

## **Bunnies from the Future**

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## ***Instructions to Dads***

This is not part of the story – don't read this bit aloud!

Although my English teachers always told me never to do so, I've written this story in the first person. This is so you – yes you, dad – can pretend that it is your story. You should read this to your child(ren) as if it really did happen to you. To make it work, you'll need to replace some words. I've highlighted these in the text and enclosed them with asterisks.

In the Prologue, replace \*Corcoran\* with your own surname.

In chapter 5, replace \*Fairfield Road\* with the name of your own street.

In the last chapter, right at the end, replace \*Toby\* with the name of your own child(ren).

One last thing, if you are asked if any of this really happened, you must say that it is just a story. This will make sense if you read the end of the last chapter.

Have fun!

## ***Prologue***

Do you remember the first time I met the Bunnies from the Future? I would be surprised if you did. You were quite a bit younger then than you are now, but I distinctly remember telling you about it on the very day that it happened.

That day started with a misty morning, and I'd left the house early. I can't remember why I was up and about so early, but it involved running an errand of some sort. In any case, when I got outside it still wasn't fully light. I couldn't see very far in front of me, and the mist robbed everything of its colours, so that the world seemed very grey and drab. The overall effect was that even the most familiar places seemed strange. I didn't know it yet, but it was going to be a strange morning all round.

The first sign that there was something unusual going on was as I came out onto the pavement. Sat on top of a nearby wall, above some bins, was the grey figure of something small and furry. That's sad, I thought, looks like someone's lost their teddy bear. I turned to check for traffic, and behind me, there was a squeak and a thud and a rustle of paper. When I turned back the figure on the wall was gone. Teddy bears don't move on their own, so I was puzzled for a moment. Then I realised that it must have been some sort of animal, come to scavenge in the bins. I'm sure you would have been more curious, but I just shrugged and walked on. I did notice, as I passed, a little fluffy tail poking out of a pile of paper in one of the bins, but I was in too much of a hurry to investigate. I walked on at a brisk and purposeful pace. I did think, a couple of times, that I heard someone calling my name, but when I looked round, I couldn't see anyone, so I assumed it was just the wind.

By now I was walking along the main road, and something made me look up. There, above my head, was a hang-glider. It was flying low enough so that I could clearly

see the pilot was a rabbit. Not a normal rabbit, either. This rabbit was wearing a leather flying cap – with holes cut out for his ears – flying goggles and a long, white, silk scarf that billowed out behind him.

Strange, I remember thinking to myself.

Even stranger, the bunny was calling something down to me. I couldn't hear very clearly, but it sounded like, "We need your belt". I was about to call back when a pigeon, who had obviously taken exception to this invasion of his airspace, landed on one wing of the hang-glider and started pecking at the fabric. Clearly the pilot was not amused by this development.

"I am under attack by local vermin," I heard him say, "taking evasive manoeuvres." The hang-glider climbed slightly, then performed a double roll – spinning first to the left and then to the right. The result was that the pigeon was thrown off one wing, then batted away into the distance by the other.

"Ha!" shouted the pilot in triumph, but the victory was short lived. The pigeon was clearly very determined, and it had friends. A squadron of three birds now appeared out of the mist, heading straight for the hang-glider, and if I thought double roll trick had been impressive, I was now treated to an exhibition of flying skills the like of which I had never seen before. The pigeons and the bunny battled for air supremacy, sometimes only inches above my head. At one point the hang-glider did a loop-the-loop, which I thought was impossible, dumping two of the pigeons in a tree, but more feathered help was on its way. A new gang of pigeons arrived, and the bunny pilot zoomed up into the mist. Seconds later I heard a muffled crash.

"They really ought to make you get a license to fly one of those things," I said to myself.

Still I marched onwards, with the mist still thick about me, and I heard a new sound. It was the putt-putt-putt of a motor scooter, and I glanced around to see if I could spot this early morning motorist, but there was nothing there – even though the engine noises seemed to be right next to me.

"Down here," called a muffled voice.

I looked down, and there was a rabbit riding a moped – a mini moped.

"Hello," I said, which seemed only polite.

"Bellow," he shouted in return, or that's what it sounded like. In truth, it was difficult to tell because his voice was muffled by his crash helmet.

"Lovely morning for a ride," I said, wondering where the conversation was going.

"We skied on your kelp," the bunny shouted, which really confused me.

"I don't have any kelp," I replied, my voice sounding too loud in the stillness of the early morning.

The bunny shook his head, and although it was as quiet as a whisper, I distinctly heard him say, "stupid human." Then he pushed up the visor of his helmet, looked straight up at me and opened his mouth to shout the message again ... but with his attention distracted, his paw slipped on the accelerator, and the little bike leapt

forward, disappearing into the mist. All I heard was the bunny's voice trailing away into the distance – "heeeeeeeelp!"

Now I was beginning to get a bit freaked out. Even though it was early morning and I was still half asleep, my brain was reaching the inescapable conclusion that I was being stalked by bunny rabbits. Okay, so it is difficult to imagine a less threatening situation, but it was just so odd – impossibly odd, even – that it made me feel rather uneasy. I quickened my pace, looking around me with every step, wondering where the next bunny might appear from. What with this and the mist, I'd begun to work myself up into quite a state of nervousness. So don't be surprised when I tell you that even I – your brave daddy – shrieked out loud when something heavy landed on my head and stuck there. I was so surprised that I went into a bit of a panic. I shook my head around. I waved my arms in the air. I tried to brush it off, like it was a wasp or a spider. Finally, I grabbed the thing with both hands and pulled it off my head. There was a squeak, and I found myself looking at a very frightened rabbit.

"Oh, please don't hurt me," it squealed, "We've only come to give you a message. It will save a lot of trouble if you'll listen."

"What's all this about," I snapped, still quite cross about having someone drop onto my head, and a little embarrassed by the way I'd panicked, "... and who's 'we'?"

"Please, Daddy \*Corcoran\*," said a little voice behind me, "we're the Bunnies from the Future."

I turned to see that a little crowd of rabbits had gathered behind me. One had scraps of paper stuck in his fur, one was wearing flying goggles and another looked like he had tyre marks on his ears.

"We've been trying to talk to you since you left home this morning," said the one I was holding, "We need your help. It IS very important."

"Really, what on earth could you need from me?" I asked, surprised at how well I was adapting to the whole 'talking rabbit' thing.

"I'll tell you," said the bunny, "but first, would you please put me down."

Well, I apologised for my thoughtlessness and placed him gently on top of a nearby wall, next to the pavement.

"Watch yourself, Skip," said the rabbit with paper in his fur, "Difficult to keep your balance on walls."

The bunny called Skip didn't reply. He just raised his eyes for a second, settled himself comfortably on the wall and began.

"In a couple of minutes, near this very spot, there will be a terrible accident," said Skip, his voice full of doom, "A brilliant scientist will be killed, run over by a doughnut truck."

"That sounds hole-y inappropriate," I quipped, but Skip was not amused.

"I'm serious," he said, and he looked it, "In less than two minutes, a man will die here ... unless you save him."

Well, I didn't believe a word of what the rabbit was saying – how could he possibly

know what was about to happen – but if there was even a small chance that he was right, and I'd be saving someone's life, I thought it was worth playing along.

“What would you like me to do?” I asked.

The sense of relief among the bunnies was quite obvious, and I began to think that there was more at stake here than just one person's life. As if to confirm my suspicions, the sun chose this moment to break through the mist, and it shone down on our little group. Several of the bunnies sighed with pleasure as they basked in the warm rays of light, but Skip was not to be distracted.

“Pockets,” he said, “hand over the banana.”

I now noticed that the bunny with paper in his fur had a pouch on his tummy, rather like a kangaroo's. He reached into this pouch and produced a banana skin, which he handed to me.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, “I got hungry while we were waiting for you.”

“Okay, well I suppose that's stage one of the plan complete,” said Skip, giving Pockets a despairing look, before turning his attention back to me.

“In about 60 seconds' time,” he continued, “the scientist will come walking round that corner. You must drop the banana skin in his path. He will slip on it, and so he won't be crossing the road when the truck arrives – you will have saved his life.”

It seemed a simple enough plan, and I was just about to set off when a thought struck me.

“And what will you be doing while I'm saving the scientist?” I asked.

“We'll be right here,” said Pockets, who was lying in a patch of sunlight, “It's very cold in the future, so we want to get properly warm while we've got the chance.”

“Hurry!” urged Skip, “He's almost here.”

With a shrug of my shoulders, I turned and walked down the street, the way that Skip had pointed. Sure enough, while I was still a little way off, a man came round the corner. I wasn't at all surprised that he was going to be run over. His head was buried in a sheaf of papers, and he was clearly not concentrating on anything going on around him. I dropped the banana skin directly in his path and walked on, saying ‘good morning’ as I passed. He barely grunted in reply. Well, if that's your attitude, I thought, I'm not going to help you a second time. When I heard the yelp and the crash, however, simple human kindness made me go back to him. The banana skin had worked, and he was sat on the pavement amid a flurry of papers.

“My research,” he shouted, as I went to help him to his feet, “Never mind me, save my research.”

He started to frantically grab at the pages that were now being blown about by the wind, and of course, I helped. This could have caused a disaster, if I hadn't been quick. The scientist was about to chase a page that was being blown out into the road, but I grabbed his arm, holding him back. He turned angrily to me, and at that moment a huge truck went whizzing past, blowing the remaining papers back onto the pavement. It was really racing along, but I still had time to read the lettering on the

side – DOUGHNUTS.

There's little more to tell about what happened that day. By the time I returned to the wall, the bunnies had gone. In fact, I began to wonder if I hadn't been imagining them all along, but they had seemed so real at the time. I finished my errand, whatever it was, and returned home. The only other thing I remember from that day was your gurgling laughter when I told you about the 'funny bunnies', and my own strange feeling, as I fell asleep that night, that my little adventure was part of a larger destiny ... one that might test me to the limits.

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## **Chapter 1: The Bunnies Return**

I didn't think about the Bunnies from the Future very much after that. Until last week, while you and mummy were out, and I was left at home on my own. I went out front, because I'd noticed some things that needed tidying, and I saw that one of the bins was turned upside down. I thought it was odd, but didn't turn it over right there and then, because my hands were full. I bent to put the things down and, when I wasn't looking, I thought I heard something. I looked up, and I was sure that the bin had moved. What's going on here, I thought. Maybe the bin has been blowing in the wind? But it was a very still day. Maybe someone's attached a string, or a fishing line, to the bin and they're pulling it along to try and trick me. I looked up and down the street, but I couldn't see anyone. I walked all around the bin, and I couldn't find a wire. Then the bin moved again. I saw it lift off the ground and scuttle, first one way and then the other, before dropping back to the ground. Well I never, I thought, there must be something under there. I'll show them. So I crept up behind the bin, grabbed it with both hands and lifted it high into the air. There was nothing underneath. I couldn't understand what had been making the bin move until ...

"Hello," said a little voice by my ear.

There, wedged at the bottom of the bin, were two rabbits. I recognised them immediately as Skip and Pockets, two of the Bunnies from the Future.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, surprised and a little worried.

"Well," said Skip, "there's a lot of foxes about, so we thought it best to hide while we waited for you."

Then he saw the look on my face.

"Oh, you mean why are we paying you a visit? Well that's a long story. We'd better come in and explain. Don't want all your neighbours seeing you talking to rabbits, they'll think you've gone doolaley."

I certainly agreed with that, so I invited the two bunnies into the house. Then I thought about what mummy would say if she knew I'd been letting rabbits loose indoors, and I decided it would be better if we talked out back. We found a hidden corner, and once we'd made ourselves comfortable, Skip started to explain.

"Like I said," began Skip, "it's a long story, and it all began on the 21st of May—"

"—The earth's been taken over by plants," cut in Pockets.

Skip gave him a hard stare.

"That's the summary," he said, "I prefer the long version, but I think that Pockets has got the basic facts right."

"Well, I'm always saying that we should give peas a chance," I said, chortling at my own joke.

Skip turned his hard stare on me, which made me feel a little bad but also a little defiant.

"I'm sorry," I shrugged my shoulders, "I'm sure it's no joking matter, but I just don't

see what it's got to do with me.”

“It would all be clear,” said Skip slowly, staring at Pockets, “if I'd only been allowed to tell my version of the story.”

Pockets shuffled uncomfortably as Skip went on.

“In the future there are no people left. They've all ... gone away. There's just plants and bunnies – and the plants are winning. We've got a plan, but we need a person to help us carry it through.”

It made sense to me that a group of rabbits would need help from a person, even in the simple matter of dealing with a few plants. Mummy had left me with a lot of chores to do: mending, fixing, watering, tidying and washing. You weren't due back for a while, and the thought of having an adventure was much more attractive than the thought of staying at home and working my fingers to the bone.

“Okay,” I said, “I'll help you. Count me in.”

“That's great,” said Skip, “We knew you'd be there for us, didn't we Pockets?”

The two bunnies winked at each other, and I suddenly thought that maybe they weren't so cute, cuddly or helpless as they'd been pretending. From out of his pouch, Pockets now produced a strange looking device. The central bit of it was the size and shape of a large, flat bread roll. Four arms, each about as long as one of my fingers, extended from this at right angles to one another. The whole thing seemed to be slightly furry, and it glowed with a blue light. Pockets was pushing some buttons on the central section, which caused mysterious symbols to be projected into the air in front of his eyes.

“Put your paw on the end of one of the arms, and try to stay still,” instructed Skip, “This might feel a little odd.”

I reached out to do as I was told, and realised that my hand was much too big – the device had been built for bunnies. Instead, I found that my thumb fitted neatly into the little indentation at the end of the arm nearest to me. Skip and Pockets each had their paws touching other arms, and I had just started to wonder who was holding the device up, when Pockets said:

“Oh yes, and this is going to hurt quite a lot.”

