pulled his leg out of the gap. Riley tiptoed the rest of the way across the bridge, and rolled onto the grass.

He breathed a sighed of relief. *Home free and bone dry.* He jumped up and ran to the front door.

The two carriage lamps at either side of the door were covered with spiderwebs, and projected monster-sized spider shadows onto the enormous front door. Riley knocked. The wooden door felt like concrete, as though it were petrified.

If the email was real, this was gonna be cool. But if it was a joke—if some clown from

school had set him up—the old doctor might yell at him or call the police or pull out a shotgun. But he'd been well aware of the dangers when he'd lied to his mom. The best case scenario would leave him grounded for two weeks after witnessing some amazing, cutting-edge technology. Totally worth it.

The worst case—

The hinges groaned as the door opened. The man was tall—well over six feet—with a full head of gray hair, down to his shoulders. If this was Doctor Himmel, then Riley had to agree: he *did* look crazy—more like a wino than an inventor.

“Hello, Riley.” His booming, crackling voice sounded like it was coming from the bottom of a barrel that hadn't been opened in fifty years. It was the lowest-pitched voice Riley had ever heard, delivered in syrupy-slow motion. It was as if the doctor's words had been recorded earlier and were playing back at a much slower speed.

Riley shivered. It freaked him out that this weird-looking old man had just called him by name. Apparently the email had been real, but now Riley kinda wished it hadn't. He quickly calculated that he could make it to the street in thirty seconds—assuming the bridge didn't crumble under his feet.

“I'm Dr. Himmel. Come in, son.” He pulled the door open farther.

“Good to meet you, Dr. Himmel.”

“You can call me Doc. That's what my patients always called me.”

Riley walked into the foyer. “Okay, Doc. Thanks for inviting me.” When he got a good whiff of the place, he nearly gagged. It smelled like mildewed tennis shoes filled with rotten banana peels, covered with cigarette ashes.

Doc closed the door. “You know I picked you because of your science fair project. That was good, solid work you did with that robot.”

“Thanks. I plan on winning first prize again next year.”

“Not if I can help it.” Rachel Oliver was standing at the other end of the foyer.

“What are *you* doing here?” Riley asked.

“I invited Rachel too,” Doc said. “She got here a little early.”

“We don't need her, Doc,” Riley said. “Her science fair project came in a distant second.”

“The judges screwed up,” she said. “My robot ran circles around yours.”

“That’s about all it could do—run in circles,” Riley said. “Besides, you wrote your controller application in Java, so most of the work was already done for you. All you had to do was plug in a few lines of code. I created my own programming language from scratch.”

“Which was a complete waste of time,” she said. “How are we supposed to make any real progress as scientists if we keep reinventing the wheel? Right, Doc?”

Before he could speak, Riley said, “My code is highly sophisticated—unlike yours.”

“So said the judges,” Rachel said.

“Then we’re in agreement,” Riley said.

“No, we’re not, because when the judges awarded you first prize they judged *themselves* to be inferior,” she said.

Riley looked at Doc. “That is so bogus.”

Rachel got in Riley’s face. “Why don’t we borrow one of Doc’s computer and show him our code. Let him decide who’s is better?”

“Stop!” Doc’s booming voice shook the walls.

Riley and Rachel froze.

“I don’t have time for this bickering,” Doc said. “I selected *both* of you for a reason. Now, follow me.”

He turned and walked out of the foyer.

Rachel stuck out her tongue at Riley.

He responded with a conceited grin.

They followed Doc through the living room. The coffee table was covered with dust and the couch and chairs looked like they hadn’t been touched in years. Then they went down a long hallway and through a door that led into what must have been the doctor’s dental office at one time. The room was so bright that Riley had to squint for a few moments until his pupils adjusted.

There were several dentist chairs in a row, bolted to the floor. Only remnants remained of

the inner walls that had at one time partitioned the large room into patient stalls.

“This is my lab,” Doc said.

To the left, in a corner was a heavy-looking metal desk with a computer workstation on it. Riley recognized it as an old DEC Alpha workstation from the 1990s. “You running UNIX, Doc?” Riley asked, before Rachel had a chance.

“Yes, sir.”

“Programming in C?” Riley asked.

“No, I use my own language that’s built on top of C.” Doc said.

Riley smirked at Rachel. “See? Doc doesn’t use Java either.”

“Okay,” Doc said, “I’m gonna show you a video that demonstrates my advanced 3D scanner and 3D printer.”

“I know all about 3D scanners and printers, Doc,” Rachel said.

Doc gave her a cold stare. “You’ve never seen one like this.”

“You mean you brought us here just to show us a video?” she asked.

“You could have just emailed us the video, Doc,” Riley said.

Doctor Himmel’s face turned red. “I’m not gonna take a chance on my inventions getting out there on the web where idiots can scrutinize them and criticize me. The scientific community rejected my ideas twenty years ago, and I am about to make them choke on their own superiority complex. But not until I’m ready.” He started coughing, and quickly went into a full-blown coughing fit.

By the time he finally he got it under control, his eyes were red and watery. “Whew, that was a rough one.”

“Are you sick?” Rachel asked.

“No,” Doc said. “I’m dying. Lung cancer. Cigarettes. Four packs a day for seventy years.”

Riley didn’t know what to say.

Doc went on. “So, I haven’t got much time left. But, hell, I’m 87 years old, so I can’t complain. Never thought I’d live this long. But while I’m still kicking, I’m gonna push my

new technology to limit, and with your help, prove that it works. I'll show those dumbasses. It'll literally blow their pants off." He grinned.

Riley wondered how he and Rachel were going to help Doc prove anything by simply watching a video.

"Before I show you the video...follow me." Doc took them outside and down a sidewalk that led to what appeared to be a large warehouse. Inside, the only source of light came from a small lamp sitting next to a computer workstation on a desk.

"Aren't you gonna turn on the lights?" Rachel asked.

Her voice echoed, leading Riley to surmise that there were no inner walls in the building—no division of the space into smaller rooms—just one big, open area with little or nothing in it. But as he stared into the darkness, he thought he could see a large object in the middle of the room. Perhaps it just the afterimage of a dental chair, temporarily burned into his retina during their brief visit to the Doc's bright lab.

Doc walked over to the computer, logged in, entered a few keystrokes, and the entire room lit up. A very large, open-ended glass tube was pointed at the ceiling. It was ten feet tall and at least twelve inches in diameter. The bottom of the tube was mounted to a huge metal apparatus covered with electric cables.

"Is that a laser?" Riley asked.

"An extremely powerful laser," Doc said, still typing at the keyboard. "I'm way ahead of NASA."

NASA? Riley remembered reading that NASA scientists had built a high-powered laser that could transmit data to and from the moon at super-fast speeds.

The roof opened to a clear sky.

"Nice," Rachel said.

Riley pointed. "There's Alpha Centauri."

"How would you like to go there?" Doc asked.

Riley whipped around. "What do you talking about?"

"Well, not to Alpha Centauri specifically," Doc said. "Let's go back inside."

“Aren’t you gonna tell us what you do with this laser?” Rachel asked.

“Inside.” Doc walked toward the door.

“Don’t you need to close the roof?” Rachel asked. “What if it rains?”

Doc ignored her.

They followed him back into the lab.

“Have a seat,” Doc said, offering two of the dentist chairs.

Riley and Rachel sat down in the chairs.

Rachel looked nervous.

“You’re not gonna drill our teeth, are you, Doc?” Riley said, trying to lighten the mood.

Doc stood in front of them holding what appeared to be a custom remote control. “My advanced 3D reproduction technology is like nothing you’ve ever seen. It can reproduce about anything—including the human body.”

“You’re joking,” Rachel said.

Doc touched the remote, and the wall became a video screen. He stepped aside as the video began to play.

In the video, Doc Himmel was sitting in a dental chair. In a second dental chair that was facing his, a copy of Doc’s body began to gradually appear.

“So, the copy of you being produced by your 3D printer?” Riley asked. “This can’t be real.”

“Quiet!” Doc said.

When the copy was fully formed, it opened its eyes and saw Doc sitting across from it. “Who are you?” It asked.

“I am the original,” Doc said. “I’m the *real* you. You’re just a copy.”

“That’s impossible.” The copy slid out of its chair and stood up.

Doc clicked the remote, which paused the video.

“What are you doing?” Riley said. “It was just getting good.”

“No,” Doc said. “That’s when it got bad.”

“What happened?” Riley asked.

“He died,” Doc said.

Riley looked around. “What did you do with his body?”

“I buried it in the back yard,” Doc said.

“He *died*?” Rachel asked. “No, you *killed* him. You pulled the plug on him, didn’t you? How could you do that? He was walking and talking. He was real. He was *you*.”

Riley said, “Doc, you could have manipulated the data inside your 3D system and removed your cancer before you made the copy.”

“Yes,” Doc said. “I could have.”

“Then why not do it?” Riley asked. “Then you could go on living—as the copy.”

“It’s not that simple,” Doc said.

Yeah, Riley thought, because the video was a fake. None of this is real. Doc was delusional.

Doc said, “The enormous laser I showed you a few minutes ago is part of my high-speed digital, Full-Duplex, Laser Communication System, or FuddleCuz, as I call it.”

“FuddleCuz?” Rachel asked. “Why do you call it that?”

Riley jumped in. “Because that’s what *scientists* do with acronyms, Rachel—they make them into funny words so it’s easier to say them and remember them. The acronym for Full-Duplex, Laser Communication System is F D L C S, which Doc has turned into FuddleCuz. Get it?”

“Yeah, sure.” Rachel smirked at him, probably wondering why Riley was still playing along with Dr. Nutcase.

“Very good, Riley,” Doc said. “So, once the 3D scanner has created a digital copy of the subject, the FuddleCuz can send that data to another planet and—”

“Another *planet*?” Riley asked. “But that would take years.”

Doc grinned. “When I say high-speed, I’m talking about speeds you’ve never even

dreamed of, son. A few minutes ago, you looked into the sky and pointed to Alpha Centauri. How long do you think it would take for the FuddleCuz to transmit to that star system? Take a guess.”

“Are you kidding?” Riley asked. “Alpha Centauri is 4.37 light years away.”

“That is exactly right,” Doc said, “but you haven’t answered my question.”

Rachel piped in. “The fastest speed I’ve ever heard of would get you there in about 85 years or so. But that was just theoretical stuff.”

“Yeah,” Riley said, “using the best technology we’ve got right now, it would take something like 80,000 years.”

“Correct,” Doc said, “which is why my system is such a breakthrough. Of course, in fairness, I’m not sending up a physical spaceship. The FuddleCuz only transmits the data needed to make a copy of the subject.”

“And how many years does that take?” Riley asked.

“It can reach Alpha Centauri in approximately ten minutes,” Doc said.