Before I could take my thumb away, there was a crackle of raw power, the world faded around me and it felt like a million tiny hands were trying to pull me into little pieces.

I think I must have passed out, because the next thing I knew there was something soft stroking my cheek. I was vaguely aware that this was Skip slapping me around the face to wake me up, but his paws were so furry and small it wasn't really working. My eyes were struggling to open and I felt very sleepy.

“Pockets,” I heard Skip say, “we need to wake him up ... and quickly. I authorise you to take desperate measures.”

The fuzzy shape of another rabbit swam into my vision. He stuck his bottom under my nose ... and let out a tremendous fart. Immediately I was wide awake. I sat bolt

upright, sending Pockets tumbling to the ground.

“Phew!” was all I could say, “What on earth have you been eating?”

“TCS,” replied Pockets, “Textured Carrot Substitute. What else would a bunny eat?”

This, naturally, raised another question, but Skip cut me short.

“Can you stand?” he asked, “We’ve got to move. We’re in terrible danger.”

“Now I looked around properly for the first time, and I realised that we weren’t ‘out back’ anymore. Around us was the most beautiful woodland I had ever seen. Tall trees stretched up above our heads, covering the sky with a green canopy through which I could see glimpses of blue sky. The floor was covered in a soft carpet of moss and grass, with larger plants – like bracken – dotted around. Where the sun cut through the canopy of leaves, I could see amazing blue and pink and yellow flowers turning their heads to drink up the light. Standing out against all this beauty, about twenty to thirty meters away from where I sat, was an ugly, tall metal cylinder. It looked like it had once been silver, but had been battered and scorched until it was nearly black. It must have been sat there in the woods for a while, because plants had started to grow up around it, like they were trying to cover up its ugliness.

“It’s my own fault,” Skip was saying, “We landed the pod at the front of your house,” and here he waved a paw at the ugly cylinder, “then we walked through to the back.”

He pointed to the ground where we were standing.

“But this isn’t my home,” I said, shaking my head, “I don’t live in a wood.”

“No,” said Pockets patiently, “this is where your home used to be, two thousand years ago.”

He waved the strange, blue, furry device in the air and made a ‘I cannot believe I have to explain this to you’ kind of a face.

“It’s a time machine, not a space machine,” he said, like it was my first day at school.

“But I don’t understand why you think we’re in such danger,” I said, “There’s no one else here.”

As I looked around again, I did notice a small movement in the grass near Pockets. I was about to call a warning when, with lightning speed, a thin vine whipped up round his tummy. With a squeak, he tried to pull away, but he wasn’t strong enough, and it started to drag him backwards. I lunged forwards, managing to catch one of his paws in my hand, and with the other hand, I snapped the vine in two.

“Now run!” yelled Skip, and suddenly everything was happening at once. Vines were whipping through the air. Tree roots were breaking through the surface trying to trip us. The grass, glinting in the sunlight, was suddenly as sharp as knives. Through it all the three of us ran, dodging left and right to avoid each new danger. It seemed to take an age to cross the few meters to the pod, and when we were almost there, I noticed the flowers. They were no longer turning their faces to the sun. A group of them was swivelling round to point straight at Skip. I knew it was too late to warn him, so instead I snatched him up and shielded him with my body. A split second later, each of the flowers fired out a seed-shaped missile, and I felt a shower of sharp pains in

my back.

“Pod!” shouted Skip, “Activate defence grid.”

At once, the air around us was lit up with laser light and filled with the crackle of electricity as the pod tried to hold off the plants that were attacking us. It was an amazing show, but I didn't have time to stop and stare, because Skip and Pockets were pulling and pushing me through the small door of the Pod and into the cramped interior. As soon as the three of us were through the door, it slid shut and Skip started issuing instructions ... fire orbital rockets ... deactivate defence grid ... deploy canopy busters.

“I hope we're going to make it,” said a scared little voice beside me.

I looked down to see Pockets strapping himself into a bunny-sized padded chair. I noticed that Skip also had his own chair.

“Where's my chair?” I asked.

“No room,” said Pockets.

Sure enough, I now realised that the Pod was just about big enough for me to stand up, but much too narrow for me to sit down.

“We did make you some handles,” continued Pockets, “I'd hold onto them if I were you, we're about to pull to Gs.”

“Pull some what?” I asked.

Then the Pod started to move, and it was as if an elephant had suddenly decided to sit on my head. I quickly grabbed the straps that were attached to the Pod's walls on either side of my head.

“Now,” said Skip, “let's see get a look at what's going on ... Pod – activate 360 view.”

What happened next made me yelp with surprise. It seemed like the whole pod just disappeared. I could see woodland all around, the canopy above and the ground below. I tapped my foot ... carefully. I could still feel the floor of the Pod, and I could still feel the handles I'd grabbed a few seconds earlier. Everything was right there where it had been – it was just that it was now completely invisible.

“Impact in five,” said Skip, and as I looked above me, I could see two small rockets heading up towards the canopy.

Skip completed his countdown – 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1 – then there was a shower of leaves and a hole appeared in the tangle of branches above, with nothing but blue sky beyond. Skip must have increased the speed because the pod seemed to give another leap forward. Looking up, I could see why. The hole in the canopy was closing. The trees were growing back, from all sides, at an astonishing speed. I knew it was going to be close because I could hear Pockets, behind me, grinding his teeth. Then, with a final burst of acceleration that almost forced me to my knees, we were clear. Above us now I could see only the sky and below, getting smaller by the second, was the unbroken green roof of the woodland.

“Deactivate view,” said Skip, and abruptly I was looking at the inside of the pod

again.

“We need to save energy,” explained Skip, “Besides, it might be a bit much to see our new home all at once. We don’t want to freak you out.”

“Wow,” I said, “You must live somewhere amazing. Is it inside a volcano, or at the bottom of the ocean?”

The two rabbits looked at each other and shook their heads sadly.

“Those are both good guesses,” said Pockets, “but I’m afraid that the only place safe for us rabbits nowadays is out in space.”

Even as he said it, I felt the acceleration of the pod begin to reduce, and my feet started to lift off the floor as the weightlessness of space took over. Then, with no warning at all, I started giggling.

“Oh no, I forgot,” said Skip, “Those must have been giggle seeds.”

Which, for some reason, I thought was hilarious.

“Come on, Pockets. We’d better get them out of him. Otherwise he’ll need to be in the sad room for weeks.”

The two bunnies released themselves from their chairs and busied themselves in cutting the back off my shirt so they could inspect my wounds.

“Unless we get a giggle seed out really quickly,” explained Pockets, “the victim has to be put into a special room and shown sad pictures – like melted snowmen and broken toys – otherwise they never stop giggling.”

By now the two bunnies had got to work on my back. I couldn’t see what kind of tools they were using, but it felt like they were doing quite a lot of damage. As they gouged each one of the seeds out of my flesh, I felt a fresh wave of pain which, strangely, made me giggle all the more. Finally, they were finished, and I stopped giggling for long enough to ask if there was anything left of my back. Skip got the Pod to make a mirror on one wall, and I looked nervously round, expecting to see lots of blood. Instead I just saw my skin, as normal as ever, except for a few tiny red spots dotted here and there.

“Chemicals,” explained Pockets, “They make you feel pain even though nothing’s really wrong. Just like a wasp sting.”

Whatever it had been, I was glad now that the pain was starting to go away. If it hadn’t been so cold, I’d actually have been feeling quite comfortable.

“I told you it was cold in the future,” said Pockets, seeing me start to shiver, “Don’t worry, we’ll find you something warmer to wear once we get to the habisat. It won’t be long now.”

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## **Chapter 2: Training**

As we approached our destination, Skip started to issue instructions to the pod about approach vectors, docking seals and sterilisation protocols. I could feel us turning, then slowing down and finally there was a hollow metal clang followed by a series of sharp clicks.

“Just before we go in,” said Skip, as he got ready to open the pod door, “I’d like to say thank you for saving my life back there.”

“And mine,” cut in Pockets.

I was about to say something modest like ‘Don’t mention it’ or ‘It was nothing’ or ‘I’m sure you chaps would have done the same for me’, when Skip opened the door, and I stumbled out into a blaze of light and noise. I was in a large room, or at least it felt large after the pod. It was bubble shaped, and because there was no gravity, I just floated out into the middle. All around me in the bubble were bunnies. Bunnies of all shapes, colours and sizes, all talking in an excited jabber all at once. “Oooh” they went and “aaah” and “isn’t he big”. Then Skip appeared at the pod door, and he got a big round of applause from the assembly. I noticed that the bunnies seemed to be able to swim through the air, moving with great elegance, whereas I felt like I was drifting helplessly. Then I felt something furry touch my back. There was an excited squeal of “Ooo, it’s warm”, and in an instant I had bunnies all over me. It was certainly very cosy, and warmed me up nicely after the cold journey in the pod – although it felt strange to be drifting about in zero gravity in the middle of a clump of rabbits.

“Excuse me! EXCUSE ME!” shouted Skip, “There’ll be plenty of time to play with the human later. Right now, we have to take him to Methuselah.”

Most of the bunnies left then, disappearing into small holes that were dotted around the wall of the bubble. There was no way I’d have fitted into any of them, and it made me start to worry that, if this place had been built for rabbits, I might have a hard time getting about. As it was, a few of the bunnies had to stay behind to help Skip and Pockets guide me to wherever it was that we were going. Two of them seemed to be large, strong rabbits, and together they helped steer me towards the largest tunnel leading from the bubble – a little like tugboats steering a huge ship into harbour. The third one, who was called Tribble – or maybe it was Trouble – was a little rabbit who didn’t seem to help at all. He just danced around in the air, doing somersaults and other tricks, and asking me how old I was and why I couldn’t do space swimming. When I told him my age, he was quite taken aback.

“Cor! You must be really daft to be that old and still not have learnt to swim.”

Then he did a little dance, showing me his moves and waving his bottom at me. This continued until one of the bigger rabbits told him that, if he carried on like that, he’d be on outdoor cleaning duty. This calmed the little bunny right down.

“But isn’t outside in space?” I asked.

“Exactly,” growled the big rabbit.

I wasn't sure if he was joking or not, but I didn't have long to think about it, because we soon arrived outside a small door in the side of the tunnel. I say small. It must have been very large by rabbit standards, but for me it looked like a tight squeeze. "Just remember to speak loudly and clearly," said Skip. Then he thought again and added, "And try not to crush him, he's very delicate."

I was just about to ask if Skip was coming in with me, but the door had already opened and they were manoeuvring me through. I found myself in a room that was cylindrical, like the pod only bigger. Still, if I put my feet on one side of the cylinder, I could easily reach the other side with my hands – so I could stop myself floating about. The walls were coated in some kind of thick plastic and they felt almost as if they were padded. About halfway down there seemed to be a window, although I couldn't see out of it from where I was. The room was also pleasantly warm, certainly a lot warmer than the tunnel I'd just left. Looking down the cylinder, I thought I could see why. There, in front of, or above, me (zero gravity is so confusing) was the oldest rabbit I had ever seen. He was very small and hunched, with bright white fur that was thin in some places and long in others, and he floated completely motionless, watching me with bright grey eyes.

"Hello ... sir," I said, thinking that it was odd to be calling a rabbit 'sir' but wanting to be polite, "my name is—"

"—We have no names here." cut in the old rabbit.

His voice was parchment thin, but surprisingly strong.

"We use what, I believe, the youngsters refer to as 'call signs'. Your call sign will be Turtle."

"Why Turtle?" I asked, feeling a bit annoyed that my name had been taken away and forgetting my politeness.

"Isn't it obvious?" replied the old bunny, letting out a long rattle of breath that might have been a laugh, "You see our call signs choose us, not the other way round. I think that you will grow quite fond of yours."

For some reason, at this point, I felt a strong urge to bow – as if I had been given a gift by royalty. I let go of the ceiling and bent forward as gracefully as I could.

Unfortunately, once I'd started moving I found I couldn't stop. I did one forward roll, then started another. With horror, I realised I was spinning towards Methuselah. What had Skip said – 'try not to crush him'. I scrabbled frantically about, trying to stop myself, but every movement seemed to make my spinning worse. I closed my eyes, preparing for the worst, but just before I struck the old bunny, I stopped.

I opened my eyes, and found I was only inches away from Methuselah – although I doubted now that that was his real name. My face must have been a picture of confusion, because I felt like I was stuck in a sticky web. I couldn't move at all. Slowly I drifted backwards to the point where I'd started my bow.

"Why don't you make yourself secure," said the old bunny, "And please, no more bowing."

Just like that, I found that I could move again. Being very careful this time, I braced myself against the sides of the room. As soon as I was in position, I gazed over at my host with a mixture of awe and confusion.

“How did you do that? How did you stop me?”

“It is a power called telekinesis,” explained Methuselah, “It means that I can move things without having to touch them. I can move things using just the power of my mind.”

“Do the other bunnies have the same power?” I asked.

“Of course,” replied Methuselah, “although some are better at it than others. When we were created, they gave us the power of telekinesis to make up for not having any thumbs.”

Methuselah then told me about how the Bunnies from the Future first came into being. It was after the plants had turned nasty – a long time ago, even for this old bunny – and the story sounded more like a legend than real history. The humans fought a terrible war against the plants, but they were losing. They created super-smart bunnies in the hope that their enemy would ignore such small creatures. For a while it worked. The bunnies fought well and turned the tide of the war, but it didn’t last. The plants learnt that they had a new enemy. They adapted, and the surface of the earth soon became lethal for bunny-kind. The war was lost, but the bunnies never stopped searching for a way to achieve victory and to reclaim the planet.

“What happened to people? Where are they now?” I interrupted, rather rudely.

“The people are ... safe,” replied Methuselah – exactly the same word that Skip had used, and exactly the same pause – “but they can take no further part in our battle with the plants.”

I opened my mouth to ask another question, but the old bunny silenced me with a raised paw.

“There will be plenty of time for questions later,” he said, “Besides, you have had quite enough new information for one day. Your human brain will need time to process what you have heard before you will be ready to hear more.”

The way he said ‘human brain’ made it sound almost like an insult, but I decided that, as a guest, I wouldn’t take offense. I did have one point to press, however.

“There’s just one question I’ve got to ask,” I said.

“Is it about the people?” asked Methuselah, suspiciously.

I shook my head, and the old bunny waved his paw as a sign for me to continue.

“I know that you can travel in time,” I said, “so why don’t you go back into the past and alter history? Stop the plants before they can begin?”

It was the first time I’d seen Methuselah look uncomfortable – embarrassed, even.

“We tried that ... once,” he mumbled, “You may remember it. The incident with the scientist?”

I nodded, and Methuselah sighed a deep sigh, shaking his head as he continued.

“We thought that this one small act would do exactly what you suggest – stop the

plants before they began. Our calculations were very thorough. We were quite certain of success—“

“—but it didn’t work out the way you expected?” I said, finishing the bunny’s sentence.

I’d heard that messing about with time could be a dangerous and unpredictable business, but for me it was all just theory and science fiction. For Methuselah it was real, and even for this super-smart, telekinetic bunny, the reality was painful and confusing.

“From my point of view, this is the way it’s always been – us bunnies were driven from the planet’s surface and forced to live out in space – but Skip, and the rest who travelled to the past with him, remember a quite different future. They tell me that, when they left on that first mission, us bunnies were in a much better position. We had built a whole bunny city, underneath the ocean.”

“I knew it,” I said, under my breath.

“We had far greater resources, which is why we were able to invent time travel. Something that happened during that first mission changed all that. We still don’t know what it was, but I suppose we should be grateful that the effect wasn’t worse – after all, we are still alive and kicking, and thanks to you, we’ve got a chance to win.” Methuselah smiled at me, and his mood seem to brighten.

“Now, we’ve talked for too long. It’s time for you to go and get a new suit. You should go and see Tailor.”

The door behind me swished open and it was clear that my audience with Methuselah was over. I gave one last look at the ancient bunny, before shaking my head and making my way, carefully, to the exit. He was certainly right about one thing. My ‘human’ brain was having a hard time taking on-board all this new information. I could feel a headache coming on.

Skip and the other bunnies were still waiting when I squeezed my way out through the door. I almost lost control again, but the two large bunnies grabbed me and kept me from cartwheeling around the corridor.

“So, what’s your call sign?” asked Pockets, as soon as the door closed behind me. All the other bunnies crowded in to hear the answer, and I felt that this must be a special moment.

“Turtle,” I answered.

Skip smiled, the two big bunnies winked at each other and Trouble laughed.

“That’s perfect,” said Pockets, “Methuselah always nails the call signs.”

The other bunnies nodded, but I was totally confused.

“Why Turtle?” I burst out, “It makes no sense at all. Why would he call me Turtle?”

Skip looked at me, trying to figure out if I was joking or not.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he said with a frown.

Trouble giggled. I was about to lose my temper, when I was given a good hard push from behind and we all started drifting off down the corridor.

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### **Chapter 3: Flying Lesson**

We didn't have to go far. Waiting outside a door, a little way down the corridor, was a smart-looking bunny – Tailor, I guessed – who carried a tape measure in his hand. I was brought to a halt in front of him, and he surveyed me with a critical eye before taking a slow spin around me.

“Dear oh dear!” he said, feeling the fabric of my clothes between his paws, “When they said you had come from the past, I didn't think that they meant the stone ages.” I bristled a little at this, but the bunny either didn't notice or didn't care.

“My goodness, you have managed to combine the unflattering, the unfashionable and the un-functional in this outfit. I think we shall have to burn everything.”

This was just too much.

“I don't have to take that from you,” I snapped back, “You aren't even wearing any clothes.”

It was true, he wasn't. He wore only a red kerchief around his neck. Although, I had to admit that his fur was exceptionally well groomed.

“I think you can see that it would be a crime to hide my natural perfection under gaudy clothes,” replied the bunny calmly, “but I think for you it is not the same.”

Now he started whizzing around me, taking measurements and making rude comments.

“I dread to think what ugliness there is under these outdated clothes,” he continued, “We shall have to cover you up, so that the little bunnies are not frightened.

Fortunately, I can create a suit for you that will make the best of the poor material I am given to work with.”

“Do you not have good fabrics in the future?” I asked, eyeing a box that seemed to be stuck to the wall.

“Oh, the cloth will be first-rate”, replied Tailor, “It's what I have to put it on that's the problem.”

I opened my mouth to complain, but I was so furious that I couldn't find the right words. I just ended up looking like a fish.

“Fortunately,” said Tailor, finishing his measuring and going to the box, “I am a genius!”

With the air of a magician about to perform an impossible trick, he slowly opened the box and reached inside. Pausing at this crucial moment, Tailor turned to give me one last despairing look, then his frown turned into a grin of triumph as he produced, from the box, a suit of clothes. There was a gasp from the other bunnies, and even I was impressed ... except for one thing.

“Those will never fit,” I said, feeling a little pleased with myself for having caught out this show-off, “You've only just taken my measurements and those clothes were in the box when we first saw you.”

“Didn't I say that I was a genius,” replied Tailor, and to prevent any further debate,

he opened the little door and I was shoved through.

“Please, try them on,” he shouted through the door as it slid shut behind me.

Then it swished open again. Tailor had one last instruction.

“Skip says that your old clothes are contaminated. You must take them all off. So, you must – I think it is called – go commando.”

As the door slid closed I discovered, with a sigh, that the bunny was right – there were no underpants included in the new outfit. Still, I did as I was told, and soon I emerged back into the corridor looking like a new man. I now wore a simple suit of jacket, shirt and trousers, with a pair of light and comfortable shoes completing the outfit. The suit’s material was a matt silver, almost grey, and was quilted all over. Between the jacket and the trousers, there were more pockets than I could count.

“This material,” explained Tailor, “as well as being very fashionable and hard-wearing, will adapt to protect you from both heat and cold.”

It was true. I could feel the suit plumping itself up to keep out the cold that I’d felt since I arrived on the habisat. Without thinking, I gave Tailor a grateful smile. Then I remembered all the rude things he’d said about me and I scowled. Then I realised that the suit fit perfectly, and my scowl turned into a puzzled frown. Was it really magic?

“What did I tell you,” said Tailor, with a wink, “Genius!”

After I’d seen Tailor, I was taken for my flying lesson. I felt very special in my new suit of clothes, but I still needed to be pushed and pulled through the corridors by the two large rabbits – who, I had found out, were called Biff and Boff. Finally, I was brought back to the large spherical chamber where I’d started, or at least one that was very similar. Now it had been decorated with all sorts of markers and obstacles.

These were attached to the walls in various places, so that they didn’t float around. It looked to me like some kind of training course, and my heart sank. I had no idea how to do space swimming and I had no special powers – like telekinesis. My heart sank further when I saw the bunny sat in the centre of the room. He was wearing a leather flying cap, a pair of flying goggles and, round his neck, he had a long, white silk scarf. When he saw me he winked, pulled the goggles down over his eyes and proceeded to zoom around the room, weaving in and out and through the obstacles, until he finished up in front of me with a bow.

“WingCo at your service,” he announced, “and you must be ...”

I was about to introduce myself with my real name, but Skip interrupted me.

“This is Turtle,” he said.

Then he turned to me.

“WingCo is our expert on flying. He can fly any sort of machine you care to mention, and of course, he’s the best of all of us at space swimming. He’s going to teach you everything he knows.”

Well, I very much doubted that WingCo could teach me anything. I felt so big and clumsy. What I really wanted to do – as Biff, Boff and Skip disappeared back down the corridor – was to run away and hide. The problem was that they’d left me floating

in mid-air, and I didn't know how to move without help. I was stuck.

"Now then, Turtle," WingCo began, "there's nothing to worry about. Space swimming is a piece of cake once you get the hang of it. All you have to remember is that every movement has an effect, so you might have to concentrate at first."

Unfortunately, I wasn't really paying attention, because I had an itchy nose. Without thinking, I brought up my hand to scratch it. Suddenly I found myself drifting in a slow corkscrew towards the wall. I tried to stop myself by waving my other arm, but that only made things worse. Soon I was thrashing my arms and legs in a complete panic, and spinning totally out of control.

"Stop moving!" bellowed WingCo, but I was much too disorientated to listen to him. I would have thrashed about for a long time, except my leg got caught on one of the obstacles – a large hoop – and I crashed into the wall. Finally, I brought myself to a stop by clinging onto one of the anchor ropes.

"Well," said WingCo, as he floated up to me, "I've seen worse starts. What did you learn from that?"

"I learnt that I'm never going to try space swimming again." I wailed, "Get Biff and Boff back. They can take me everywhere, then I won't need to learn."

"Biff and Boff have other duties," said WingCo, "Everyone on the station needs to pull their own weight."

I heard what he was saying, and part of me understood what he meant, but I was too scared to think clearly.

"I can't do it. I'll never be able to do space swimming. I won't do it." I was aware that I was sounding more and more like a spoilt child, but I still couldn't stop myself adding, "You can't make me!"

WingCo floated backwards a little and regarded me with a cool eye.

"You're no hero," he said at last, shaking his head, "Skip made a mistake bringing you here. We'll send you back tomorrow. Find someone who will be up to the job – a real hero, not a snivelling child."

He stared at me for a few seconds longer, and his words triggered various thoughts in my brain. First, I wasn't going to have to do any more space swimming – that was good. Second, I was going to be replaced because I wasn't hero material – that didn't feel so great. Third ... why was WingCo turning to go?

"You just wait here until we're ready to take you home," he said, as he floated towards one of the exit tunnels.

"Wait? For how long?"

My fingers were already beginning to ache from clutching at the rope, my body was twisted into a very uncomfortable position and I was pretty sure that I'd need to pee quite soon.

"You'll wait until we're ready," answered WingCo, still gliding to the exit, "You're of no use, and there are other priorities."

The difficulty of my situation started to become clear. I was stranded in the far future,

completely dependent on these rabbits to get me home. Worse than that, I couldn't even move from this spot without their help. I began to feel a bit more humble – a bit more grateful.

“Look, I'm sorry,” I said, as calmly as I could, “I didn't mean to sound so ... useless. I was just scared. It's been a difficult day.” I paused before adding, “Please don't leave me here.”

WingCo stopped and looked over his shoulder, his keen eyes searching mine.

“Better,” he said, “but I still can't hear the hero who's going to save the world. That's the fellow we were all hoping for.”

Desperately, I thought back to the stories that I'd read as a boy. The ones that were filled with heroes. Soldiers, explorers and adventurers who faced danger – even death – with a stiff upper lip knowing that they were fighting on the side of all that was right and all that was good. What would they say in my situation? It was okay to be afraid, I was sure they would say, because without fear you cannot be brave, but a real hero should conquer his fears. I summoned all my inner strength and put on my best hero voice.

“Sorry, old chap, had an attack of the wobbles. Dashed embarrassing – be grateful if you didn't mention it to the others. I think I'm ready to start again. I'm sure I can crack it, if you're still willing to teach me.”

WingCo turned to face me, the traces of a smile playing around the corners of his mouth.

“That's the spirit, Turtle. We'll make a hero of you yet.”

And then we began again.

WingCo explained to me that space swimming was a bit like normal swimming but with two big differences. First, he said, in normal swimming you usually swim along, or near, the surface of the water. In space swimming you can go in any direction. Second, water is a lot thicker than air. In water you have to really put in a real effort in to get moving and it's easy to stop. In space swimming the smallest movement can start you spinning and stopping takes precise, controlled actions. That's why I'd ended up in such difficulty when I'd scratched my nose.

So, we started off with the hardest bit of all. WingCo towed me into the very centre of the room and let me go. All I had to do was stay there. It was maddeningly difficult. When I breathed out, I'd start moving backwards. I would move an arm or a leg and start spinning. WingCo taught me how to make small movements with my hands, feet and even my head in order to hold my position. It took hours, and I ended up spinning out of control more than a few times, but I stuck at it. In the end, I could hover pretty well, and move around slowly. I was so exhausted that I just wanted to go to bed, but WingCo insisted we head to the canteen for something to eat. All they had was TCS – Textured Carrot Substitute – which was disgusting, but I was hungry enough to eat two helpings. Then WingCo took me to my bunk, and I had another shock. I was too big to sleep in a normal bunny dormitory. Instead, they'd made a

bunk for me in one of the corridors. I say a bunk, in reality it was just some foam padding glued sideways on the wall. WingCo manoeuvred me into position and then strapped me in using some bungee cords.

“Wouldn’t want you drifting off when you’d drifted off,” he said, chuckling to himself.

For my part, as soon as my head touched the pillow I fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

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## **Chapter 4: My First Mission**

“Wakey wakey, Turtle. Time to rise and shine.”

Skip’s voice brought me back to the land of the living.

“Let’s go and have breakfast, and I’ll brief you on today’s mission.”

He unhooked me from the bunk, and I followed him down the corridor to the canteen. I lost control a couple of times on the way, and by the time we got there, I had a bump on the head, a scrape on my hand and all my muscles were sore. I felt very sad and angry inside that I was so helpless in this new environment, but I kept repeating to myself “I’m the hero who’ll save the world”. That helped me to keep my temper and to keep trying. WingCo was just finishing his breakfast when we arrived in the canteen.

“How’s he doing,” he asked Skip.

“He got here all on his own.” replied Skip, “A bit slow and a couple of bumps, but he made it under his own steam.”

“Well done, Turtle,” said WingCo, patting me on the shoulder, “Without your hard work yesterday, I swear you’d have had at least a broken arm – if you’d have made it at all.”