Riley now knew for sure that Doctor Himmel was completely out of his mind.

“That’s impossible,” Rachel said.

Doc smiled. “No, dear, it is not impossible. I’ve already done it. Actually, I blew right past Alpha Centauri because it’s way too hot for mammals: about 1200 degrees Celsius.”

“I’m sorry, Doc,” Riley said, “but do you realize how crazy that sounds?”

Doc walked over to a metal cabinet and took out something that looked like a bowling ball.

“This is another one of my inventions: the Auto-Maneuverable Camera Ball.”

“So, what’s your *cute* name for it?” Rachel asked.

“I just call it the camera ball,” Doc said.

“So, it takes pictures while it’s rolling around?” Riley asked.

“Right,” Doc said. “But it does a lot more than that. It can travel at speeds of up to sixty miles per hour. It can traverse mountains. Leap over obstacles. And it even has a stealth mode.”

Yeah, right. Riley was beginning to wonder if this was even the real Doc Himmel. Maybe he'd died several years ago, and now Ashton Kutcher was using this place to punk nerds like him and Rachel.

Rachel cocked her head. "That ball can turn completely invisible?"

"Very close," Doc said. "I send it to other planets and let it take pictures and videos, and transmit them back to me through the FuddleCuz."

"So, you've tested it?" Rachel asked. "Where's the video? I've got to see this."

Doc ignored her questions. "There are more than eight billion stars in the Milky Way Galaxy that may be capable of supporting human life. I have selected seven of them to investigate."

"But even if you can transmit to another planet at ridiculously high speeds, what are you transmitting *to*?" Riley asked. "How do you get a receiver and a 3D printer to that planet?"

Doc grinned. "That, son, is the most amazing aspect of this whole thing. But, unfortunately, I don't have time to explain it right now." He pressed a button on his remote.

Rachel screamed.

"Shit!" Riley felt his body being sucked down tight against the padding of the chair. He couldn't pull away from the armrests, and his legs were glued to the leg rest. "What are you doing to us, Doc?"

"Let me out of this thing!" Rachel said.

"Sorry to bring you two here under false pretenses," Doc said. "But I'm dying fast, and before I kick the bucket, I've gotta prove that my system is capable of sending humans to another planet."

"Wait," Riley said. "You just said you wanted to prove you could send *humans* to another planet. But you meant *copies*, right? You're trying to prove you can send *copies* of humans."

"Sure, that's what I meant, of course," Doc said.

"I don't want to do this," Rachel said. "Let me go."

"You kids should be proud," Doc said. "Out of everyone in the city, I chose you two because I was impressed with your intelligence and your ingenuity."

“I’m not really that bright,” Rachel said. “I lucked out when I won second place in the science fair. You need to let me go and find somebody smarter.”

“This could be dangerous,” Riley said. “Your crazy invention could kill us.”

“Crazy invention?” Doc got up in Riley’s face. “You’re calling my life’s work crazy? Do you have any idea how many years I’ve been developing this system? How many sleepless nights?” He began to cough violently and stumbled away from Riley.

“You need to see a doctor about that cough,” Riley said. “Let us take you to the hospital.”

Doc reached into his pocket, pulled out a pack of Marlboros, put one between his lips, and lit it.

“What’s holding us to these chairs?” Rachel asked. “It feels like I’m magnetized.”

“You are,” Doc said. “That’s another one of my inventions.”

“I don’t like,” Rachel said. “It feels weird.”

“It won’t hurt you though,” Doc said.

“Well, you’re obviously a brilliant man,” Riley said. “I have no doubt about that. But if you run this experiment on us and something goes wrong, we could die. And then you’d go to prison.”

“Or, even if your experiment does work, you could die in the middle of it and leave us stuck on some strange planet forever,” Rachel said.

“Well, remember, I’ll only be sending a *copy* of you through space. The original you will still be sitting here in the chair.”

“So, once you send our copies you can let us go home,” Riley said.

“I’m afraid not,” Doc said. “You see, the trickiest part about making copies of the human body is the brain. The copies that my system produces are not *exact* copies—I’ve still got a few bugs to work out—but they’re close. They’re functional. Except for the brain.”

“Then what’s the point? How do you expect our copies to do anything without brains?” Riley asked. “Let us go until you work that out. Then we’ll come back.”

“Right, sure you will.” Doc coughed. “No, I’ll be dead by then. Besides, I have a workaround for the brain problem. You saw it demonstrated in the video. What I do is

borrow part of the brain from the original to use in the copy.”

“*Borrow* it?” Riley asked. “You’re gonna take out part of our brains?”

“You’re a monster!” Rachel said.

“The process removes a portion of your brain and puts it in the copy. And then, after the experiment is complete, your brain will be restored one-hundred percent,” Doc said.

“And if *you* die,” Rachel said, “before you restore our brains—”

“That won’t happen,” Doc said, “because I’ve taken the precaution of installing a countdown timer to automatically retrieve your brains and restore them in case I die before I can bring them back manually.”

“Please don’t do this to us,” Rachel said.

“What if something goes wrong and our brains get lost somewhere out there in space?” Riley asked. “Then we’re screwed. We’ll be left with half a brain—or maybe we’ll be stuck in a coma. What will you do then—bury us in your backyard cemetery?”

“Your brains *are* my number one concern,” Doc said, “because without them, the copies will be useless.”

“Really?” Rachel asked. “*That’s* your number one concern? Not the fact that you’re probably gonna kill us?”

“It will all work out,” Doc said. “Now, you can either shut up and let me explain a few things, or go in blind. What will it be?”

“I want to go home.” Rachel began to tear up.

“Okay, then, blind it is.” Doc walked toward his computer.

“No, wait!” Riley said. “Please explain it to us. We want to hear everything, right, Rachel?”

Rachel nodded.

“Good,” Doc said. “The planet I’m sending you to has a climate that’s almost identical to Earth’s. It’s populated with intelligent mammals, with a civilization somewhat similar to ours. Your mission is to blend in and learn as much as you can. According to the data that was sent back by the camera ball, their technology appears to be somewhat more advanced than our own. I’m sure you two will enjoy that aspect of it.”

“But we won’t be there,” Riley said. “It’ll just be our copies, right?”

“Yes, but your copies will be using your brains, so I expect that it will feel like you’re actually there,” Doc said.

“But how will our copies communicate with the people, or whatever they are?” Rachel asked.

“Not a problem,” Doc said. “I’ll get to that momentarily.”

“What do they look like?” Riley said.

“Surprisingly similar to humans,” Doc said. “And the copies of your bodies will be altered to look just like theirs. I want you to learn everything you can about the them and their technology, their politics—assuming they have such a thing, and—”

“Whatever we can pick up in a couple of hours?” Rachel asked.

“It’ll take a little longer than that,” Doc said.

“How much longer?” Riley asked.

“I’ll be watching the data as it comes in,” Doc said. “Everything you see, say, and do will be recorded and transmitted back to me.”

“How?” Riley asked.

“Our copies will automatically send the data back?” Rachel asked.

“Because you’re adding that functionality to our copies?” Riley asked.

“No,” Doc said. “It’s easier to add it to the originals.” He walked over to a metal cabinet, opened the door, and took out two large syringes.

“What the hell are those?” Riley asked.

“What are you gonna to do to us?” Rachel said. “I know you’re not worried about going to prison, but don’t you have a conscience? Please, stop and think about what you’re doing.”

Doc set one of the syringes down on the table and walked to Riley’s chair. “This is going to sting a little.” He pressed down on Riley’s forehead to hold his head in place.

Riley said, “Stop!”

Doc injected the syringe into the side of Riley's neck, just below the skull.

Riley said, "Dammit!"

Doc said, "The chip is designed to do two things: send data to the FuddleCuz, which will, in turn, relay it back to me; and translate other languages into English for you. It will also translate what you want to say into the foreign language and your mouth will automatically speak in that language."

He put Riley's syringe on the table and picked up the other one.

"You don't need to send *two* people," Rachel said. "Just send Riley. He's smarter than me anyway."

"Don't be so modest, my dear."

She began to sob. "Please..."

Doc held her head and injected the chip into her neck.

"You bastard!" She said.

"Okay, good," Doc said. "Now, you're all ready to go." He put the syringe down, walked over to his computer, and sat down.

"Wait," Riley said, "I need to go to the bathroom."

"That won't be a problem," Doc said, typing at his keyboard.

"Yes, it will, damn it," Riley said. "I'm about to piss my pants."

Doc continued to type. "That's okay. The seat is waterproof." He laughed. "Okay, here we go."

Riley held his breath, waiting for the inevitable vibration or jolt or disintegration of his body. "Nothing's happening."

"Thank God," Rachel said.

"You're wrong," Doc said. "It's happening right now. You're both being scanned. Soon your copies will be on their way to the planet Sorella Uno."

"Where's that?" Rachel said.

“Never heard of it,” Riley said.

“I named it myself,” Doc said. “It means Sister One.”

“This is ridiculous,” Riley said. Obviously Doc’s system was a dud, so he would release them and let them go home. But what the hell had he injected into their necks? They would need to get to a doctor as soon as possible and have it removed. But the very first thing Riley would do was call 9-1-1 and report this lunatic so they could haul him off to the funny farm.

Doc entered a few more keystrokes. “Now I’m initiating the brain procurement process...”

The back of Riley’s head slammed into the head rest—apparently now magnetized to the chair like the rest of his body. “Stop! I want out of this thing!”

“Just relax,” Doc said.

“It feels like you’re sucking my brains out!” Rachel said.

“And remember,” Doc said, “your copies will look a little different—so that you can blend in. It could be rather disconcerting at first, but you’ll get used to your new bodies quickly enough.”

“It’s not working, Doc,” Riley said. “You must still have a few glitches in your system.” Riley’s head began to buzz.

Rachel said, “I feel sick.”

“Me too,” Riley felt vomit coming up the back of his throat.

Everything went black.

Doc Himmel studied Riley, who was sitting motionless in the dental chair. He looked wide-awake, but nobody was home. Doc lowered the boy’s eyelids and checked his pulse. It was strong and stable. Riley had been left with just enough brain power to keep his body functioning in a coma-like state.

He went to Rachel’s chair and checked her. She was doing fine as well.

The doctor walked over to his computer workstation and sat down. It would be another twenty minutes or so before Riley and Rachel’s copies were created on the distant planet,

Sorella Uno. Then it would take ten more minutes for him to receive confirmation. Doc felt certain that everything would go smoothly this time. He was convinced that he'd finally removed all the bugs from his system.

He had implied to Riley and Rachel that they would be participating in the first human trial. But that was not true. This was actually the ninth attempt. During his most recent trial, a minor coding error had caused a freakish reproduction: feet attached at the wrong end of the legs. How could he have made such a careless mistake? Another coding error had resulted in the boy's brain getting fried on its way back to Earth. But he was a runaway kid, like most of Doc's subjects, so nobody would come looking for him—at least not anytime soon.

How many more bodies was he going to have to bury in the back yard? Doc was beginning to feel like a mortician.

He coughed hard, and heaved up a gob of phlegm and spit it into the trash can beside his desk. The next cough produced blood. Only one thing would stop the coughing. He lit up another cigarette and glanced over at Riley and Rachel.

It was going to work this time. Those two were gonna make it. They had to. He was running out of time.

Riley's eyes opened to an orange and maroon sky with three suns. He was flat on his back and had no idea where he was. The last thing he remembered was being in Doc Himmel's lab, magnetized to an old dental chair. He sat up and saw Rachel a few yards away, lying in the grass.

Two arms suddenly wrapped around his waist from behind. "Hey!" Riley looked back, but didn't see anyone. He tried to pull the arms loose, but they were latched on tight, so he got up and ran around like a maniac and then flopped down and rolled wildly in the grass, and came to an abrupt stop, face down, on top of a mound. He opened his dizzy eyes and realized that was lying on top of Rachel. His head was nestled between her breasts.

Rachel's eyes popped open. "Get off of me!" She pushed him to the side.

"Take it easy," Riley said. "I wasn't trying to make a move on you." He stood up.

"Look out!" she said. "Somebody's behind you!"

Riley spun around, but didn't see anyone.

“Oh, my God,” Rachel said.

“What? What?” Riley rotated frantically.

“Nobody’s there.”

Riley stopped spinning.

“It’s you,” she said. “You’ve got four arms.”

Riley looked down. “What the hell?” The arms that were still wrapped tight around his waist were his own. His body had two extra arms, attached at the hips.

“No, no, no. This is icky weird.” Rachel stood up. “I’ve got them too.” She held out her four arms and started crying. “What happened to us?”

“Doc did this,” Riley said. “I’m gonna kill that bastard.” With his upper hands, he released the lower arms from his waist and began flailing them, as though he could fling off the unwanted appendages.

“It’s no use. We’re stuck with these things.” Rachel began to regain her composure. “Doc’s experiment must have worked.” She looked around and then gazed at the sky. “Because I don’t think this is Earth.”

“You really believe he made copies of us and zapped us onto some distant planet? No, it’s got to be a trick. He probably put us into some kind of dream state. Although, I’ve never had a dream that seemed so real.”

“And I’ve never had a dream with *you* in it,” she said.

Riley didn’t respond.

“I feel lighter,” she said. “Maybe this planet has less gravitational pull than Earth.” She jumped up six feet off the ground before coming back down and landing gently. “Whoa.”

“We’ve *got* to be dreaming. But hey, I guess we might as well enjoy the dream.” Riley jumped even higher than Rachel had. “This is nuts.” When his feet touched down, he said, “And you know what else? I feel taller.”

“I think we *are* taller.”

“And it’s a good thing, because otherwise our lower hands would be dragging the ground.” He walked around in a circle with his arms dangling at his sides. “This looks ridiculous. I

feel like a gorilla.”

“A gorilla with four arms,” she said.

“Doc really screwed us up.”

“Well, it could be worse. At least we don’t have two heads.”

Rachel examined the white jumpsuit and shoes she was wearing.

Riley’s outfit was similar, but in black. He bent down to check out his shoes. “These shoes feel like gummy bears. They’re comfortable.”

“I wish Doc had given us better clothes,” she said.

“I guess it’s hard to shop for people with four arms though.”

Rachel giggled. “I suppose we should just be thankful we have *something* to wear,” she said. “I didn’t really think his experiment was gonna work, but if it did—I was afraid we’d be naked.”

“Hmm.” Riley grinned as he gave her the once-over.

“Quit looking at me like that.”

“I was just thinking that these extra arms could come in handy.” He walked toward her with his four arms extended. “How about a hug?”

She held up her four fists and sneered at him.

Riley put his arms down. “So, even in my dreams I get rejected.”

“What’s the matter with you? Why are you acting so weird?”

“I guess it’s because I can’t believe this is real. Maybe it’s the difference in the gravitational pull. I may be kinda light-headed. Or Doc might have scrambled our brains a little. He said he was only sending part of our brains.”

“Well, mine’s working just fine,” she said.

Riley looked up at the sky. “Is it just me or is it getting darker?”

“It’s definitely getting darker.” She pointed to the suns. “All three of those suns are going down fast. We’d better look for shelter. Who knows what kind of creatures may come out

at night.”

“Yeah, and we don’t know what will happen to the temperature. Right now it feels like seventy degrees. But nightfall could put us below freezing, for all we know.”

Riley heard a humming noise and ducked.

Something silver and very large flew over their heads at a low altitude.

“Was that a plane?” he asked.

“It was moving so fast that I didn’t get a good look at it.”

“Flying that low—it was probably about to land. I think we should go the direction the plane went. There’s probably a city over there.”

“That makes sense,” she said.

They started walking.

Riley said, “Hey, I wonder if we could get there faster if we got down on all six and ran?”

“All *six*? Funny.”

“Okay, even if this isn’t a dream, are we really copies?” he asked. “I mean, how could that be? I feel like myself—except for these extra arms.”

“And being lighter and taller.”

“Yeah. Hey, I wonder how far we could jump with a running start?” He took off.

“Wait for me.” She ran after him.

“Wow,” he said, “I must be doing twenty miles per hour. I’ve never run this fast.”

Rachel ran up alongside him. “This is amazing.”

“Now, for a jump.” Riley leaped into the air and landed fifty feet away and continued to run. Then he slowed to a stop and turned around to watch Rachel.

“I’m coming!” She jumped nearly as far as Riley had and then ran up to him and stopped.

“Imagine what we could do if Doc had given us *wings*.”

“I do not want wings.” Riley looked up at the sky. “Can you hear me, Doc? Do *not* give us

wings. And I don't want these freakish extra arms either."

"He can't hear you."

"I know he can't hear me *now*," he said, "because there's a delay. But in ten minutes he'll get the message—assuming everything works the way he claimed it would."

"So, he's gonna hear and see everything we do?"

"Supposedly. He might even be able to tell what we're thinking."

"No, don't say that," she said. "That would make me crazy. If it's true, then I don't want to know it. And I can *pretend* I don't know it if you quit talking about it."

"Yeah, that is creepy."

They started walking.

"Wonder how long Doc is gonna leave us here?" she asked.

"Until we've spent enough time mixing in with whatever weird humanoids are living on this rock—at least, that's what he said."

"But what if something goes wrong?" she asked. "What if...we *die* here? Does that mean Doc can't bring us back? If our copies die, do we die too?"

"He didn't say."

"And how do we know he wasn't lying about bringing us back?" she asked. "He tricked us into coming to his house. Maybe once he's got all the data he wants, he'll just pull the plug and leave us here forever."

"But we're just the copies, remember?"

"Yeah, but we're using part of our *real brain* according to Doc."

"We must be using *most* of our brains," Riley said. "How else could we be functioning normally like this?"

"So, if we die here, our real bodies will never their full brains back," she said.

"I don't even want to think about that."

"It's getting dark. But I can see lights over there."

“Yeah,” he said. “So, at least we’re headed in the right direction. But we need hurry up and get there while we still have enough light to see where we’re going. So, let’s make like kangaroos and get hopping.”

Riley and Rachel had been running and jumping and hopping toward the light for two minutes when Rachel began to slow down, and said, “Stop. I need a break.”

Riley tried to halt abruptly, which sent him into multiple cartwheels before he landed face down in the grass.

Rachel ran to check on him. “You okay?”

Without moving, Riley said, “I’m fine. Just resting.”

“Wish we had flashlights. It’s about to be black out here.”

“Yeah, and the temperature’s dropping fast.”

Rachel didn’t respond.

“Don’t you think?” Riley rolled over and saw Rachel standing over him. “Rachel?”

She stood frozen in place.

He got up. “What are you doing?” He stepped in close to her. “Hello? This is not funny, Rachel.” He waved a hand in front of her face, but she didn’t move or even blink.

No human could stand so perfectly still. But, of course, she wasn’t human. Neither was he. They were *copies* of humans. Was this a hiccup in Doc’s technology—something that would clear up within a few seconds? Or...maybe this was how people died on this planet—going along, living their lives like everything was fine and then, without warning, turning into statues.

No, she couldn’t be dead. No, no, no. Maybe she just needed a reboot—something to jolt her system. He stepped in close, put all four of his arms around her, pressed his body against hers, and kissed her on the lips. *This should do it.* Riley kept his eyes open so he could see her reaction. Her lips were warm and her body felt wonderful. She was definitely not dead. He would keep holding her and kissing her until she—

His body froze—as though he’d instantly caught whatever had infected Rachel. But he wasn’t unconscious and he wasn’t cold. Even though he couldn’t move, he could still feel Rachel’s lips. Sense the warm titillation of her body. They were both hot from all the running and jumping. He could smell her sweaty face against his nose. Riley had never

imagined that a whiff of perspiration could be tantalizing. He wanted to lick it off her face.
God! I'm such a pig!

He could see her eyes. Her beautiful green eyes. He wondered if it was the same for her. Was she seeing him, feeling him?

Riley had been so busy competing with Rachel that he hadn't allowed himself to see how pretty she was. Suddenly, he was very attracted to her—four arms and all. Although, he doubted that she felt the same toward him. He wondered what she was thinking at this very moment. Probably that she was going to pummel him with her four fists if they ever got out of this frozen state.

On the other hand, how could he possibly know? Maybe she was enjoying him holding her tight and kissing her. She had no way of giving him the slightest hint.

What if this was how their lives would end—stuck together like this for eternity? It certainly wasn't the worst way to go. But still, he wasn't ready to die, and neither was Rachel.

Riley heard a boy's voice behind him, in the distance. "Well, they're obviously not brother and sister."

"I told you," a girl said.

The area around them gradually became flooded with light as the voices grew stronger.

"Okay, you two," the boy said, "I'm gonna unlock you now. But if you don't play nice, I'm gonna relock you, okay?"

Thank God, Riley thought, he and Rachel were not permanent sculptures.

"We know you're Fundamentalists because you're not tagged," the girl said. "You're not supposed to cross the Main Stream."

Riley had no idea what Fundamentalists were, and he didn't know anything about a Main Stream. But at least the aliens were talking in English. No, wait—he and Rachel were the aliens. Great job on the translation chip, Doc, Riley thought. He just hoped the outgoing translation functionality worked as well as the incoming, because if these kids started hearing gibberish coming out of his mouth, they would surely lock up Rachel and him permanently.

"I wonder how they made it across," the boy asked.

"Well, if you'll unlock them, maybe we'll find out."

Riley and Rachel unfroze.

“So, how did you get here?” the boy asked.