Skip and I collected our TCS from a dispensing machine and went to sit at one of the few tables in the canteen – a tight squeeze for me as the chairs were bunny sized. I noticed that the rabbits themselves tended not to use the tables. They simply floated in the air, on their own or in small groups, eating their breakfast. Because there was no up or down, some of them looked to me like they were upside down, or on their sides. It made a very odd sight.

“You look odd to them as well,” said Skip, “but they’re polite enough not to stare.”

Now I stared at Skip, how on earth had he known what I was thinking?

“No, I can’t read your mind, if that’s what you’re thinking,” said Skip, apparently contradicting himself, “but I can read your face like a book.”

I suddenly became very aware of how my face looked. I closed my mouth and tried to put on an expression of polite interest.

“Should we begin with the briefing?” I suggested, taking a spoonful of TCS and grimacing. Since last night I’d forgotten how awful it was – how awful, and how completely unlike carrot.

“We need to figure out what made the plants change and why they started attacking people.” Skip began, pausing to take a mouthful of his own breakfast before continuing, “Yesterday, while we were waiting for you to come out of the house, Pockets and I collected samples from all the plants we could find near your home. If we can get a sample from one of the same plants, as it is now, we can figure out what’s different.”

“And then will you be able to beat the plants?” I asked.

“One step at a time.” he replied, holding up a paw as if to slow me down, “If we can

find out what the difference is between then and now, we might be able to work out what caused the change. Then we might be able to reverse it.”

“That doesn’t sound very certain,” I said, “I could be in terrible danger down there.” I was about to say that I wouldn’t do it and that I wanted to go home, but I noticed that all the conversations in the room had stopped. The bunnies were all looking at me, and I remembered what WingCo had said about me being the hero who was going to save the world. I took a deep breath, and in my best hero voice, I said: “One thing is certain. Sitting round here talking isn’t going to get the job done. Let’s get to it.”

Then I spoiled things a little, because I stood up too quickly and ended up floating all the way to the ceiling before I could stop myself. Even so, I could tell that the bunnies were very impressed by my bravery.

Skip took me back to the large spherical chamber, which had now been cleared of the space swimming obstacles. He said that this was the docking bay. The pod was now recharged, refuelled and was waiting to take me back to the surface.

“Who’s going to fly it?” I asked, and an answer came from behind me that made my heart sink.

“Why, you’ll fly it of course.”

I turned to see WingCo, and once again my face must have betrayed my thoughts, because he continued:

“No need to look so glum. It’ll be a breeze for someone who can master space swimming. I’ll teach you.”

I had mixed feelings about this. WingCo was a good teacher, but the last time I was his pupil – just last night – I had ended up battered, bruised and very tired. I needed to be on top form, if I was going to face the plants again.

I needn’t have worried. Flying the pod seemed to be a lot simpler than I’d imagined. WingCo took me inside and explained that everything was voice activated. When I was ready, I could just tell the pod to undock and then tell it to take me to the mission location. Once I had completed the mission, I just needed to tell the pod to take off and then to return to the habitat. There were a few other things. For example, if I activated the external view, like Skip had done, I could steer the pod manually just by looking where I wanted it to go. I could also launch up to four canopy-busting missiles to clear a path for my take off, or activate a defensive grid that would hold off the plants for a few minutes. WingCo then explained, in a very serious voice, that I only had limited power and limited fuel. If I wasted too much of either, I might not get back again.”

“You mean that I’d be stranded on the surface until you rescued me?” I asked.

WingCo didn’t answer, he just shuffled around and looked at his feet, until a voice from outside said:

“The Wing Commander is frightened to tell you that no one has survived long enough to be rescued. He should not need to hide this from you – we all know how

brave you are. Besides, we do not know how the plants will react to you. They only attack when they feel threatened, and it is likely that they will not see you as a threat – at least at first.”

I stuck my head out of the pod and saw, standing next to Skip, a very strange looking rabbit indeed. She was a bit smaller than Skip, had bright pink fur and her eyes were so large that there was very little room left on her face for anything else. In one hand she carried a jam jar and, in the other, she held what looked like a stubby pair of scissors.

“Who are you?” I asked.

She looked so strange that I couldn’t help staring, but she didn’t seem to notice, or if she did, she didn’t take offense.

“People call me TwoBrains,” she said.

“Is that because you’re really clever?” I asked, and she gave me a puzzled look before answering.

“No, it is because I have two brains. One up here,” she tapped her head, “and one down here,” she wiggled her bottom, “It is true that this makes me very smart, and this is why I am the chief plantologist.”

I wasn’t sure if she was making fun of me, but Skip and WingCo seemed to take her very seriously, so I decided to check out how clever she was.

“Have you designed some special equipment to help me complete my mission?” I asked, thinking there would be a laser scalpel, or a force field generator, or a personal rocket pack.

“Indeed,” said TwoBrains, “Here I have a pair of secateurs, which will be perfect for removing the sample from the plant.”

She handed me the stubby scissors.

“And here I have a jar for containing the sample.”

She handed me the jam jar.

I felt a little disappointed by the simple nature of this equipment, but I had to admit that it was exactly what I needed to complete the mission.

“Now then, Turtle,” said WingCo, “you’re all set. It’s time for you to start.”

With that they helped me into the pod, closed the hatch and I was alone.

“Pod,” I said, in my best hero voice, “undock and set course for mission location.”

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## **Chapter 5: Hello George!**

The journey itself was quick and uneventful. I realised that we were coming in to land when I felt my feet being pushed into the floor by my returning weight. Experiencing the gravitational pull of the earth, so suddenly after the day or so I'd spent in space, made me a bit queasy. I had to resist the urge to turn on the outside view, remembering that I needed to save power for other things. It seemed like I was getting heavier and heavier until, finally, there was a bump, and a sign lit up telling me that it was safe to open the hatch. I took several deep breaths and tried to calm myself before I gave the instruction. When the hatch slid open, I peered nervously out and slowly climbed through the opening to stand on the grass. It was every bit as beautiful as I remembered, and I almost forgot how deadly the plants could be until I turned round to look at the pod. Already the plants were starting to grow up around the cylindrical base. I quickly checked my feet, but the plants seemed to be taking no interest in me – thank goodness. I thought that, maybe, it was the bunny technology that was attracting the plants, and as I reached into the pod to retrieve the jam jar and secateurs, I realised how very clever TwoBrains had been in equipping me for the mission. I had deliberately been given very low tech equipment, so I wouldn't seem to be a threat. Still, there was no point in hanging around. I decided to start my search.

“Pod, close the hatch,” I commanded, and I started to walk slowly away from the landing site looking carefully all around for any plant that I might recognise. It didn't take long for me to realise that I recognised nothing. In fact, as I looked around, I found it harder and harder to believe that I was standing close to anything I might once have called home. I gazed at the tall trees trying to imagine the buildings that I knew must have once stood in their place. It was as I was looking up that my foot caught on something hard in the grass, and I stumbled. At first I thought that I was being attacked. I half turned to run back to the pod, but then I saw the edge of something man-made, half buried in the ground. I bent down, pushed away the grass and moved aside some loose earth. It wasn't long before I'd cleared the face of the object, and with a shock, I realised I was looking down at a street sign. Although it was battered and faded, I could still clearly see the letters – *\*Fairfield Road\**. Our street! Now that I had found something so familiar, I looked at the scene in front of me with new eyes. Sure enough, I could suddenly see straight lines in the grass and running between the trees. They must be the outline of the street itself, maybe the pavements as well. Beyond these lines I could see grassy hillocks, and I guessed that these were the long collapsed remains of buildings. Now that I had some landmarks to follow, I started to make my way carefully to where I thought our home had once stood.

Even though I could see some traces of how things used to be, it was still quite difficult to find my way. It took me a few tries before I felt quite certain that I was

standing exactly in the place where I had lived in the distant past. Even then, when I looked around, I didn't see any plants I recognised. I walked up and down, back and forth, trying to remember all the bushes, trees, flowers and weeds that I must have passed a hundred times, but nothing looked familiar. Suddenly I felt like it was utterly hopeless and I sat down with my head in my hands. I sat like that for a long time, until a sudden gust of wind made me look up. It had blown through the woodland and ruffled the leaves of a plant I had been sat next to. One of the leaves was blown against my shoulder, again and again, like it was trying to get my attention. The plant was a huge, unruly bush of a thing – almost a thicket on its own – but as I stared at it, I started to recognise something.

“George?” I whispered, and the wind must have blown again because it was as if the whole plant was nodding.

Now, I've never told anyone before, but this particular plant is one that I walk past almost every single day, and so it had seemed natural to give it a name. “Hello, George,” I'd say as I walked past – as long as there was no one else about, obviously. I'd developed quite a soft spot for that little plant, so it was a shock to see it so huge, and an awful thing to see it in such bad shape.

“Has no one been looking after you, George?” I said, “What a state you've got into.” Well, I'd always been told that a good pruning does wonders for plants – like a haircut and a shave for us men – so I set to work. It only occurred to me later that by cutting into this plant I might be putting myself in grave danger, but it seemed like such an obvious thing to do at the time. Within a few minutes, I'd made a tremendous difference and, of course, I'd remembered to collect my sample. I was just standing back to admire my handiwork, when a most remarkable thing happened. George burst into flower. Just like that, in the blink of an eye, he was covered with the most beautiful blooms I'd ever seen. It made me so happy to see my old friend transformed in this way that I stood and stared, with an enormous grin on my face ... which made the icy finger of fear all the more shocking as it touched my spine. I had let my guard down, and now my senses were telling me that I was in great danger. Quickly I looked around, but it was already too late. All at once a thick vine whipped itself around my body, pinning my arms and dragging me away. I dropped the secateurs, and I would have screamed, but there was no time. You see the vine deposited me, seconds later, in front of another bush that was growing out of control, releasing me as quickly as it had grabbed me only moment before. I stood there, mystified, until the vine waved the secateurs in front of my face and then gently placed them in my hand.

“You want me to prune your ... friend?” I asked, pointing towards the new bush. There was no answer, but again it was as if the wind was blowing through the leaves all around me. What could I do, I set loose my inner gardener and pruned as if my life depended on it – which, for all I knew, it did. Once again, when I was finished, the bush I had been working on burst into flower, as if it were applauding my efforts. But

there was no time for me to relax, because soon I was being pulled, pushed and carried around from plant to plant. I don't know how long it went on, but I was beginning to worry that I might be kept here forever – a slave to the woodland. I had just started to think seriously about an escape plan – making a run for it – when, to my surprise, I found myself deposited in front of the pod. For a second I wondered why, then I saw that the grass had grown up almost to the bottom of the hatch. I noticed, here and there, a few blue sparks rippling around the base of the pod – some kind of electrical defence, I guessed. Whatever it was, though, it wasn't working. A few more minutes and I wouldn't have been able to get in.

“Pod, open hatch,” I commanded.

The entrance swung open, and I hurriedly climbed in. I was now acutely aware that I had spent far longer on this mission than had been planned. Just before I went, however, I turned to take one last look at the scene outside. The woodland was now a riot of colour. Flowers in blues, reds, yellows and even, bizarrely, emerald greens had erupted wherever I had pruned. I drank in the view, only too aware of the drab interior of the habisat to which I would return. I don't know why, but I felt that I had to wave goodbye, and when I did it was like the whole forest waved back at me. Then, with a final check that I had the jam jar, I closed the hatch and made ready for take-off. Not a moment too soon. Already there was a warning flashing on the inside of the pod – TAKE OFF POSSIBLE FOR NEXT 30 SECONDS ONLY. As I watched, the seconds ticked down from 30 to 29 to 28, and my throat went dry.

“Pod, take off!” I croaked.

I was certain that the command was too faint to be heard, but my voice must have been louder than I thought because the pod understood, and I felt the extra weight of acceleration in my legs and neck. If I thought that I was safe, however, I had another thing coming. A new warning now flashed up – TIME TO CANOPY IMPACT: 18 SECONDS.

“Pod, deploy canopy–” I started, but then I remembered the beautiful scene I had just left. What right had I to destroy these ... creatures. After all, they hadn't harmed me. In fact, they'd let me go. I had to find another way.

“Pod, activate 360 view.”

The walls of the pod disappeared, but this time I was too busy to be amazed. I was desperately looking for something. The warning had not disappeared. It told me I now had 8 ... 7 seconds before the pod hit the canopy. Then I saw it. Right above where George was, there was a gap in the branches. Not big, but big enough for the pod to fit through.

“Pod, manual control.”

There was a lurch, and I was thrown painfully against the side of the pod. Although it was now invisible, it hurt every bit as much as slamming into a brick wall. It felt like I'd broken at least a rib, but I kept my eyes pinned on the small circle of blue sky that was my only way to safety. 5 ... 4. Was it my imagination, or was the hole getting

smaller. 2 ... 1. Screeeech. With a sound like a hundred fingernails against a super-sized blackboard, the pod was through the canopy and into the clear.

“Yesss!” I cheered, letting go of one of the straps long enough to do a mini fist-pump. The pod, however, had no intention of letting me enjoy even a moment of triumph. POWER CRITICAL, flashed a new warning, MAIN THRUSTER SHUTDOWN IN 27 SECS.

“Pod, deactivate 360 view,” I shouted, remembering what Skip had said about how much power it took.

Then I had a terrible thought.

“Pod, display time to achieve earth orbit.”

If we didn’t make it to orbit before the thrusters shut down, then the pod would crash back down to the ground and I would certainly be killed. Now there were two numbers displayed in the dimness of the pod’s interior. Two numbers counting down ... and they seemed to be synchronised. 23/23 ... 22/22. Was it my imagination, or was the ‘time to orbit’ number changing just a fraction later than the ‘main thruster shutdown’ number. The difference didn’t have to be much, just a few milliseconds would condemn me to death, and reacting to this threat, my brain went into overdrive. Why hadn’t I blanked the external view as soon as we’d made the gap? Why had I wasted precious seconds in my fist-pumping celebration? 12 ... 11. Was there anything I could do? Anything that would make a difference? I thought not. Certainly not in the last 5 ... 4 ... 3 seconds.