Riley turned around. The two beings looked very much like humans—except for their four arms. The boy was holding an odd-looking gun. They each had a light beaming from their waists, like a flashlight belt buckle.

“Hi, I’m Crinblee, and this is my brother, Torgwal. Please excuse his rudeness.”

Odd names, Riley thought. But it made sense: their names had no English equivalents. It was probably how the names actually sounded in their own language.

“I wasn’t being rude,” Torgwal said, “I just want to know—”

Crinblee held up one of her four hands to her brother, which apparently carried the same meaning as it did for humans. Then she looked at Riley and Rachel. “And what are *your* names?”

“I’m Riley and this is Rachel. And yes, you’re correct—we are not brother and sister.”

“So, how *did* you get across the Main Stream?” Crinblee asked.

Riley had no idea what to say. “Uh, it wasn’t too hard.”

Torgwal looked at him in disbelief. “It’s five kilometers wide and 20 meters deep. And the water moves at a rate of 60 knots.”

“Well, we’re very good jumpers,” Riley said, unsure of whether Torgwal was serious.

“Somebody flew you over here and dumped you, didn’t they?” Crinblee asked. “I’m sorry. I hope it wasn’t your parents.”

“To tell you the truth,” Riley said, “it’s all kinda fuzzy. We’re not quite sure how we got here.”

“What happens to people who get dumped here?” Rachel asked.

“The Federals fly them back,” Torgwal said.

“Well, that’s not so bad,” Rachel said.

“Then they track down whoever dumped them here and put them in a permanent lock,” Torgwal said. “Which, for all practical purposes, means they’re life is over—since only the

Federals have the unlocking code.”

“Whoa,” Riley said.

“You didn’t know that?” Torgwal asked.

“No,” Rachel said.

“It’s terrible,” Crinblee said, “but they have to do it or Fundamentalists would be dumping kids all the time. Our population is tightly controlled here in Tolerance. The Fundamentalists rejected our way of life, so they were forced to live outside the Main Stream.”

Riley thought that Tolerance seemed like a very odd name for this place. He suspected the word may have gotten mangled in translation.

“We don’t really understand why the laws are the way they are,” Torgwal said. “It’s not something they teach in school.”

“How old are you two?” Rachel asked.

“I’m ten and my brother’s eleven,” Crinblee said.

Riley was shocked. Crinblee and Torgwal were about the same height as Riley and Rachel. “Well, I’m fourteen and—”

Rachel jumped in. “Yeah, right—fourteen.” She laughed and shook her head. “Riley’s always pretending to be older. We’re both eleven.”

Riley was about to protest, when he realized what Rachel was doing. It was smart to pretend to be Crinblee and Torgwal’s age. If he and Rachel were fourteen, wouldn’t they be a lot more knowledgeable about things like the Main Stream? And wouldn’t they be taller than these kids? Doc probably did this on purpose—made their copies the size of fifth graders so they wouldn’t be expected to know all the things an adult would know. He wondered how tall the adults were on this planet.

“That’s what I figured,” Torgwal said.

“You guys want to hang out with us for a while—until they send you back?” Crinblee asked.

“We can’t take them home,” Torgwal said. “Mom will ground us for a year.”

“Not if she doesn’t find out.”

“Are you serious? She’s *gonna* find out as soon as they walk into the house and the alarm goes off.”

“Mom’s at work,” Crinblee said.

“But she’ll get an alert—and so will the Federals. And they can get pretty rough with Fundamentalists who break into homes. That’s a serious crime.”

“They wouldn’t be breaking in,” Crinblee said. “We’d be *letting* them in.”

“You really think the Federals care about that? They’re not gonna listen to anything we say. And remember a while back—that Fundamentalist kid who broke into that store?”

“We don’t know if that story’s true,” Crinblee said.

“What happened?” Riley asked.

“They say the Federals beat him up so bad that he died,” Torgwal said. “They took his body back across and just left it in some field.”

“But the alarm won’t go off if we can use your Tagalator.”

“I don’t know, Crinblee...”

“Hey, it worked for us,” Crinblee said. “Why wouldn’t it work for them?”

“Wait. Is this some type of experimental equipment?” Rachel asked. “Cause I don’t like the sound of that.”

“It won’t hurt you,” Crinblee said.

Riley and Rachel stared at each other.

Crinblee said, “Look, here are the options: (A), we leave you out here to be eaten by Baljeevers; (B), we call the Federals right now and let them pick you up and take you back home; or (C), we try Torgwal’s Tagalator on you, and if it works we can hide you at our house for a while. What’ll it be?”

Riley didn’t know what the hell a Baljeever was, but the fact that it was capable of eating them was all he needed to know. “Okay, we’ll take Option C,” Riley said. “Right, Rachel?”

“Yeah, sure,” Rachel said.

“Great.” Crinblee smiled. “Let’s go.”

Riley and Rachel followed closely behind them, mimicking their peculiar skipping movements. Riley found this technique to be much less tiring than the running and hopping that he and Rachel had been doing. How could they have known that there was a better way? They were newbies on this planet.

Doc Himmel was gonna laugh his butt off when he saw this. Maybe he'd laugh himself into a terminal coughing fit. It would serve him right for using them as lab rats. Although if the old coot died, it might leave them stuck here forever.

Even with the light from Torgwal and Crinblee's flashlights, it was hard to see where they were going. Riley figured they were skipping at upwards of thirty miles per hour. Slamming into a tree would be a disaster.

They were approaching a row of houses from the rear. The homes were narrow and tall. When they were two hundred yards away—Torgwal pointed and yelled out, "That's our house." He leaped ten feet into the air and latched onto the trunk of a large tree. Then he began to shinny up it with his four arms and two legs. Crinblee followed her brother up the tree in similar fashion. The two siblings climbed in through a hatch in the floor of a treehouse that was some twenty-five feet off the ground.

A light came on inside the treehouse and Crinblee looked down through the hatch. "You'd better come up quick. If you stand there for too long you're going to start attracting Baljeevers."

Riley heard a low rumble, and the ground trembled. "What the hell was that?" He looked around, but it was too dark to see anything.

"That was a Baljeever," Crinblee said. "Get up here—now!"

Rachel scampered up the tree so fast that Riley couldn't even see her arms and legs moving. He heard the rumble again—louder this time. He didn't have time to think about the logistics of using his four arms and two legs to climb up the tree. It just happened. One moment he was standing on the ground about to be attacked by some vicious animal, and the next he was in the treehouse, sitting on the floor next to Rachel, catching his breath.

Crinblee was standing next to them and Torgwal was sitting at a small table typing on something that looked similar to an iPad.

"What are Baljeevers?" Riley asked.

"They're big black furry animals with eight legs and razor-sharp claws," Crinblee said. "We don't have to worry about them during the daytime because they're nocturnal. But when it

gets dark, they come out of their caves and start preying on anything that breathes. I'm surprised you don't have them where you live."

"Well, if they're such a menace, then why don't your people just hunt them all down and kill them?" Riley asked.

"Because they're endangered," Crinblee said. "Their population is declining for no apparent reason. The scientists haven't figured it out yet."

"So what?" Rachel asked. "Sounds like they're a menace. I mean, is a dangerous predator like that even worth saving?"

"Their bodies emit a rare gas that helps purify our air," Crinblee said. "Researchers have tried to create a synthetic version of the gas, but so far they've failed. And when they try to mate the animals in captivity, but the cubs always die."

"You said they only come out at night," Riley said. "So, are they afraid of the light? Would we have been safe if we'd had flashlights?"

"No," Crinblee said. "They hate the light, but they'll still attack you if they're hungry enough. They'll shred you into a thousand pieces and then suck up the pieces with their snout. Their food gets digested in their sinuses. And, by the way, they can also kill you by sneezing on you. Their sinus fluid contains a powerful acid. So when we go into the fields, we always carry a couple of fully-charged lock guns in case we don't get home before dark."

"That's what you used on us, right?" Rachel asked. "The thing that froze us in place?"

"Yes," Crinblee said. "We always take the lock guns with us, but we didn't plan to stay out until dark. Then we spotted a couple of Fundamentalists."

"And you zapped us," Rachel said. "I thought I was dead—or in some kind of limbo between life and death. It was the weirdest thing ever. Could you have left us that way permanently?"

"No," Crinblee said. "Not with the lock guns we have. Only the Federals can do a permanent lock. They have military-grade lock guns. Our locks wear off after about an hour—on humans, that is. With Baljееvers they only last a few minutes. It's because those things are so massive. But a few minutes is enough time to get away—unless..."

"Unless what?" Riley asked.

"Sometimes they travel in packs," Crinblee said, "and if you were to come across five or six

of them, you might not have enough battery power to lock them all.”

“Shit,” Rachel said.

Crinblee chuckled. “Yeah, because you definitely can’t outrun them. You’d think they would be slow on their feet, but those huge things are the fastest animals living here. They’ve been clocked at 100 kilometers per hour.”

Yikes, Riley thought. That was close to the top speed of a Cheetah. Of course, the Baljeevers had the advantage of the lower gravitational pull of this planet. If they were on earth, a Cheetah would probably leave them in the dust.

“We don’t have to worry about the Baljeevers unless we’re in the fields though, because of the electronic shock fencing that surrounds the city,” Crinblee said. “But this treehouse is just beyond the city line—outside the shock fence.”

“Why would you want to build a treehouse in a place where you’re not protected against the those beasts?” Riley asked. “I’ll bet you don’t come out here at night much.”

“Actually, we do,” Crinblee said. “Baljeevers are lousy tree climbers, so we just don’t go down to the ground. We use this to go back and forth to the house.” She led Riley and Rachel to a window, and used her flashlight to light up the area between the treehouse and their home. There was a motorized zip line with a large metal cart suspended from it. Crinblee pointed to a window on the fourth floor of the house. The other end of the zip line was attached to a bracket just below the window. “That’s Torgwal’s bedroom.”

Torgwal said, “Okay, it’s ready.” He got up from the table. There was something in his hand that looked like a fancy metal ink pen.

“What’s that?” Riley asked.

“This is a custom Tagalator.” Torgwal grinned. “Built it myself.”

“And it’s highly illegal,” Crinblee said.

“It’s works just like the ones the Federals tag you with when you’re born,” Torgwal said.

“What does it do?” Rachel asked.

Torgwal stepped toward her. “When I hold the tip against your skin and press the tag button, a microscopic chip will be inserted just below the surface of the skin. You won’t feel a thing. And it’ll work just like an official tagging chip. I’ve entered your name as Tunpricwa Quanshtick.”

Riley almost laughed.

“Why? That’s not my name,” Rachel said.

“That’s the point,” Torgwal said. “We don’t want the Federals to know your *real* name. Tunpricwa Quanshtick is a common name here in Tolerance. The most common name for males is Gynblat Quanshtick.”

It was like naming yourself John Smith, Riley thought.

“How common is Rachel?” Rachel asked.

“You’re the first Rachel I’ve ever met,” Torgwal said.

“I wish I had an unusual name,” Crinblee said. “Crinblee is almost as common as Tunpricwa. And Torgwal is common too. Our parents weren’t very creative. They named us after ‘two of the founders of our great nation of Tolerance.’ At least, that’s how Mom tells it.”

“So, after you tag us, we’ll be able to go into your house?” Rachel asked.

“Right,” Torgwal said. “Okay, sit down over here.”

“Why do I need to sit?” Rachel asked. “Is this gonna make me faint?”

“It’s just a precaution,” Torgwal said.

Rachel studied Torgwal’s face for a moment. Riley could see her mind working. Was it safe to have a foreign object injected into her body by this alien she had just met—even though it wasn’t really her body, but merely a copy? Riley was sure she was about to ask him to go first.

“Okay.” Rachel sat down.

“But wait,” Riley said. “We won’t be in the system. Won’t that tip off the Federals?”

“You’d think so, huh?” Crinblee asked.

“It *would* be a major tip-off—if the Federal’s system worked the way it’s supposed to,” Torgwal said. “But the truth is that they’re constantly having issues with lost data and programming errors and security breaches. I used our neighbor’s house down the street as your address. Their last name is Quanshtick, so if the Federals do notice two extra family members for that house, they’ll probably just think your names got accidentally dropped and then re-added to the database.”

“Okay,” Riley said. “But they won’t think it’s funny that we’re staying at your house overnight?”

“Not at all,” Torgwal said, “since you guys are our age and you’re brother and sister. We’re just having a sleepover.”

“Brother and sister?” Riley asked.

Torgwal said, “I’ve set you up with the same address and the same parents, so you need to be siblings.”

Crinblee grinned at Rachel. “So no more of you two kissing in public while you’re here.”

“Not a problem.” Rachel smirked at Riley.

“Ready?” Torgwal asked Rachel.

“I guess so,” Rachel said.

“I’ll locate it in the same spot the Federals use—your lower left arm,” Torgwal said.

Rachel held out her arm.

Torgwal placed the tip of the Tagalator against her skin and pressed the tag button, which made a faint clicking sound.

“Did it work?” Rachel asked. “I didn’t feel anything.”

“I’ll check.” Torgwal picked up his tablet computer and entered a few keystrokes. “Yes, your tag is transmitting perfectly.”

Riley leaned in for a close look at Rachel’s arm. “Amazing. It doesn’t even leave a mark.”

“Okay, now your turn.” Torgwal stepped up to Riley. “By the way, you can’t tell anyone that I did this, because as my sister said, it’s illegal. Of course, most people wouldn’t even know *how* to do it.”

“But you’re not like most people,” Riley said, holding out his arm.

Torgwal smiled. “That’s right. I’m way smarter.” He tagged Riley’s arm. “Any computer within 20 meters will pick up your signal and broadcast tracking data to the Federals.”

Rachel pointed to Torgwal’s computer. “So now the Federals know we’re here in this treehouse?”

Torgwal shook his head. “Well, *almost* any computer.”

“Torgwal’s computer is special,” Crinblee said. “He hacked it—which is also illegal.”

“It only sends out the data that I *tell* it to send,” Torgwal said. “And we’re outside the range of the house computers.”

“Earlier you said you used the Tagalator on yourselves,” Riley said. “Why did you do that? I thought everybody here got tagged as a baby.”

“I gave us a *second* tag—one that I could manipulate—and then I disabled the original one,” Torgwal said.

Crinblee laughed. “He had been talking about how much the Federals trust their tagging system, yet how easy it would for him to outsmart it. I said, ‘Then prove it.’ I dared him to give us custom tags and program them to give us older ages. I told him that if we dressed up to look the part, I thought we could walk right into a dance club.”

“I told her she was crazy,” Torgwal said. “Programming the custom tag chips was easy, but I figured if we showed up at a club and they saw how short we were they’d never believe we were of legal age. But I was wrong. The guy at the door barely even looked at us. I guess he figured that since our tags said we were old enough, who was he to argue?”

“Those guys working the doors aren’t very bright,” Crinblee said.

“Hey, I’d love to go check out a club,” Riley said. “How about you, Rachel?”

She didn’t answer.

Everyone looked at her.

A very long, pencil-thin snake had wrapped itself around her chest and it was staring her down, its head only six inches from her nose, as though it was trying to hypnotize her.

“Don’t move a muscle.” Crinblee inched toward Rachel. Just when she was about to grab the snake’s head from behind, it lunged at Rachel’s neck and began wrapping itself around her throat.

“Shit,” Torgwal said. “Grab the head!”

“I’m trying to,” Crinblee said.

The snake quickly spun the entire length of its body around Rachel’s neck, creating a two-

inch thick collar.

“Where *is* the head?” Riley asked.

Torgwal grabbed a pair of wire cutters out of a small toolbox on the floor. “It’s hiding inside the coil.”

Rachel gasped. “I can’t breathe. Do something!”

Crinblee pulled at the layers on the left side of Rachel’s neck. Torgwal snipped away layers on the right side.

Rachel’s face began to turn red.

“Hurry!” Riley said. “Cut it off!”

“I *am*,” Torgwal said, “but I have to be careful not to cut her neck.”

Riley saw the look of terror in her eyes. How long could she last without oxygen? He stepped in close to her and tried to speak calmly. “You’re gonna be okay, Rachel. Just hang on.”

She passed out.

“I still don’t see the head,” Crinblee said.

“Here it is.” Torgwal grabbed hold of the snake’s head and pulled it out far enough to snip it off with the wire cutters. “Bastard!” He threw the head out the window.

The remaining body of the snake began to loosen its grip. Crinblee and Torgwal pulled it off of Rachel’s neck.

“Rachel?” Riley began slapping her on the cheek. “Rachel, are you okay? Are you okay?”

Her eyes opened. “Quit hitting me.”

“Oh, thank God.” Riley hugged her. “I thought you were a goner.”

“Really? Then why were you telling me I was gonna be okay?” Rachel asked. “What the hell kind of snake was that? I didn’t even feel it until it was already wrapped around my chest and staring me in the eye.”

“That was a Yagglasmooze,” Crinblee said. “Fully grown, they can be up to six meters long. We’re used to them, so we notice it immediately when one starts to slither up our

leg.”

“We just throw it on the ground and stomped its head.” Torgwal said. “You’ve got the upper hand until they wrap themselves around your neck.”

“Which is why we never *sleep* out here,” Crinblee said. “It’s a good way to die young.”

Riley said, “So, these Yagglesmoots—”

“Yagglasmooze,” Crinblee said.

“So, these Yagglasmooze strangle you to death just for the fun of it?” Riley asked.

“No,” Torgwal said. “They do it because they’re hungry. Once they’re sure you’re dead, they go up your nose and start eating your brains.”

“Oh, God!” Rachel said. “What about your house? Do they ever get in there?”

“No,” Torgwal said. “Not a chance. The shock fence keeps them out. They can’t even get into the yard.”

“And with the new software upgrade, the shock fence even keeps out the Flizzernisties,” Crinblee said.

Riley wondered what the heck a Flizzernisty was.

Crinblee seemed to notice the confusion on his face. “Are there no Flizzernisties where you live?”

“No,” Riley said.

“Do you have lizards?” Torgwal asked.

“Yes,” Riley said.

“Okay,” Torgwal said, “a Flizzernisty looks like a tiny lizard with wings. It’ll bite you, but it doesn’t really hurt.”

“It just makes you itch,” Crinblee said.

“Like a mosquito,” Rachel said.

“A what?” Torgwal asked.

He glared at Rachel and then turned to Torgwal. “It’s kinda like your Flizzernisty.”

“The main thing to remember about the Flizzernisties is to stay away from the hives,” Crinblee said. “A few bites won’t hurt you, but if they swarm you—well, then you’re in big trouble.”

Rachel looked around the treehouse. “Can we please go into the house now? I don’t want to get bit by one of those flying lizards, and I sure don’t want to tangle with another Yagglasmooze.”

Torgwal laughed. “I don’t blame you. Yeah, let’s go to the house and see if we can fool the Federals with your custom tags.”

They walked over to the window and looked down at the metal cart that was suspended from the motorized zip line.

“It can only carry one person at a time,” Torgwal said.

“I’ll go first, so I can open the window and turn on the lights.” Crinblee climbed into the cart. She pressed a button inside the cart and it began to travel across the cable toward the house.

“Battery-operated?” Riley asked.

“No,” Torgwal said. “It gets power from the house—through the cable.”

When Crinblee reached the house, she opened the window and climbed into the house, and then sent the cart back toward the treehouse.

“I’ll go next.” Rachel stepped up to the window. When the cart had reached the treehouse, the motor stopped and Torgwal helped Rachel climb into the cart.

Torgwal said, “Okay, now, press the green button.”

Rachel gripped one side of the cart and pressed the button. When the cart reached Torgwal’s window, Crinblee helped her climb into the house and sent the cart back to the treehouse.

“How do you control the cart from here?” Riley asked. “I mean, what if Crinblee forgets to send it back to you?”

Torgwal held up his tablet computer.

“Of course.” Riley said.

“Hop in,” Torgwal said.

Riley got in. When he made it to the house, Crinblee said, “Be careful getting out.”

Riley climbed through the window and began to look around. “So, this is Torgwal’s bedroom?” The walls, the ceiling, the floor—the entire room appeared to be made of sheet metal. “A steel room?”

“Steel?” Crinblee seemed confused.

Oops. It was a word that didn’t translate. Doc’s translation system had obviously been substituting approximate values for much of what was being said, and doing an excellent job of it. But it was not perfect.

“It’s a composite material made from recyclables,” Crinblee said.

“Hmm.” Riley touched the wall. It wasn’t like anything he’d ever felt. “Interesting.”

“But where’s the bed?” Rachel asked. “And the rest of the furniture?”

“Wow,” Crinblee said. “You mean you guys don’t have Synthesication?”

“I don’t even know what that is,” Rachel said.

“It’s the latest thing.” Torgwal climbed in through the window. “Let me show you. You’re gonna love this. Everybody stand here in the center of the room.”

Once they were in place, Torgwal walked to the door. Riley saw him reach for what should have been the light switch. But instead, it was a small display that looked like an LCD screen.

As Torgwal’s hand approached the screen it came to life, displaying several buttons. He touched one of them.

Items began to materialize before their eyes: a king size bed—fully made, a desk covered with gadgets and a matching chair, and a large screen on the wall. Did they have TV here? Riley could only imagine the weird shows they’d have here. The walls became covered with a blue fabric with patterns in it—like wallpaper. The ceiling transformed into a puffy white styrofoam-like material. The floors were carpeted.