When the thrusters cut out, I immediately felt weightlessness take hold of my body. That seemed like a good thing, but I couldn’t tell for sure. I didn’t want to turn on the external view for fear of draining even more power, so I strained my senses in an attempt to detect any movement. Was the pod drifting ever so slightly downwards? I was concentrating so hard that I literally jumped when there was a crackle of static and a voice came out of nowhere.

“Turtle? Come in, Turtle. You’re drifting. Is something wrong?”

I looked around, but I couldn’t see a speaker anywhere.

“Hello ... who is this?” I said, sounding rather dopey.

“This is Skip,” said the voice.

Was it my imagination, or was there a hint of relief there.

“Hello, Skip ... how are you?”

I was really not playing the part of a hero in this conversation, I thought to myself. I wondered if I’d been hit by some type of seed again and it was this that was making me a bit slow. As I tried to check myself for injuries, twisting into odd shapes and positions, Skip continued.

“Turtle, you’re drifting in low orbit.”

So I had made it. Hurrah!

“You need to start the thrusters again to return to the habisat.”

“No can do,” I said, with my head now poking between my legs as I tried to check

my bottom, “The power’s run out. I can’t use the main thrusters.”

“Well stop looking at your backside and use the manoeuvring jets.”

I snapped back upright, banging my head painfully on the side of the pod as I did so.

“You can see me?”

“Of course, this is a video link.”

Curses! Now I was looking like a dope as well as sounding like one.

“How do I turn on the jets?” I asked, trying to concentrate on the small matter of saving my life.

“Don’t worry, now you’re in orbit we can pilot the pod from here,” came the tired-sounding response, and almost immediately I felt several jolts of movement as the jets fired.

With only the small jets for propulsion, the trip back to the habisat took ages, and it became bitterly cold in the pod. Without my new clothes, I think I would have frozen solid. As it was, I was shivering uncontrollably when the pod docked and the door opened into the now familiar docking bay. There was a small welcoming committee waiting to greet me. They all seemed to be too busy doing stuff to cheer – poor things – but, nonetheless, I appreciated them showing up. WingCo immediately dashed into the pod. I could hear him issuing requests for information and tutting loudly at the responses – it was clear that I’d returned the pod in less than perfect condition.

TwoBrains approached me, and without a word exchanged, I handed her the jam jar containing the sample. Then she was gone. Biff (or maybe Boff) was there, clearly waiting to help me manoeuvre myself around when the time came. Only Skip seemed to take any real interest in me. He floated over and patted me on the shoulder.

“Well done, Turtle. Not a textbook mission, but it seems to have been successful. I’d like to know some of the details, particularly why you spent so long on the surface, but now I think it’s bed time. You look shattered.”

It was true, I was exhausted, and not a little battered and bruised. With very little help from Boff (or Biff), I started in the direction of my bunk ... and then Trouble arrived.

“Hello, Turtle,” he called in a sing-song voice while whizzing around me and doing all kinds of acrobatics – literally running rings around me as I made my stately progress through the air. After a few seconds of this he paused, critically observing my technique.

“You’ve got better at space swimming,” he pronounced, and gave me just enough time to start feeling good about myself before adding, “but you’re still rubbish.”

Then Trouble performed a dozen more somersaults before landing on my back and sitting there, like I was some kind of moving platform.

“You were gone a long time on the mission, did you stop to have tea with a friend?”

This was meant cheekily, but I couldn’t help thinking how close to the truth he was.

The bunnies were the enemies of the plants. I wasn’t sure how they’d react if they knew I’d been down there pruning bushes – making them happy.

“I got lost,” was all I said in reply.

“You got lucky, that’s what you got.” replied Trouble, “From what I heard, you escaped by the skin of your teeth. I bet the plants are going to get you next time.” “You haven’t got anything to bet,” I said, as Biff (or was it Boff) strapped me into bed.

This seemed to end the conversation, because Trouble drifted away, giggling to himself about something. It was only as I was drifting off myself that I thought about that last sentence again, and my eyes snapped open. What did he mean – ‘next time’?

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## **Chapter 6: Next Time**

I was in a deep, deep sleep when I was woken, and it took me a little while to recognise that it was Skip who was my alarm clock this morning. He looked tired himself – tired but excited – and I said as much while he was helping me unstrap myself from the bed.

“I’ve been working all night with TwoBrains,” he explained, “we’ve made a breakthrough. I’ll explain everything over breakfast.”

“Does this place only have four rooms?” I asked, “We always seem to go to the same places.”

“The habisat is actually quite extensive and very well equipped,” explained Skip, “it’s just that you’re too big to fit into most of the rooms. You wouldn’t even get through the doors. We have laboratories, control rooms, dormitories and even a hydroponics room – that’s where we grow TCS.”

As if I needed reminding about TCS. When we arrived at the canteen, Trouble was there to hand me an oversized bowl of the gloopy sludge. After only a couple of meals, I was beginning to hate the fact that this was the only thing to eat on the entire station.

“What’s the matter, don’t you like TCS?” asked Trouble, seeing the look of disgust on my face.

“It’s horrible,” I replied, thinking that it was better to be honest than polite, “Isn’t there anything else to eat?”

“No, just TCS,” said Trouble, doing a little loop-the-loop in the air, “so you’re going to have to eat it or starve.”

Then he paused for a second as a thought occurred to him.

“What do you normally eat? In the past, I mean.”

“Oh, all kinds of things,” I said, my eyes glazing over at the delicious memories, “vegetables, potatoes, rice, salad, cheese and ...”

I don’t know what made me do it. I suppose I just thought about how Trouble had teased me before, and now I wanted to get my own back. Whatever the reason, I looked Trouble straight in the eye as I finished the sentence in my most evil voice, “... and rabbit.”

It was like the whole room took a deep breath. There was silence for a couple of heartbeats and Trouble scurried off to hide behind Biff (or was it Boff). I felt like every eye in the place was upon me, and I was sure I could feel the weight of their displeasure pressing down on me, making the blood sing in my ears. Suddenly I felt isolated – the rest of room seemed to be a long way away – and the weight pressed harder on my brain until I thought my head would explode.

“Come on, Turtle. We’re waiting for you.”

Skip’s voice at my ear brought me back to the here and now. I turned to look at him, and then at the table where WingCo and TwoBrains were waiting. The room was

back to normal now, with the buzz of early morning conversation filling the air, and no one seemed to be paying me any attention. Only Trouble seemed to be different. He was definitely keeping his distance. I shrugged and went to the table.

“You have brought us a very amusing little gift,” said TwoBrains, tapping the jam jar which stood on the table in front of her, “It took us most of the night to uncover it’s secret, but we finally discovered what George had to tell us.”

“Yes, it was lucky that Pockets and I had been very thorough in collecting samples when we came to fetch you from the past,” said Skip, “We were able to compare a sample from George in your time and a sample from George today.”

“The difference is the dust,” explained TwoBrains.

“He didn’t seem very dusty to me,” I cut in, “A bit neglected and unruly perhaps, but not dusty.”

I was treated to a trio of withering stares, and I decided that I’d better not interrupt any more.

“This is not normal dust,” said TwoBrains, “This is Cosmic Dust. We have detected it before – deep in space – but not in the concentrations we see in George. We even tried to study it, but the samples never last long once we bring them into the habitat. Even as we speak, the Cosmic Dust in George is decaying. In one or two days, it will all be gone.”

“In that case, I’m not really sure how I’ve helped,” I said sadly.

“Chin up, Turtle,” said WingCo, “This is the best lead we’ve had for ages. You’ll see.”

“Something must have brought this dust to earth,” continued TwoBrains, “This would be the source of the Cosmic Dust that has infected the plants. If we remove the source, the plants will return to normal ... but first we must find it.”

Now TwoBrains brought out a strange, little, flat device which she placed on the table between us. Without any clear instruction – no button pushed or switch flicked – the device spluttered into life and projected an image of planet earth into the air above the table. Rather than being a full colour hologram, this was merely a wire-frame. The main continents and seas were outlined, as well as the gridlines that ran north to south and east to west, but that was all. It did, however, seem strangely realistic to me – perhaps because of the way it was slowly rotating, just as I imagined the real earth was.

“My idea ... my hypothesis,” said TwoBrains, “is that there will be more Cosmic Dust near the source, which is probably a meteorite. We – that is, you – will need to take more samples, so that we can test and see where the concentration is higher. Lucky for you I am really very clever, and I have devised a search pattern that will reduce to a minimum the number of samples we need.”

TwoBrains now reached out and pushed a button on the device. Three red dots lit up – small spots of colour floating in the middle of nothing – clearly showing the locations of my next missions.

“Only three, that’s brilliant,” I said, smiling and confident, but everyone else was still looking at the holographic globe.

Five more dots appeared. They seemed pretty randomly positioned to me, but I guessed that there was some very clever science behind the locations.

“Okay, eight’s not too bad. I can do eight. I guess it’s about a week’s work.”

I gazed at the bowl of TCS that I still held in my hand and tried to imagine another 20 or 30 meals just the same. Then I noticed that the bunnies were still looking at the globe. A few more dots appeared, then more ... then more, until I lost count. Then it stopped, and it was like everything else had stopped as well.

“How long will it take?” I asked, not raising my eyes from the bowl of TCS.

“Not too long,” said WingCo, floating over to lay a comforting paw on my shoulder, “only about five years, if you do one a day ... but we might get lucky, every time you go to the surface there’s a chance of finding the source.”

I said nothing. I just started swallowing spoon after spoon of TCS – now I knew it was either that or starve.

I was downhearted, of course. My first mission had been a success, and although I had been scared at times, the plants had never actually attacked me. In fact, I’d felt that they were rather friendly and, oddly, even a little human. However, it seemed unlikely that I’d be so lucky all the time. With over one thousand missions in front of me, the chances of making a mistake were very high. Nevertheless, I put on a brave face, said some brave words and hoped that the bunnies couldn’t see how much I was shaking inside my new suit of clothes. I said that, with so much to do, I’d better get started straight away. This seemed to please everybody, and I was led to the pod by a cheering crowd of rabbits. Then, almost before I knew it, I was alone in the pod with my jam jar and secateurs, heading through space towards that first red dot on the globe. I was slightly reassured to be carrying a small addition to my kit. TwoBrains had noted that, as I was not attacked by the plants, I had been able to stay on the surface much longer than bunnies usually did. This meant that not only was my pod more likely to run out of power while I was on a mission, but also that I was more likely to survive until a rescue pod arrived. For these reasons, she had given me an emergency transmitter – to be activated only if I got into trouble. As it happened, I almost had to do this shortly after landing.

The pod brought me down in the middle of a vast landscape, consisting almost entirely of tall grass. This grass was straw-coloured and so tall that it towered over my head – so I couldn’t see very far around me at all. I should have taken a sample from one of those long stalks, got back into the pod and left, but this was my first mission. I was curious, and not as cautious as I would later become. Besides, in its own way, this landscape was every bit as beautiful as the woodland. The grass swished and swayed in the breeze, and the stalks made interesting patterns as they moved – like the flames in a fire. Enchanted, I set off to do some exploring.

Although, before I went too far, I did think to turn and check that my path back to the

pod was visible in the grass. Sure enough, although I thought that I'd been moving carefully, I could clearly see a broad path of bent and flattened stems marking the way I had come. Made braver by this, I continued forward, eager to see what new wonders I could discover.

I felt like I'd gone quite a long way, although it was probably only two or three minutes later, when I started to get nervous again. I was about to turn back when, all of a sudden, the grass stopped, and I came out into a wide clearing. The clearing was surrounded on all sides by the tall grass, and within it, just randomly here and there, were five or six large pools. The pools were quite round and about as wide as I am tall. Now I looked more carefully, I saw that they didn't seem to have any water in them. So, I thought, not pools but holes. How fascinating. They were very regular, too regular to be natural, so maybe they were man made. I decided to have a closer look. I took out my secateurs, nipped off the longest stalk of grass I could find and headed forward. I reached the edge of the nearest hole and peered in. I didn't go too close – I'd heard that the edges of holes could collapse suddenly – but from where I stood I could see the glint of water about five or six feet down. I got the long piece of grass and dipped it down to try and test the depth. To my astonishment, as soon as the end of the grass touched the surface it fizzed and shrivelled. At first I didn't know what to think, but as more and more of the grass stem disintegrated, I realised that it was not water in the hole – it was acid. It must have been a particularly nasty type of acid at that ... which was eating its way up towards my fingers. I dropped the grass in shock, and it landed right at the edge of the hole.

There must have been some kind of trigger – maybe fine hairs – just there at the rim, because the next thing I knew the ground under my feet was rising and bucking. Before I could jump away, I found myself standing on a slippy, slidey slope, and I was unable to stop myself from falling towards the deadly acid pool. With a desperate effort, I twisted round, fell on my tummy and drove the point of the secateurs into the earth as far from the edge of the hole as I could reach. Although the ground still shook and tipped, I now had a firm anchor and, moving gradually, I was able to pull myself clear.

I stood up and looked around me. Now that the trap had been sprung, it was clear that I was not surrounded by random holes, as I had first thought. Around each one I could now see leaves, camouflaged under a thin layer of earth. They were huge, and were coated with a slime – some of which was now smeared on my clothes – that made them super slippery. Obviously these plants waited until an unsuspecting animal came too close. Then they would raise their leaves, tipping their prey into the pit. With a chill, I realised that this pit was the thing's stomach, and I had almost been lunch. I'd heard of carnivorous plants before – like the pitcher plant or the Venus flytrap – but I'd never dreamt of anything this big. Scared half out of my wits, I turned and ran all the way back to the pod. When I got there, I paused only briefly to take a sample of the grass before I jumped back inside and closed the hatch behind

me.