“Is all this stuff real?” Riley asked.

“Try it,” Crinblee said. “Sit down on the bed.”

Rachel acted like she wanted to, but hesitated.

Riley sat on it. “Wow. And it’s comfortable.”

Rachel walked over to the desk and sat down in the chair. “What’s all this stuff?”

“Just some projects I’ve been working on,” Torgwal said. “Okay, now stand up, because I’m about to make it all go away.”

Riley and Rachel stood up and stepped away from the furniture.

Torgwal touched a button on the panel by the door, and the room went back to the way it had been before: bare and cold.

Riley reached down where the bed had been and tried to feel it, but nothing was there. “That’s incredible.”

“It’s Synthesication technology,” Torgwal said. “Actually there are two processes. Synthesication compacts objects into their smallest electronic form.”

“I’ve never heard of anything like that,” Riley said.

“He’s kidding, Riley,” Rachel said. “It’s got to be some kind of a trick.”

“Nope. No tricks. That’s how it works,” Torgwal said. “And then once an object has been converted into electronic form, it is stored in the Synthesication Computer’s memory. That’s what just happened—when things disappeared. They didn’t vanish into thin air. They were scanned, compacted, converted, and stored by the Synthesication Processor. The reverse process is called Desynthesication. It converts the items back into their original state.”

“It’s not something we really needed for *our* house,” Crinblee said, “because we’ve got plenty of room. But think about it: a person could live in a small, one-room apartment, yet have all the comforts of home. You don’t need a place for your bed until you’re sleepy. The rest of the day you could have a couch or a desk or a kitchen table and stove in that space.”

“Wow, that’s cool. What about people though?” Riley asked. “Does the Synthesication process work on people?”

“No,” Torgwal said.

“Actually, we don’t know whether it does or not,” Crinblee said. “Parliament passed a law forbidding the use of Synthesication on any living being. So those limits are hard-coded into the system.”

Torgwal said, “We heard that Federal Researchers tested the technology on animals, and —”

“You don’t even want to know what happened,” Crinblee said.

“Eww,” Rachel said. “You’re right—I don’t want to know.”

Doc was going to love hearing about this, Riley thought. Too bad he was so close to dying. He wouldn’t have time to try to replicate the technology.

Something began to beep.

“What’s that?” Rachel asked.

“It’s our mom,” Crinblee said. “Hurry—lie down by the door, up against the wall so she can’t see you.”

Riley and Rachel scurried to the floor near Torgwal’s feet.

Torgwal touched a button on the display panel. “Hi, Mom.”

“Where have you two been? I’ve tried to call you several times. And I lost your tracking signals for two hours. Have you and your sister been out in the fields again?”

“No, Mom, just in the treehouse,” Torgwal said.

“Crinblee, you look like you’ve been sweating,” their mom said. “Are you sure you haven’t been in the fields?”

“It’s hot in the treehouse, Mom.”

“How many times have I told you two that you can’t go to the treehouse without a computer? It worries me when you go off the grid.”

“I’m sorry, Mom,” Torgwal said.

“Me too,” Crinblee said.

“Well, I’m sorry I have to work nights,” their mother said, “but that’s just the way it is right now.”

“That’s okay, Mom,” Crinblee said. “We understand.”

“Good,” she said. “So, are you in for the night?”

“Yes, Mom,” Torgwal.

“Good,” their mother said. “Just one more thing. Who are Tunpricwa and Gynblat Quanshtick, and why are they in your bedroom?”

“Uh...they live down the street, and we were just hanging out,” Crinblee said.

“So where are they?” their mom said. “I want to see them.”

Crinblee motioned for Riley and Rachel to stand up. “Here they are, Mom.”

“Hmm, I don’t remember ever seeing you two before.”

“They don’t get out much,” Torgwal said.

“Okay, fine. I’ve got to get back to work. But they need to go home soon. Bye.”

Torgwal closed the connection.

“You think your mom believed you?” Riley asked.

“I don’t see why not,” Torgwal said. “I’m a good liar when I have to be. And besides, it’s not that hard to believe that me and Crinblee made a couple of new friends.”

“Really?” Crinblee asked. “When is the last time we made any new friends?”

Torgwal shrugged. “Still—I think she bought it.”

Crinblee furrowed her brow. “Or she could be calling the Quanshticks right now to check our story.”

“Nah, she wouldn’t do that,” Torgwal said. “She has complete faith in me.” He grinned.

The panel near the door beeped three times in rapid succession.

Torgwal’s smile evaporated.

“They’re here,” Crinblee said.

“Who?” Rachel asked.

“The Federals,” Crinblee said. “Mom called it in.”

“No,” Torgwal said, “they can’t get here that fast.”

Three more beeps, and then a voice over the panel said, “Federal Officers. Open the door immediately.”

Crinblee turned to Riley and Rachel. “You’ve got to get out of here.”

“Can’t you just hide us somewhere?” Riley asked.

“No,” Torgwal said. They’re tracking your tags. You’ve got to get out of range—back in the fields.”

“No,” Rachel said, “we can’t go back there. The Baljeevers will get us.”

“Well, it’s either that or let the Federals arrest you,” Torgwal said.

“And fly us back across the Main Stream?” Riley asked.

Torgwal looked at his sister, who didn’t offer any input. “We don’t know *for sure* what the Federals do with illegals.”

“But you said they just take them back home,” Rachel said.

“That’s the *official* word,” Crinblee said. “That’s what they say they do. But we have no way of knowing whether it’s true. They may torture them first. Or they might not even take them back at all.”

“What do you mean?” Riley asked.

“There are rumors that they’ve started executing illegals,” Torgwal said. “I think you’re better off going back to the fields. I’ll give you a couple of lock guns and you can have our flashlight belts.”

Torgwal and Crinblee took off their flashlight belts and gave them to Riley and Rachel. Torgwal entered some keystrokes into the panel and the furniture reappeared. Then he went to his desk, grabbed two lock guns out of a drawer, and handed them to Riley and Rachel. “They’re fully charged—but they’re only for the Baljeevers. Don’t use them on a Federal officer whatever you do. And don’t use them until you have to. You don’t want to run out of power. Go back to where we found you: in the open field. Get there as fast as you can and stay there, because the Baljeevers prefer the wooded areas.”

Torgwal handed Riley an electric lantern. “Once you get there, turn on this lantern and keep it on all night. There should be enough juice to last until sunrise. It should keep the Baljeevers at a distance—unless...”

“Unless what?” Riley said.

“Unless there’s a pack,” Torgwal said.

Torgwal picked up a metal spike and a leather holster from his desk. “If you have to use a lock gun on a Baljeever, stab him in the eye with this spear while he’s locked.”

Rachel cringed. “Gross.”

“You must push it deep into the brain to kill him,” Torgwal said. “Then pull out the spear. The Baljeevers will eat him instead of you—if you’re lucky.” Torgwal slid the spike into its holster and handed it to Riley.

“Are you sure that will work?” Riley secured the holster to his waist, just below the flashlight belt. “Have you ever tried it?”

“No.” Torgwal pulled the desk away from the wall. There was a leather scabbard attached to the back of the desk. Torgwal unhooked it and handed it to Riley. “So, take this machete—just in case.”

Riley tied the cords of the scabbard around his waist.

A voice from the panel said, “Federal Officers coming in.”

“They can just break in?” Rachel said.

“They don’t have to break in—they have the master codes,” Crinblee said. “Now, go!”

Riley and Rachel hurried to the window.

“You’ll have to ride over together,” Torgwal said. “There’s no time for two trips.”

Riley helped Rachel climb into the cart. “Are you sure this cable can support both of us?”

“Just go!” Torgwal helped Riley get into the cart and Riley activated the motor.

The cart began to move across the cable.

“I’m scared, Riley,” Rachel said.

“I know.” He put his arm around her. “Me too.”

Riley and Rachel were riding across the zip line in the cart, praying that the cable would continue to support their combined weight. They were nearly to the treehouse when Torgwal’s bedroom window went dark. A single light, located above the back porch of the house provided just enough illumination for them to climb out of the cart into the treehouse.

“It’s too dark in here,” Rachel said. “There could be Yagglasmooze. We need to turn on our flashlights.”

“No. If the Federals look out here, they’ll see the light. I think I can find the hatch.” Riley got down on his knees and felt around on the floor with all four hands until he located the hatch and opened it.

They looked down at the ground—which they could barely see—thirty feet below.

“How are we supposed to get down?” Rachel asked.

“Just pretend a Yagglasmooze is about to crawl up your leg,” Riley said.

Rachel took a quick breath and jumped through the hatch, grabbed onto the tree trunk and used her legs and four arms to scramble downward, head first. She rolled onto the grass and looked up at Riley. “Hurry up!”

Riley didn’t have time to think about what Rachel had just done, or how she had done it, or the fact that it was impossible. He just did it.

The back porch door burst open.

Riley and Rachel scrambled to get out of the light, and hid behind the tree.

A bright beam of light flooded the area where they had just been standing.

A male voice shouted, “You two need to come down from that treehouse right now. We’re not going to hurt you. We’re Federal Officers. We just want to talk to you.”

The light grew brighter as the officers walked toward them.

Riley whispered to Rachel, “We need to go. Now.” He took Rachel’s hand and led her away from the tree quietly, trying to keep the large tree trunk between them and the officers.

“Go up and check the treehouse,” a man said. “They’re probably hiding up there. If not, they’ve run out into the fields, in which case, nature will solve the problem for us.”

Riley and Rachel were about twenty meters away when she whispered, “This is crazy. I can’t see where I’m stepping.”

Riley said, “Let’s turn on our flashlights and make a run for it.”

“You honestly think we can outrun them?”

“No,” he said. “I just don’t think they’ll chase us for very long.”

“So we’ll do the skipping thing that we learned from Crinblee and Torgwal?”

“Right. On three,” Riley said. “One, two, three.”

They both switched on the flashlights that were on the belts Torgwal had given them and began to run, then skip.

“There they are!” an officer yelled.

Riley and Rachel skipped through the woods at a dangerous rate of speed, leaping high into the air, sometimes clearing the tops of the trees, dodging branches, and watching for Baljeevers.

They finally broke out into the open field.

Riley said, “Stop!”

They switched to a run, then to a walk, and finally came to a stop.

“Why are we stopping?” Rachel asked. “We need to keep—”

“Listen,” Riley said.

Dead silence.

“They didn’t follow us—or they would already be here.” Riley unhooked the electric lantern from his belt.

“That officer said that if we were in the fields, nature would solve their problem,” Rachel said. “He was referring to the Baljeevers, wasn’t he? I’m not so sure we made the right choice. Maybe we should have surrendered.”

“So we could be tortured—or executed?” Riley turned on the lantern and set it on the ground.

“Doc wouldn’t let that happen. He’d bring us back home, right? He’d save us before they could do that.”

“There’s a ten-minute delay, remember? By the time he knew they were about to kill us, we might already be dead.”

“Our *copies* would be dead,” she said.

“Our *brains* would be dead.”

“Maybe he was lying about that.”

“About sending a part of our real brains here with our copies?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Because if we knew that anything that happened to us here wouldn’t affect us back on Earth—”

“We wouldn’t care if our copies died, because we’d know that we would wake up in our real bodies back on Earth,” he said. “I think that’s it, dammit.” Riley pulled the machete out of its scabbard. “And I’m calling his bluff.” He held the machete out for Rachel to take. “Send me home, Rachel. Your choice: a blade through my heart or decapitation. I don’t care. Send me home now.”

Rachel stepped back. “Are you crazy? Put that thing away. Maybe Doc was lying—but I’m not gonna die trying to prove it. And I’m sure as hell not gonna kill you so I can be stuck on the shitty planet all by myself.”

“Fine.” Riley slid the machete back into its scabbard. “It is pretty far-fetched though—to think that he somehow transported part of our brains along with our copies.”

“*Everything* he said and did was far-fetched,” she said. “We can’t take the chance that he was lying about our brains.”

“Maybe we’re not even here at all.”

“The dreaming theory?”

“That would explain everything,” he said.

“Yeah, well I don’t ever remember feeling pain in a dream before. And right now my feet

are killing me.”

They heard a deep rumble in the distance.

“Baljeevers.” Rachel stepped behind Riley. “I thought the lantern would keep them away.”

“Torgwal said it *probably* would—unless there was a pack of them.”

Another rumble. Then a third rumble from a different direction.

They snatched their lock guns out of their holsters.

Riley said, “I’ll shoot the first one and you take the second one, okay? And one shot should do it. We don’t want to waste our batteries.”

A huge, black, freakish-looking monster ran out from the darkness.

“Oh, my God,” she said. “It’s huge!”

“Stay strong and concentrate. We’ve got this.”

The Baljeever barreled toward them on all eight legs, and then stood on his hind legs and arched his trunk into the air.

Riley fired.

The animal froze in place—just ten feet away from them. In an instant the Baljeever’s speed had gone to zero.

Silence.

“Wow,” Riley said. “That was easy.”

“Riley, look out!”

He turned left and saw another Baljeever charging at them. It was moving so fast that Riley didn’t even have time to aim his lock gun. The trunk was two feet from Riley’s face when the creature froze.

“Got him,” Rachel said.

Riley felt warm urine streaming down his leg. “Thanks.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” he said. “But now I’ve got to drive a spike into their brains and kill them before they unfreeze.”

Another rumble, from behind them.

They both spun around and fired toward the noise.

Silence.

They looked at each other, and must have had the same thought: stand back to back. They did.

The animal raced toward them, skimming across the ground like a gigantic caterpillar. Riley fired.

The animal froze.

Rachel turned around. “I hope that’s the last one.”

Riley held up his hand. “Listen.”

Silence.

“I don’t hear anything,” she said.

“Okay, cover me while I kill them.” He holstered his lock gun and unsheathed the long spike Torgwal had given him. He leaned down to the animal’s head. “He can still see us and smell us, can’t he? Just like when we were frozen.”

“Don’t you think you should start with the first one you shot? We don’t know how long the lock will hold.”

Riley straightened up. “Good idea.” He went to the first Baljeever. “Here goes.” He stabbed the spike into the animal’s eye and thrust it deep into his skull. Riley pulled it out, and blood and brains oozed out the creature’s eye socket and he began to move.

Riley jumped back. The animal lurched forward with its trunk swinging. Riley tripped and fell down. The beast toppled over and nearly landed on top of him. Riley scrambled to his feet.

The Baljeever lay motionless on the ground.

“Dammit! That was close,” he said. “Why didn’t you shoot him again?”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It happened so fast.”

Riley picked up the spike and went to the second Baljeever, who was still frozen in place. “This time, be ready, and if he starts to move, freeze him, okay?”

“Okay.”

“And keep an eye on that one too.” Riley pointed to the third one, who was still locked, lying on the ground. He reached up and rammed the spike into the Baljeever’s eye. “Go to Hell, you stinking son of a bitch.”

Riley glanced back at Rachel. “Ready?”

She pointed the lock gun at the animal. “Ready.”

Riley yanked the spike out of the creature’s eye and jumped out of the way.

The animal did not move.

“Okay. One more.” Riley was beginning to feel cocky. He went to the third Baljeever, leaned over the animal’s head and tomahawked the spike through his brain to the back of his skull, causing a thud. “These things aren’t so tough after all.” He jerked out the spike and started to walk away. Something caught his ankle. He looked down. It was one of the animal’s paws.

Riley was reaching for his lock gun when Rachel fired hers.

Riley froze. Rachel had shot him instead of the Baljeever. The animal was still alive, tightening his grip on Riley’s ankle. How long would it be before the razor-sharp claws tore off his foot?

Rachel fired again—this time hitting the animal. It froze.

She zapped Riley again, this time in unlock mode.

He tried to step away from the Baljeever, but the paw was still holding tight. “Shit! His claws are cutting into my ankle.”

“What can I do?” she asked. “If I unlock him—”

“No! Don’t do that.” He pulled the machete out of its scabbard and lifted it over his head with his upper arms. He brought it down across the animal’s arm, severing it. Blood spewed into the air.

“God!” Rachel turned away.

The paw relaxed, and Riley knelt down down and used all four hands to carefully open the sharp claws and release his ankle. “So, apparently a spike to the brain doesn’t necessarily kill them. Be ready to fire at those other two in case the lock wears off.”

“Why don’t we just run?”

“How do we know they won’t unfreeze and come after us? We can’t outrun these bastards.” Riley went to the head of the Baljeever who had grabbed his ankle and held up the machete with his upper arms

“What are you doing?” Rachel asked.

“It’s the only way to be sure.” He brought the blade down forcefully, slicing into the animal’s neck. But it only went partway through. He hacked the neck over and over again. Blood spurted out on the ground and all over Riley’s shoes and jumpsuit.

“Stop, Riley!”

He continued to chop until the head separated from the neck.

“Did you really have to do that? You got blood all over yourself.”

Riley looked down. “And the blood *stinks*. But remember what Torgwal said? Baljeevers will eat their own. So, I’m gonna give them plenty to munch on, so they won’t come after us.” He went to animal that was still standing. His neck was too high for Riley to reach, so he went around behind the beast and kicked him in the back, causing him to tip over and land face down. More chopping. More blood. But at least this one went faster. Riley was getting good at it. He imagined himself as a medieval knight.

“I hope the others don’t pick up the scent of blood before we can get away from here,” she said.

“Yeah, and I probably need to get to some water and wash it off of me.”

“Hurry.”

Riley sneered at her. “*You* wanna do it?”

“No. But just hurry. Please.”

He went to the last animal, and was about to take his first chop at the neck when he saw

the head move.

The animal growled.

There was no time for Riley to run. He reached for the lock gun with his upper right hand.

All eight of the Baljeever's limbs began to flail. Two of them squeezed together, clamping Riley's legs in place. The animal's trunk swung around and knocked the lock gun out of Riley's hand. It landed between two of the moving arms. There was no way Riley could retrieve it.

"Lock him!" Riley started chopping at the neck as hard and fast as he could.

"I'm trying," she said. "It's not working! My battery must be dead!"

He continued to hack at the neck. Why was this one tougher than the others? Maybe it was Riley. Maybe his arms were getting tired. But shouldn't he be feeling a rush of the adrenaline? The blade had barely cut through the thick fur. Was the machete getting dull?

The Baljeever's trunk whacked one of Riley's legs and he nearly went down. It was gradually getting stronger, coming out of the freeze. If the animal got his claws around Riley's legs or arms before he could sever the neck, the battle was lost. Was this how Riley would die—mauled to death by an alien monster? No!

The Baljeever was gaining more strength by the second, and Riley sensed that he might have only one more chance at the animal's neck, so he would make it count. No more quick chops. He'd use every ounce of his strength to inflict a mammoth blow. He quickly visualized it happening: the blade slicing cleanly through the neck—not stopping until it hit the ground.

Riley raised the machete over his head with his upper arms, grabbing them at the elbows with his lower hands, and pulled down with all four arms, letting out a thunderous howl, as he brought the weapon down like the blade of a guillotine.

The head fell away, rolled to face up, and the animal's steely eyes stared up at Riley for a full two seconds before the life went out of them.

Riley's entire body tingled. He was afraid to move at first, in disbelief that he was still alive.

"Are you okay?" Rachel asked.

The blade of the machete was buried deep in the ground. Riley released the handle and looked over his shoulder. "I think so."

Something swooshed through the sky, fifty feet above their heads, and they ducked.

“What was that?” Rachel asked.

“I don’t know.” Riley hurried to where Rachel was standing.

A low rumble came from the woods, then another, then a chorus—no, more like an *army*—of Baljeevers.

“Oh, shit. Here they come,” Riley said.

“We’re dead.” Rachel hid herself in his arms.

Another swoosh, and they were instantly sucked up into the sky.

Riley and Rachel were standing face to face on top of a small, round platform in the center of what appeared to be the control room of a space ship. Riley suspected there might be an electric field surrounding them, and from the look in Rachel’s eyes, she must have been thinking the same thing.

“You should not have run from Federal Officers.” The man was wearing a blue uniform, and sitting in a captain’s chair. He was a young man with dark, wavy hair, probably seven feet tall, with a lean build. And, of course, he had four arms.

“I am Lieutenant Drenchbawld Chimma. What are your names, please? Your *real* names.”

“I’m Riley Rangle, and this is Rachel Oliver.”

“Hmm. Unusual names. Good to meet you. But I wish it were under better circumstances. You seem like nice kids, but you’ve gotten yourselves into big trouble.”

“I know,” Riley said. “We’re sorry about that, sir.”

“The Baljeevers *should* have killed you. I’m impressed that you were able to survive as long as you did. There’s only one thing more powerful than a Baljeever’s hunger: his sense of revenge. You thought they would eat their own, didn’t you? That they would enjoy devouring their chopped-up brethren while you two got away safely. Well, the Baljeevers *are* cannibals, that’s true. They would not have hesitated to eat their own—but only *after* they had tracked you down, sliced you to shreds, and enjoyed you as an appetizer. All it takes is one drop of blood in the air. They’d already picked up the scent, and hundreds of them were on their way.” He shook his head. “If I’d gotten here a minute later, you two kids would have been nothing but blood slush.”

“Thank you,” Riley said.

“Yes, thank you, sir,” Rachel said.

“Still, you have broken the law. I don’t know how you made it over the Main Stream. But you’re criminals, so I’ve got to take you in.”