My nerves were jangling, and I fidgeted the whole of the return journey, but I had mostly calmed down by the time the pod docked. The bunnies were very excited to see me, and TwoBrains swam off like a rocket in her eagerness to analyse the sample. I, however, was too tired after my adventure to do much of anything. I went to have dinner, and then I went to bed. I noticed that the little rabbit, Trouble, was following me around, but he kept his distance now and didn't try and tease me. It was only as I was drifting off to sleep, I realised that I had got back to my bunk and strapped myself in without anyone to help me. Something that had seemed impossible only two days ago was now automatic. Even though I had so much left to do, this achievement gave me a nice warm feeling inside, and despite my difficult day, I had happy dreams all night long.

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## **Chapter 7: Thin and Spindly**

The next morning, I was woken by Skip, who told me that the sample I'd brought back from the grasslands had contained less Cosmic Dust than the sample from George. I was quite disappointed, but Skip explained that this was still valuable information. Each sample would help us build up a map showing where the dust was stronger, and where it was weaker. Eventually, this would enable TwoBrains to pinpoint the source.

"Yeah, in about ten years' time," I said grumpily. Then I remembered the warm feeling from the night before. What seems impossible now could be easy before too long. I decided to redouble my efforts.

Of course, sometimes success takes perseverance, and this was definitely one of those times. I did mission after mission. If I was quick, I found that I could even do two missions in a day. This wasn't always possible because the different places I visited were sometime very interesting and frequently very beautiful. In these cases, I couldn't stop myself from taking the time to look around and explore. I never forgot my experience in the grasslands, and I was very careful, but no exploration is totally safe.

The other thing was that I couldn't help feeling sorry for some of the plants that I saw. I did a lot of pruning – which always made the plants happy. I also did some watering. This started on a mission where the pod landed in the middle of a desert. When I first came out of the pod, it looked like there was nothing but sand, sand, sand – as far as the eye could see and in all directions. As I walked around, circling further and further from the pod, I noticed a little brown stalk poking out from the sand. When I bent down, I saw that it was a tiny plant, but so dried out that I couldn't tell if it was alive or dead.

"You poor little thing," I said to it, "Looks like you could do with a drink."

I reached into one of my many pockets, where I always carried a flask of water. Although it was hot, and I was already getting thirsty, I poured the entire contents of the flask over the little stalk. At first nothing happened. Then a little green shoot popped up, and then at the top of the shoot, a delicate blue flower appeared.

"How pretty you are," I murmured, amazed by how bright the colour seemed amid the endless yellow of the desert.

But what happened next took my breath away. A little bit to the left of the first flower, another little blue flower stuck its head out of the sand. Then another ... then another, until there was a long wavy line of blue flowers snaking its way across the desert.

"Wow!" I said in dumb admiration, and I was so busy admiring this magnificent sight that I almost didn't realise the danger. The line of flowers was heading straight for the pod! With a quick "Sorry", I plucked the nearest flower and popped it into my jam jar. Then I raced back to the pod and jumped inside, just before the line of

flowers got there. The hatch was almost closed, when the whole pod lurched to one side. Something underneath was trying to tip it over. Quickly I gave the instruction to take off, and not a moment too soon, we were rising into the air on the return journey. Fortunately, such mishaps and adventures were rare, and I always managed to get back to the pod in time. That is, until the day I met Thin and Spindly.

The mission started like any other. By now I had done over a hundred missions, and the bunnies had started to treat my comings and goings as part of the routine of the habisat. Only a few rabbits had accompanied me to the launch bay to see me off on this particular morning. Trouble was there, of course. He hung back a bit, ready to dive into one of the smaller tunnels in case I looked like I was getting peckish. I was also delighted to see Pockets there, and I stopped to say hello. I hadn't seen Pockets for a while. He told me that he'd been working on a secret project elsewhere on the habisat and that it was taking up all his time. We spent a minute catching up, and as I was turning to get into the pod, he seemed to remember something.

"I know how you like to do a bit of gardening when you're down on the surface," he said, with a conspiratorial wink, "so I got you this."

He brought a trowel out of his pouch and handed it to me. It felt good to hold such a familiar thing in my hands. The trowel looked old, and I wondered where he'd got it from. I also wondered how he knew that I needed a trowel. I didn't talk to the bunnies about my gardening – I was worried that they would think I was 'soft on plants'.

With the mission waiting, however, there was no time for questions. I just said a quick thank you, found a spare pocket for my new tool and then it was time to leave. Once the pod was in flight, I settled back and waited. There really wasn't much for me to do, as TwoBrains always programmed the destination in advance. Because I got bored – just like you do on long journeys – I had invented a little game for myself. I began by turning on the exterior view as the pod started its descent – the drain on the power wasn't all that much, if I didn't look for long. The aim of the game was to guess, as quickly as possible, where in the world my mission would take place. I told myself that it would help prepare me for the type of landscape and plants I would meet, but really if I'd wanted to know this, I could just have asked

TwoBrains. In fact, I liked to see the earth from the sky, and most of the time, I was pretty bad at guessing where the pod would land. This time, however, I could see immediately where we would be landing. We were coming down on the South West coast of what had been the United States. This seemed good to me, as I didn't think it was a place where there would be much danger – not now the people were gone.

Sure enough, when I emerged from the pod, I could see a landscape that was nice, but quite unexciting. There was flat ground covered by short grass, which formed hummocks here and there. A few small streams trickled along, adding a bit of variety to the view. Beyond the flat ground, I could see some rocky hills that were, maybe, ten minutes' walk away. All in all, it looked a bit waterlogged, and I thought I might twist an ankle on a hummock, but otherwise I didn't see much risk ... until I looked

behind me.

There, on the other side of the pod, was a quite amazing sight. There was a forest of trees, but like no other forest I'd ever seen. Each of the trees had to be a hundred meters tall, and although they were widely spaced, their canopies were so broad and thick that they entirely blocked out the sun. This made the interior of the forest absolutely pitch black. In one way, it was like looking into a cave, but the forest was so tall and so vast, that I actually felt like I was looking at the edge of the world. "Giant Redwoods," I said to myself.

I knew about this type of tree. Even in my time these were the largest of all trees, and among the oldest living things on the planet. Now they had been mutated by the cosmic dust, they had become even bigger. Without thinking about what I was doing, I started walking towards the nearest tree, staring up and up until my neck ached. If only I had stopped there, but I was determined to make the most of this new experience. I walked past the treeline and into the forest.

It started to get colder as I went further in and the canopy cut out more of the sunlight. Soon there was no grass under my feet, just moss – and then, once I got to the second line of trees, nothing but bare earth. Now, as I looked further into the forest, I could see only darkness, and I started to feel afraid. I was about to turn around and go back to the pod, when I looked down. There, growing in-between the roots of one of the giant trees, where nothing else would grow, were two little seedlings. I guessed at once that they were Giant Redwood seedlings – what else could they be to grow here – but I knew that there was no way they could survive in the dark, and I felt very sad for them. These trees lived for such a very long time, who knew how many seeds they might drop, or how many of those might make it to become full grown trees. I decided that, at least, I'd do my best to give these two a chance. I bent down and looked at them more closely.

"Mmm," I said as I inspected them, "I think I'll call you Thin and you Spindly," Then, because it seemed polite to be thorough with the introductions, I added, "And you can call me Turtle."

I had decided long ago that it was best to explain to plants what it was you planned to do before you did it. That way they tended not to react badly – or at least not so badly as to cause permanent injury.

"What I'm going to do," I said, "is to give the two of you a lift to somewhere with a bit more light."

Then, using my new trowel, I gently dug around them both so that I could lift them out of the ground without damaging their roots. It took a little while, but before too long I was able to carry them both carefully out of the forest. I made sure that we were far enough away from the tree line and then got ready to plant the two little saplings. I decided to plant them far apart from one another, so that they would both have plenty of room to grow. I planted Thin first, then went to carry Spindly away, but they both looked so sad – with droopy leaves and limp roots. In the end, I planted

them close together. Now they didn't look quite so sad, but still not what I would call chipper, so I decided to give them some water from the flask that I always carried with me. Now they were in the sunlight, however, the two seedlings grew rapidly, and I could see that they were sucking up all the water from the earth around them. Quickly I ran backwards and forwards with my flask, scooping up water from puddles – and then from the nearest stream – to try and satisfy the thirst of my two young friends. In the end, I dug a new channel from the stream to run right past their roots, and finally they seemed to look happy. Certainly, they were growing at a terrific speed and were already as tall as I was. I took a minute to look at them, and to appreciate the good deed I had done. As I looked, I realised what long shadows they were casting. Not just because of how tall they had grown, but also because the sun had dropped so low in the sky. It was almost night, and I had spent the whole day here without realising. I rushed back to the pod, but it was too late – the power was completely drained.

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## **Chapter 8: The Cavern**

Initially, I stayed quite calm. I remembered the emergency transmitter that I'd been given – just in case this exact thing happened. I reached into one of my pockets and pulled out the device. To activate the transmitter, I pulled open the cover and pushed the single button that I found underneath. A small light came on, to show that the emergency signal was being sent, and now I started to think about the position I was in. It would take some time for the rescue pod to arrive, and already it was starting to get dark. My clothes were reacting to the cold – inflating to provide extra insulation – but I still didn't like the idea of spending the night in the open. I thought about what I was going to need to survive until the emergency pod arrived – water, food, shelter – and I began to make a plan.

Soon, however, I was distracted by a rustling sound in the distance. It sounded like a light breeze blowing through leaves, although I couldn't feel any wind. As I listened, it grew louder until it was more like a rumbling, and I thought I could feel the ground shaking slightly. I looked around, to find where the sound was coming from, and my eyes fixed on the tree line. I couldn't really believe what I was seeing, because it looked like some of the trees were moving. They had pulled up their roots and were slithering across the marshy ground towards me. It didn't seem like they were moving particularly quickly, but I still didn't want to stay where I was. I had a strong urge to find somewhere safe. The pod wouldn't do – these monstrous trees would crush it in an instant. I would have to get to the rocky hills I'd seen. Rock was strong. Maybe I could find a cave, or maybe the trees wouldn't be able to climb the slopes. I started to move in the direction of the hills – or at least that's what I tried to do. The grass had grown around my feet and was holding me fast. I pulled one foot free, but as soon as I put it down the grass grew up around it again. Why were the plants suddenly attacking me? After all this time – so many missions – why now? Of course, I realised, it must be the transmitter. There were other things that were new about my current situation – the fact that night was falling, for instance, when all my other missions had been in the daytime – but I'd seen before how plants reacted to bunny technology, so the transmitter seemed the most likely explanation. I fingered the small device that was now safely tucked into a pocket. There was just one button, I remembered. It could be turned on, but not off. I thought about throwing it away, but then how would the rescue pod find me? No, I would have to keep the transmitter with me, even though it would make me a target. Running was the only option I had left, so I yanked my feet free of the grass and started towards the hills. It was slow going at first. Then I found that the faster I went, the less chance the grass had to hold me back. Soon I was sprinting across the waterlogged surface, with my muscles burning and my throat aching from gulping down lungful after lungful of the cold night air. I was too scared to stop and rest in case the grass grabbed my feet. If I was too tired to break free, it wouldn't take long for the giant redwoods to arrive and

crush me. So, on and on I ran until I felt the ground rising beneath my feet and I knew that I had reached the hills. I kept going only until I saw a large enough rock. Like a drowning man who has just found a life raft, I dragged myself onto the rock and climbed to the top.

Looking back the way I had come – staring into the gathering darkness while trying to get my breath back – I could see the enormous shadows of four or five trees, crossing the flat ground on their way to get me. They seemed to be moving slowly, but they were a lot closer than I would have liked. Of the pod, I could see nothing at all. Maybe because it was too far away in this dim light, or maybe because it had been flattened beneath the roots of the passing trees. I turned to look at the hillside, searching for somewhere I could hide, but there was nothing. I could see another rock, an island in this sea of hostile grass, so I made a dash to this and looked again. I kept going like this – dashing from rock to rock, without finding any other type of shelter – until the foremost tree got so close that its roots were almost touching me. I decided I would have to make another run for it, and I wondered how much longer my tired legs would keep going. As I hesitated, I could feel the roots of the trees creeping up around my ankles. I could hesitate no longer. I jumped off the rock and started to run.

I ran for all I was worth, hoping to put some distance between myself and the advancing trees, but still the crash of branches seemed to be close behind me. I tried running up the slope, down the slope or just along the slope. Nothing seemed to make any difference to the speed of my pursuers. My legs were like jelly underneath me – truly, they were about to give way – when I saw, out of the corner of my eye, a dark spot in the hillside to my left. Risking everything, I dodged that way and saw, to my joy, the entrance to a cave. I sprinted, or tried to sprint, desperate to reach safety, desperate to survive so that I could see my family again. Finally, I got to the entrance and collapsed, panting, with my back to the cool rock wall. Stopping too soon was almost fatal. You see the trees themselves couldn't get through the small entrance to the cave – of course not, they were hundreds of meters tall – but their roots were small. Their roots could go anywhere. Their roots were as long as the branches that stretched high into the sky. Now those roots started to feel their way into the cave. Seeming to sniff the air, they searched for me, and as they reached for me, I recoiled in horror. Unfortunately, this is just what they were waiting for. They couldn't really smell me, but they could sense movement, and they rushed forward, targeting me for their deadly embrace. I jumped up and backed away, keeping my eyes fixed on the tips of the roots as they hunted round the cave. Unable to look away, but wanting to move faster, I was almost running backwards when my heel caught on a rock, and I went toppling head over heels down a steep slope. I fell and skidded until I was stopped, not by unyielding rock, but by what felt like the skin of a trampoline. It bounced me once or twice, and it seemed to be weighing me up until, with a loud sucking noise – tthhhwwuup – I was pulled through. I fell for no more than a second

before landing, with a thump, at the bottom of the slope. When I opened my eyes – which I had closed as I fell – I saw above me the oval entrance through which I had fallen. It was covered with a glowing orange membrane, like a jelly, that was substantial but transparent. As I watched, I saw the tree roots working their way down the passage towards me. I shrank back, but when they touched the membrane, they hissed and fizzed and drew back. Two ... three times they tested the barrier before they gave up and withdrew. Once the roots had disappeared from sight, I felt confident enough to stand up and look around me. Even though there was hardly any light, I realised straight away that I was in a huge cavern. The light that there was came from row after row of crystal cubicles, all as clear as glass and each containing a person. A live person, I thought, although I couldn't be sure as they all stood as still as statues.

From where I was standing, which was slightly higher than the floor of the cavern, I could see that the rows of cubicles stretched away into the distance. In the dim light, I could just make out where the rows ended, and about halfway between, I could see a clear, circular space with some sort of low table in the middle. Peering through the membrane barrier behind me, I now found that my eyes had adjusted to the gloom, and I could see the tips of the tree roots lying still in the tunnel outside. Clearly they were waiting for me to come back out so that they could drag me to the surface. I would either have to wait until they had gone or I would have find another way out of here. I didn't fancy my chances of being able to out-wait a tree, so I set off to explore the cavern.

First, I decided to take a good look at one of the cubicles. I stopped, randomly, at one that contained a man. He looked quite old to me, with grey hair and wrinkled skin. I could see him pretty clearly because the material that made the cubicle walls was so thin that it looked like it wasn't there. The man wore simple clothes – quite like pyjamas – which were light brown in colour and had no pattern. Looking around I saw that all the people were dressed the same way, men and women, old and young. I reached out, carefully, to touch the wall of the cubicle, and found it to be very smooth and quite cold. I ran my finger along the surface, and all at once, some letters appeared.

“Krasnodar Mycroft,” I read, “born 3254. Status normal.”

I drew my fingers back and the letters faded. Now I walked all around the cubicle, examining it in detail, but without touching. I was wondering, if I touched the wall in a certain place would the cubicle open and the man awake. What a wonderful story he must have to share. What amazing things could he tell me about the future? I reached out, but almost immediately drew my fingers back. A terrible thought had occurred to me. What if these were the last humans? What if I harmed this man by waking him? Anyway, what would he do when he woke? He'd be trapped here with me, and even if we got out, would the bunnies allow him to stay on the habisat – there wasn't a lot of room. No, I would leave him sleeping for now.

Having, for the moment, discovered all I could from my investigation of the crystal cubicle, I started my journey towards the centre of the cavern, where I'd seen the circular clearing and the mysterious table. The walk was longer than I'd thought it would be, and I grew more and more unsettled as I passed by every new cubicle. Although everyone seemed to be asleep, with their eyes closed, I began to imagine that I was being watched. I thought that, maybe, when I passed by, the people were coming to life – their eyes flicking open and their heads turning to follow me as I walked on. More than once, I spun round to try and catch them out, but every time I found myself looking at the same row of motionless figures. All dressed the same. All with eyes closed. All locked in their dimly glowing crystal boxes.

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## **Chapter 9: The People Are ... Safe**

Eventually I reached the centre of the chamber and found that the clear area was, in fact, raised slightly above the floor of the cavern. I had to take three steps up, and then I was on a platform – it almost felt like a stage – from which I could see all the cubicles both in front and behind. The light was dim, and I'd come so far that I couldn't quite pinpoint the entrance. I remembered that the membrane had seemed to glow orange, but all I could see was grey rock. Looking the other way, I found that I could see the point where the cubicles ended, but beyond this it was too dark even to see the cavern wall. I would investigate what was over there next. For now, I decided to concentrate on the table. Given that it was right at the centre of the cavern, and set on a raised stage, I decided it must be some sort of control console – maybe like a computer. I was good with computers, so I was sure I could use it to find out some valuable information, maybe even a way out. I crossed the few remaining steps to the table and found myself staring down at an unbroken white surface.

There were no buttons, no switches, no keys and certainly no sign of a screen. Although, I now saw that the table was covered with a thick layer of dust, so maybe there was some writing or some pictures underneath. Without really thinking about it, I swept my hand across the top of the table to clear the dust and a remarkable thing happened. An image appeared, covering the whole of the table top. At first I thought that the table itself was a screen, but as I looked more closely, I could see that the image was being projected above the table. Also, the image wasn't flat. It looked bumpy, with some features sticking further out from the table than others. You'll understand what I mean when I tell you what I saw.

At one side of the table, the one nearest to me, was a picture of the cavern from above. It showed the rows of cubicles and the central clearing where I was now. The amazing thing was that the cubicles, and other features, stuck out from the picture – so it was like I was looking at a model. I reached down to see if I could touch them, they looked so real, but my fingertips just passed through the image like there was nothing there. Well, not quite like nothing. Every time I touched the image of a cubicle, some letters were projected in the air – just like when I had run my fingers over the cubicle wall back by the entrance. It looked like the person's name, their year of birth and always the words 'status normal'. I guessed this meant that the person inside was alright. I now looked at the other side of the table, furthest away from me. Here I saw a picture in constant motion. At the top it looked red and hot – like lava from a volcano. At the bottom it was blue and cool – like a lake. In between were two tubes, one flowing up and one flowing down. I reached out to touch one of them and a message appeared, but this time the writing was in a language I didn't understand. There were two buttons beneath the message, followed by a question mark. I had no idea what would happen if I pressed either of the buttons, so I decided to leave them alone ...

But what if I'd activated a self-destruct sequence and it was asking me if I wanted to turn it off. I thought carefully. On the computers I used, the left button was usually OK and the right was usually CANCEL. Do you want to cancel the self-destruct, I thought, OK. I reached out to touch the left button ...

But what if it was asking if I wanted to START the self-destruct sequence. I wavered and moved my finger towards the right-hand button ...

But what if these people read left to right – like in Arabic. I wavered again. I thought and thought again, but I couldn't decide anything except that I needed to do something. I summoned up all my courage, closed my eyes and reached out to touch the left-hand button ...

“Dude! Face about bottom, innit,” said a voice in my ear.

I must have jumped at least three feet in the air and, when I landed, I spun around to see a man dressed in the simple brown clothes of the people in the capsules. He was smiling slightly, in a puzzled kind of a way.

“Gargh!” I squeaked, as I backed away from him, squeezing myself up against the table.

“Dude in boggle,” he continued, moving slightly closer, “wasssi doesit?”

“Stay away from me,” I stammered, putting my hand on his chest.

To my amazement, my hand went right through him. He was no more substantial than the image on the table. He didn't seem offended by my touching him. In fact, as soon as he heard me speak, his smile broadened.

“Ah, you speak Old English,” he said, “You must be a scholar. Maybe this will make you more comfortable.”

As I watched, he grew a long grey beard and his clothes transformed into a long black gown. From behind his back, he produced a floppy black hat, which he placed carefully on his head.

“Now,” he continued, “as I was saying, you're standing on the wrong side of the table.”

I was so taken aback by this simple statement that I immediately moved round the table, without pausing to ask any of the many questions that were crowding into my head. Sure enough, it did seem to make more sense from this side – although I still couldn't read the message. The man, or whatever he was, seemed to sense my confusion, because he translated for me.

“It's asking if you'd like to display more information about the hydrothermal generators. The left button is for 'yes', the right for 'no'.”

I reached out gingerly and touched the left button. Immediately, the table filled up with a lot of words and dials, and I couldn't understand any of it.

“Maybe you'd better just ask me if you have any questions,” said the man, seeing the puzzled look on my face.

Well, I knew where to start there.

“Who are you,” I asked, “and where did you come from ... and what is this place?”

The man then began to tell me his story. I had many questions, and some bits he had to repeat for me two or three times, because I got a bit lost. It was a long story, and it got quite complicated, so let me try and explain what I learnt, and I'll put it as simply as I can.

The man was, in fact, not a man at all. He described himself as an avatar – an avatar of the cavern control system, to be precise. What that meant, I discovered, was that there was a super-intelligent computer inside the table. The computer was so clever that, as I was talking to it, I started to forget that it was a computer at all. It projected a hologram, the image of a man, to help people feel more comfortable. After all, you'd feel pretty silly having a conversation with a table. The hologram had been activated as soon as I'd touched the table, but I hadn't seen it because it had appeared behind me – I was on the wrong side of the table, remember. When it had seen me get confused, it tried to help, but it didn't realise that I was from the past, and so it spoke to me in Genglish. Genglish is short for Global English. You see, when the plants started to become a real menace, all the countries of the world decided that they would have to work together if humanity was to survive. To make it easier, they agreed that they would adopt a common language, which was called Global English. No one had spoken Old English, like I spoke, for hundreds of years. Luckily the computer still remembered some of the ancient languages. It remembered because that was part of the reason it was created.

The computer had been built right at the end of what it called the Plant War. When the plants had turned nasty, humans had fought back. The war had raged on for years and years until a stalemate, a balance between the two sides, had developed. Humans controlled the cities, and the plants were kept out with all kinds of terrible weapons and devices. The plants controlled the countryside, and no one dared set foot there. This was okay for a while, but then the people in the cities started to get ill. They didn't understand why it was happening – the doctors and scientists were mystified – until they looked around them. There was not a scrap of green in their new cities – no grass, no trees, no flowers. Imagine how sad it would be to live in a place with no parks, no gardens and no woods. It was no wonder they were all feeling ill. The people argued about what should be done, but it was clear that they were fighting a war they couldn't win. Even if they destroyed all the plants on earth, they would be left in a world with no happiness – no joy. They came up with a new plan.

The new plan was desperate and daring. Earth's finest scientists worked hard to create the first Bunnies of the Future. The bunnies' mission was not to destroy the plants, but to find a way for humans and plants to live together again in harmony. Meanwhile, the people of the world had to be kept safe, together with all the knowledge and culture that mankind had created. Caverns were built – deep underground and cut into solid rock. The entrances to the caverns were protected by powerful force fields, guaranteed to keep out any plant – no matter how big or small. Into these caverns the last people put two things. First, they installed the cryogenic

storage cubicles. These would keep the people asleep for as long as it took for the bunnies to succeed. They would never grow old and never die, but they would be frozen – captured in a dreamless sleep until awoken. The thousands of people I saw in this cavern, and in the thousands of other caverns I was told existed around the world, would either wake into a world where the bunnies had succeeded ... or they would never wake at all.

The second thing that was built into every cavern was a state-of-the-art computer. The computer was there to protect the people. It told me that it had various military capabilities, but that the details were classified. In addition, and maybe more importantly, the computer also held in its memory banks the vast knowledge and culture of the human race. The whole cavern – cubicles, defences, computer and all – was powered by geothermal energy. Hidden generators transformed the heat from the earth's core into electrical power. They were designed to keep working for a billion years.

I was so caught up in the story that, when it was over, I didn't know how much time it had taken. I have to say, I was in a bit of a panic. Then I thought about the resources available to me. I had a super-intelligent computer in front of me, ready to answer any question. First, I asked how I could get out of the cavern to meet the escape pod.

"There are trees waiting for you just outside the entrance," the computer told me, "I don't see how you could hope to get past them."

"Haven't you got weapons you could use?" I asked, "Can't you burn them or blast them or something?"

"That is not allowed," explained the computer, "My instructions are to keep the people and knowledge in this cavern safe. I was not created in order to continue the war against the plants."

"But if I don't get out of here, you might never be able to wake up the people," I argued.

"That is not my concern," the computer said, sounding rather cold, "My instructions are simply to keep them safe. If the bunnies succeed, I will no longer have a function. Until then, I will continue according to my programming."

"You make it sound very bleak ... very dull," I said, beginning to feel a little sorry for the computer.

"In one way, you are right," responded the computer, "It is a simple function I have – well within my capabilities – but this allows me plenty of time to engage in my hobbies. I have created a whole new form of music, for instance. Would you like to hear it?"

Before I could answer, I felt myself hit by a wave of sound so powerful that it almost knocked me over. Then the music picked me up. Literally picked me up, and I found I was dancing – without really meaning to. What's more, I was doing it in mid-air.

"Good, isn't it?" said the computer's avatar.

Without me realising, he'd floated up beside me so that he could speak into my ear. I had to agree – it was good – but at the same time, it was becoming painful to be subjected to such a high level of noise.

“It's a very interesting new art form,” I shouted back, “but please can you stop it now because I can feel my internal organs shaking loose.”

Slowly, the music subsided and I felt my feet touch the floor again.

“I suppose it must be very quiet here,” I said, once I had got my breath back.

There was a pause while the computer thought. I realised that ‘quiet’ was maybe not a strong enough word to describe how it must be to spend hundreds of years in a cavern full of frozen people.

“It is quiet most of the time,” said the avatar, eventually, “but every now and again, something happens that distracts me from my studies. For example, about twenty years ago there was a rock fall in the southern part of the cavern – that's why you can't see the walls over there anymore. I spent months with my scanners, making sure that there weren't any plants getting in that way.

Click, click, click, went my mind, and eventually, a question emerged.

“Why did you think a plant might get in?” I asked quietly.

“Well,” the computer began, “at first I didn't think the rock fall had caused any damage. All the cubicles were okay, and my sensors aren't calibrated to see past where the cavern wall used to be, but my microphones can pick up sound from a lot further away. Since the rock fall, I've been hearing this lovely tinkling sound coming from over there. It's like ...”

The computer paused, trying to find the right way to describe what it heard.

Eventually, it decided to be poetic.

“It's like liquid laughter.”