“Something happened to us, sir, and we’re not sure what,” Riley said. “We’ve lost our memories.”

“Then how do you know your names?”

Rachel jumped in. “It’s a *partial* loss, sir. We do remember *some* things.”

“Yes,” Riley said, “and I think somebody might have altered our tags, but we’re definitely not Fundamentalists.”

“Hmm,” Lt. Chimma said. “Well, don’t worry then. We’ll sort it all out.”

Riley couldn’t believe the lieutenant was buying their lies. Or was he lying to *them*? Maybe this was merely idle chit-chat, and he and Rachel were going to be tortured and murdered regardless of what they said.

Lt. Chimma rotated his chair to his control panel. “Here we go.” He touched a few buttons.

Rachel whispered to Riley, “Are we moving yet?”

“We’re here.” Lt. Chimma stood and walked them out of the aircraft. They were on top of a tall building. Two intense-looking soldiers were waiting for them. As the soldiers escorted the three of them across the roof toward the entrance to the building, Riley wondered if they should try to escape. They were not handcuffed or bound in any way. They could run, but where to? Off the side of the building? Would Doc save them before they hit the ground? No. There was a ten-minute transmission delay. It would be suicide.

They went into the building and a Sergeant Klockler took Riley to an interrogation room. He suspected that Rachel would be questioned simultaneously. What would happen to them if they gave the wrong answers, or if they simply gave *different* answers?

Sgt. Klockler sat across from him at a table. “Who put the tag in your arm?”

If Riley told the truth, what would happen to Torgwal and Crinblee? And if he claimed to be from Tolerance, the next questions would be: who are your parents and where do you live? He could say that they were Fundamentalists, and that their parents dumped them in

Tolerance. Maybe that would keep Torgwal and Crinblee out of trouble. But the Federals would try to track down Riley and Rachel's parents and put a permanent lock on them. What would happen when they discovered that he had lied to them?

But the worst thing he could possibly do was to tell the truth. *A mad scientist from a distant planet transported us here with his giant space laser.* Yeah, they'd love that one. What fun their scientists would have dissecting Riley and Rachel. So, what was the safest answer?

"To your people, Rachel and I would be considered Fundamentalists—because of where we're from. But we don't hold the same beliefs as the people of our homeland. Neither do our parents. In a few weeks, we are scheduled to be married—once we've both turned twelve. That is our law."

"I am familiar with the laws of your people. Go on."

"Rachel and I weren't ready to get married. We're not even sure we want to marry each other at all. As soon as we were married, we would have been expected to have a child every year, for as long as we're physically able. We don't believe the state has the right to force us to do that."

"You two sound more like Tolerants than Fundamentalists."

"That's why we came here."

"But *how* did you come here?"

"It was ingenious, really. Rachel thought of the idea of using a catapult. But that had been tried many times before, and nobody had made it across the Main Stream."

"Of course not. It's five kilometers wide."

"I know. So, my dad wondered what would happen if we combined the idea of a catapult with a glider."

Sgt. Klockler's eyebrows arched.

"So, we did a test run—without a passenger."

"And?"

Riley nodded. "It made it across—with a hundred meters to spare."

"And that's how you got here?"

“Rachel’s flight was perfect, but I almost didn’t make it—probably because I’m a bit heavier than she is. I could see that my glider was gonna come up short, so at the last moment I jumped for the shore. I landed in the water, but I grabbed onto a tree root and pull myself out. That was scary.”

“That’s a wild story.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Where’s the glider?”

“It broke into a million pieces when it hit the Main Stream.”

“Your friend’s glider. You said she made it to land.”

“We...set it on fire. That was the plan all along. There’s nothing left of it.”

“I see. And that’s your full story?”

“Uh, yes. I guess that just about covers it.”

Sgt. Klockler stood up. “Let’s go.”

He took Riley down the hall to the main area and found the other investigator—the one who had taken Rachel for questioning.

“Where’s the girl?” Sgt. Klocker asked.

“I already took her down there,” the other officer said.

Sgt. Klocker nodded. “Right.”

He walked Riley down a long, narrow hallway.

Riley had a bad feeling.

The windowless door was labeled Disposition Room. Sgt. Klocker opened it. Rachel was sitting on a bench near the back wall. Otherwise, the room was empty. The walls were brick, as were the floor and ceiling. No cameras, no windows.

Sgt. Klocker motioned for him to step inside, and Riley went in. The door closed behind him. The sergeant had not offered any information as to what the they were there for, but Riley was sure it wasn’t anything good.

He sat down next to Rachel.

“Do you think they’re watching or listening?” she asked.

Riley scanned the room. “I don’t think so.”

Rachel obviously wasn’t convinced, since she leaned in and whispered, “What did you tell him about how we got across the Main Stream?”

Rachel’s hand against his face and her warm breath in his ear caused him to lose focus for a moment. They were sworn enemies, bitter rivals, who had been working together simply because they were in survival mode—not because they actually cared for each another.

Or did they?

He held his hand beside his mouth and spoke into her ear. “I told him we used a catapult and gliders.”

“Damn. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“But I don’t think he bought it. What did you say?”

“That we were dumped here by our parents. That’s when he brought me in here. So, if they compare our stories, we’re screwed.”

“Probably.”

“They think we’re Fundamentalists?”

“Or maybe aliens. I don’t know.” Riley looked around. “You know what this room looks like?”

“An incinerator?”

“Yeah, but I don’t see any gas jets.”

“Could be a completely different technology. Maybe they just push a button and we’re toast.” A tear ran down her cheek.

“Well, if we’re about to die...”

“What?”

“Would you mind if I...”

She grabbed his head, pulled his face to hers, and kissed him on the lips for a full five seconds.

“Oh, wow,” he said, and went back for more.

The door opened and an officer walked in.

“Are you gonna kill us?” Riley asked. “Because if you are, I have a last request. Would you mind coming back in an hour. What’s the difference? Nobody has to know.”

The officer unholstered his weapon. “I’m sorry. I really am. But I have my orders.”

“Okay,” Riley said. “Thirty minutes. *Ten* minutes. Come on man, can’t you see we’re in love?”

He aimed the weapon at Riley.

“No, please,” Rachel said.

“Doc! Get us out of here!” Riley yelled.

The officer fired and Riley’s chest burst into flames.

Rachel tried to scream, but couldn’t.

The officer fired at Rachel.

Riley gasped for breath, as though he’d been underwater for five minutes. He turned. Rachel was beside him, also struggling to catch her breath. But they were alive. “Rachel, are you okay?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

They were back on earth, in Doc’s dentist chairs. He’d apparently rescued them in the nick of time.

“I can’t believe we survived that,” he said.

“Me either,” she said. “Your chest was on fire. Did you feel it?”

“It hurt like hell. But Doc got my brain out in time. I mean, he must have because I feel normal.”

“Me too. Except that I’m still stuck in this chair.”

“Doc?” Riley saw him sitting in the dental chair on the other side of Rachel.

Rachel turned her head and looked at Doc. “Is he—?”

“Dead? Sure looks like it. But maybe he’s just sleeping.” He tried to get out of his chair.

“Dammit, Doc.”

“Doc? Wake up,” Rachel said.

“Doc!”

He didn’t flinch.

“If he’s dead, then how are we gonna get out of these chairs?” Rachel asked.

“I don’t know. Hope for a power failure? Right now I’m just happy to be alive.”

“But we could starve to death before anybody finds us.”

A video came to life on the wall in front of them. It was Doc, smiling, with a cigarette hanging out of this mouth.

“Thanks to you two, I have proved that my equipment works. I’ve done the impossible. And now everyone on Earth will know how brilliant I am. But I don’t even care about that anymore, because I’m about to relocate to Sorella Uno. My copy will be a ten-year-old boy. A kid genius, cancer-free, endowed with my full brain power. And thanks to the knowledge I gained from your little trip, I will be able to avoid the kind of problems you encountered. Perhaps I’ll develop a synthetic Baljeever gas—save the environment and become a legend in Tolerance.” He laughed.

“He might actually do it,” Riley said.

Doc continued. “You’re probably wondering why I didn’t just make a copy of myself here on this planet. Start over as a boy right here on Earth. Don’t think I didn’t try. There is apparently something that works differently when the essence of the brain is transported through space. I still don’t understand it. I just know that it works. You two are the proof.”

Riley shook his head.

Doc leaned in to the camera. “I set your return to automatically occur right after my copy is created on the planet. So, assuming that you managed to stay alive until then, you two are

now safe and sound, watching this video. If not...my apologies.”

“Bastard,” Riley said. “You nearly got us killed.”

“I had other plans for you two, but that doesn’t matter now, so you will be released from your chairs when this video ends. Thanks for helping me get a brand new life.”

The video ended.

Rachel tried to get out of her chair. “I’m still stuck. He said we’d be released when the video was over.”

“Be patient. It may take a few seconds.”

“What do you think he meant when he said he had other plans for us?”

“I don’t know, but he said it doesn’t matter anymore. I just want to go home and...hey, you want to go out for pizza tonight?”

Another video started up.

Doc said, “I made this video in case something happened to me before you returned.”

“This is an old video,” Riley said.

“Yeah, he looks way younger.”

“You’re seeing this on the assumption that you have returned safely from the planet Sorella Uno. Congratulations. Next, you’re off to the planet Sorella Due. Isn’t this a fun adventure? Good luck.”

The video ended.

“What the hell is going on, Riley?”

“We weren’t the first. He’s been doing this experiment for years.”

“Then what happened to all the other kids?”

“What do you *think*?”

“The Baljeevers got them?”

“He went off and left us inside an automated system.”

“We’re in a loop?”

“I remember him saying that he wanted to investigate seven planets. His system is gonna keep sending us to one planet after the other. Shit!”

“We have got to get out of these chairs.” Rachel fought to release herself.

They heard Doc’s voice over the sound system. “Initiating countdown for transmission to Sorella Due. T minus twenty seconds.”

“Noooooo!” Rachel said.

“He must have been so excited about his new life that he forgot to release us.”

“*Forgot?* He did this on purpose.”

“Why? He’s not gonna be here to see all the feedback from the other planets.”

“Oh, God! There’s no way to know how far advanced the planets might be. We could be dealing with *dinosaurs!*”

“We are so screwed.”

Doc: “Ten seconds to transmission.”

“No, no, no!” Rachel struggled to get free.”

“Nine.”

“It’s no use, Rachel.”

“There’s got to be a way,” she said.

Doc: “Seven.”

“I think I’m in love with you,” he said.

“You’re just saying that because we’re about to die.”

“Four.”

“We’re gonna be okay.”

Doc: “Three.”

“How can you say that?”

Doc: “Two.”

“As long as we’re together,” he said.

Doc: “One.”

They both screamed.

Doc: “Transmission.”

Everything went black.

THE END

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