Liquid laughter? It didn't mean a lot to me, but it made a particular image spring into my mind. I was in the countryside, standing by a fast-flowing stream. The water was running over rocks and it made a sound like the happy gurgling of a baby. I decided I had better investigate the southern end of the cavern. If there was water down there, then there might be another exit. I told the avatar that I was going to explore and started to move away from the table. Before I'd gone two steps, the computer called to me.

“Turtle,” it said, and this stopped me dead in my tracks because, in all the conversation, I hadn't once mentioned my call sign, “there is another option.”

I paused now, half turned to go and half turned to listen.

“We have spare cubicles here. I could freeze you while we wait for a solution. Your mission and your suffering would be over. You could sleep and enjoy a well-earned rest.”

As he spoke, I heard a small sound behind me. I looked around and saw an open cubicle – waiting for me to step inside.

“Turtle,” said the computer, insistently, “Your cubicle is ready. You can join your

fellow humans.”

I thought very hard. It had been so difficult to get used to the bunnies’ rules, and life on the habisat wasn’t easy. A rest would be so nice. I could have a good sleep. I’d been so busy with all my missions – I deserved some time off. I took a step towards the cubicle.

“No, no, no, no!” I heard WingCo’s voice in my head, or maybe it was my conscience speaking, “Now is not the time to rest. You’re not a quitter. You’re the hero that’s going to save the world.”

“Excuse me,” I said politely, addressing the avatar, “but I won’t be needed the cubicle. I’m going to investigate the south of the cavern.”

I turned and started to walk away, but the avatar called to me again – more loudly and more urgently than before. It was the first time I’d been able to detect emotion in its voice, and it sounded angry.

“Wait, Turtle,” it said, “It might be dangerous. I can’t protect you once you get past the cubicles.”

“Don’t worry,” I answered, looking over my shoulder and giving a brave, heroic wave, “I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

Then I spoiled things, because I’d forgotten about the step down from the stage, and I tripped over, landing rather heavily on the cavern floor. With as much dignity as I could manage, I picked myself up and headed towards the end of the cavern.

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## **Chapter 10: Escape**

It felt like it was a shorter walk on this side of the cavern – maybe because my mind was occupied, processing my conversation with the Avatar. Before I got to the end, I found I could hear the sound of running water, although the end of the cavern was still hidden in darkness. I kept on going until I was level with the last line of cubicles. I took two more steps forward and stopped, to let my eyes adjust to the darkness. For a while I could see nothing, but slowly everything became visible, lit by the dimmest of dim lights. I could now see the far end of the cavern. There had indeed been a big rockslide, and it had been caused by an underground river. It was lucky I had stopped when I did, because I now stood at the edge of a steep slope that led down to a fast-flowing torrent of water. Beyond this, the cavern floor climbed again until it met the far wall. Everywhere I looked, I could see a greenish glow coming from the rocks. Intrigued, I took a few steps down the slope, so that I was beyond the reach of the faint light from the cubicles, and bent down to examine the floor by my feet. It was almost entirely covered by patches of lichen, and it was this lichen that was glowing. Carefully I got out my jam jar and started to scrape pieces of the lichen off the rocks. I kept going until I had almost filled the jar, and then I screwed the lid back on tight. Holding the jar above my hand, I saw my palm turned green by the mysterious light that the little plants were emitting. Then I stopped in shock. What were all these plants doing in the cavern? Why hadn't the computer detected them? They were so close to the cubicles. I better go back and warn it, I thought, but as I turned to climb back up the slope, my foot slipped. For a second I fought to keep my balance. Then I slipped again, and I started to tumble head over heels down the slope until I ended up, with a splash, in the water. The river was deep and cold and fast flowing. My suit inflated automatically, to try and keep me warm, but the shock was still numbing. I felt myself being carried along by the rush of the river, and I tried to swim for the shore. The jam jar, which I had managed to keep hold of, I stowed in one of my pockets, so that I could use both arms. Even so, I made slow progress, and I soon heard the roar of water getting louder. Looking downstream, I saw that the river was about to enter a tunnel. I was going to be carried out of the cavern long before I could hope to reach the shore.

Knowing there was nothing I could do, I stopped swimming and turned on my back with my feet out in front of me. This way, if there were any rocks in the water, I'd hit them feet first and not head first. My inflated suit helped me float a little, so I had my hands free to try and steer as best I could. The river rushed on and on, and I rushed with it – until I looked ahead and saw nothing but a solid rock wall. The tunnel was ending, and the river was disappearing underground. I was going much too fast to be able to stop. All I could do was to take a deep breath and duck under the water. I felt the current quicken, and it grabbed hold of me, pushing me faster and faster through this rock pipe. I could feel the walls getting closer all around me, and the water

seemed to fizz and bubble as it rocketed along. Suddenly ... pop ... I was shot out into the open again, like a cork from a bottle. I took a deep gulp of the cool air. It was pitch black, and I couldn't tell where I was – except that I was falling, falling, falling. I started to scream – aaaarrgh! Then, with an almighty splash, I crashed back into water.

Under the water, it was black as night and dead still. Not at all like the rushing river I had just been in. I guessed I'd been fired out into another huge cavern and had dropped into an underground lake. I started to swim, to get to the surface, but with a shock, I realised I didn't know which way was up. I stopped swimming, to see if I'd float to the top, but I didn't seem to move at all. I could sense my body running out of air, wanting to take a breath. I was beginning to feel a rising panic when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something move. I spun around. There, staring at me, was a little pink lobster. The lobster waved a claw at me and blew a bubble, which floated away a little distance before bursting. I thought I must be imagining the lobster because it was too dark to see down there. Sure enough, when I closed my eyes the lobster was still there. The fact that he was imaginary didn't seem to bother him. He just sat there, waved and blew another bubble. An imaginary pink lobster, I thought. How strange. My brain must be trying to tell me something, but what could it be? Of course! I quickly reached into my pocket and got out the jam jar. Even under the water, the lichen inside lit everything up with its eerie green glow. I held the jar near my mouth and blew a bubble. Immediately the bubble started to float away from me, and I knew it must be floating up towards the surface. I kicked my legs hard to swim after it, and when I lost sight of the first bubble, I blew a second. This one I followed until I saw it burst on the surface of the water. A second later I too burst to the surface, panting and spluttering.

I floated there for a few moments, treading water and getting my breath back, until I felt I was ready for my next challenge. I had to find the edge of the lake. I was beginning to feel quite cold, despite the padding provided by my suit. A good brisk swim would warm me up, for a while anyway, but which way to go? I held up the jam jar, and the green glow of the lichen lit up the surface of the water for a few meters in all directions. There was no sign of the shore, and there was nothing I could see that would help me find my way, so I listened instead. To my right, I could hear the sound of roaring water. That must have been the way I came in. I thought that this would be as good a direction to go in as any.

As I swam the noise grew to a crescendo and then I saw the waterfall itself. It was an awesome sight. An entire river falling out of the blackness and churning up the surrounding lake. I didn't want to get caught and pushed under again, so I kept my distance and swam around the rough water. By the time I had worked my way about half way round, I found I could see the edge of the lake. To my dismay, the cavern wall met the shore in a sheer cliff face. There was no way I'd be able to climb out here, and nowhere to go if I did. I had to keep on swimming, but at least now I could

follow the edge of the lake around. Before too long, the cliffs at the shore gave way to jagged rocks. A while later, a small bay appeared, and I found myself climbing out of the water onto a little beach of black sand.

By now I was freezing cold, and my teeth chattered as I looked around to find a way out. The beach was very small – no more than a few paces across. Where it ended, the wall of the cavern rose steeply upwards, partially covered by a stack of boulders left over from some ancient cave-in. At the foot of this pile of rubble sat the little pink lobster. This time he was flying a kite, which bobbed around, performing dives and spirals. He waved a claw at me as he saw me approach, gave an exaggerated wink and disappeared with a sound like the pop of a cork. I knew that I must be hallucinating again, but just like last time, I was sure that there was some clue in what I had seen. Why a kite? Kites needed wind, and the air was dead still in the enclosed space of the cavern. I walked right up to where I had seen the lobster and held out my hand. Sure enough, I could feel a faint breeze. Air was moving down, from the top of the pile of boulders. There was only one answer. There must be an opening up there. I began to climb.

I could tell you about the difficulty I had, climbing that rickety stack of rocks to reach the surface, but I think it's enough to know that I made it to the top. Despite my frozen fingers and tired limbs, I made it, and I gave a little cry of triumph as I squeezed my body through the narrow crack in the cavern ceiling and out onto the surface. A cry of triumph that I choked back half finished, as I realised that the trees might not be far away. It was still night – I thought it must be the same night – and I prayed that the rescue pod was still up there somewhere. Finding a large rock to stand on, I held the transmitter high above my head. It was a straight race now. Would the pod reach me first ... or the trees? Usually, in situations like that, time moves slowly, but not on this occasion. Almost immediately, it seemed to me, I was able to pick out one star in the sky that was moving oddly. A star that headed straight for me, getting lower and lower, until I could clearly see that it was rescue pod, it's engines scorching a trail through the night sky. Within minutes it had landed next to me, and I was climbing gratefully into the cramped interior. My toughest mission yet was over. When I got back to the habisat, all the bunnies crowded round me to hear my story. Which was great, because they all snuggled in to me and helped warm me up. Even Trouble came a bit closer than usual, and I felt so sorry for him that I had to invite him in.

“Come on, Trouble. Snuggle in and hear the story. I'm not going to eat you with all these other bunnies about, am I?”

All the other bunnies laughed at how scared Trouble was, and his fur bristled. He looked carefully at me, then grudgingly came forward and settled himself on my head. Of course, none of them knew how tasty they were beginning to look to me after a hundred days of eating nothing but TCS. I coughed slightly to cover the sound of my tummy rumbling, and then I started the story.

The bunnies seemed to me to show a lot of interest in the dull bits of my story and no interest in the really exciting bits. My description of the Giant Redwoods brought only yawns and cries of “seen them”. When I described the membrane that had covered the cavern entrance and stopped the roots from getting me, I couldn’t remember enough detail to satisfy them. The bit where I found the lichen seemed to terrify them, and almost all the bunnies darted away into the small corridors when I brought the jam jar out of my pocket, even though the lichen had stopped glowing by that point. But the most thorough questioning I got was about the computer I met in the cavern. The bunnies seemed almost as worried about the computer as they did about the plants.

“Did you see it use any of its weapons?”

“Do you think it will wake the people up ... when the time comes?”

“Did it really try and force you to stay?”

“Did it ask about us bunnies?”

I answered as best I could, and eventually, at least one of the bunnies realised I’d run out of things to say.

“I think that’s enough interrogation for tonight,” said WingCo to the assembled crowd. Then he turned to me, “You must be shattered, Turtle. Let’s just get that jam jar off to the lab, and then time for you to hit the hay, eh?”

Suddenly I felt so tired that I could barely stand – not that that made much difference in zero gravity – and I could have fallen asleep right where I was floating. The bunnies were now drifting off in various directions, chatting about what they’d heard. Trouble was one of the last to go. He unfolded himself from where he’d been sitting on my head and swam lazily away with a little smile on his face.

“Bye bye, Turtle,” he said as he went, “Thanks for letting me drop in to hear your story.”

Something about the way he said ‘drop in’, or maybe it was ‘dropping’, made me suspicious. I reached up to the top of my head. My hand closed around something soft and squishy, and I brought down a little pyramid of rabbit droppings. I wanted to go after Trouble and give him a piece of my mind, but by now he’d disappeared into one of the small tunnels. Instead, I swam slowly and thoughtfully to my bunk, where I strapped myself in and immediately sank into a deep sleep, with endless dreams of little pink lobsters.

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## **Chapter 11: Magic Space Arrow**

The next morning, I was woken by TwoBrains, who was hopping up and down with excitement.

“Come on, come on!” she said, “We’ve found something very exciting. We’re going to have a debrief in the canteen. Everyone has to be there before we can start. Come on, come on!”

And having said this, she unstrapped me from the bunk and started pulling me down to corridor.

“Wait, wait,” I said, as I started to wake up properly, “I have to have a wee first.”

TwoBrains tutted and rolled her eyes, but I really did need to go, so that was that.

Now, having a wee in zero gravity is not all that easy. In fact, whenever I was on a mission, I always took the chance to have a wee while I was on earth – unless I was being chased by some man-eating plant, that is. You see, when you wee in zero gee there’s no gravity to pull it down into the toilet. No, if you used a normal toilet it would just bounce right off the porcelain, and before you knew it there would be little drops of wee floating everywhere – very messy indeed. Now the bunnies had developed a clever little solution to this problem. It was called the suction toilet. The suction toilet is just like a normal toilet except, before you start, you press a button and it starts sucking air down into the bowl. So, when you start to wee it sucks that down as well. It really is very clever ... except that it’s bunny sized. It’s a toilet that’s just the right size for a rabbit. If you’re a normal-sized person, your aim has to be very good. Fortunately, I’d been practicing, and so I managed to hit the target, but I must have taken too long because, by the time I came out, TwoBrains had gone. Worried that they might start without me, I swam as fast as I could down the corridor, round the corner and into the canteen.

“Can we start, can we start, can we start?” TwoBrains was saying as I came in. It looked like she was about to pop with impatience. Everyone else was already there – Skip, WingCo, Pockets and even Trouble, who gave me a cheeky smile but kept his distance.

“Ah, Turtle, there you are,” said Skip, “You’d better have a seat. TwoBrains has some exciting news for us about–”

“– It’s about the sample of lichen you collected in the cavern,” interrupted

TwoBrains, “It contains the highest concentration of cosmic dust we’ve ever seen. It must mean that the source of the cosmic dust is very close to the cavern.”

Everyone looked at me expectantly, but I just shook my head slowly.

“I don’t think the lichen comes from the cavern,” I said.

Pockets looked a bit puzzled, so I explained.

“The computer told me that, before the cave-in, it was able to scan the whole cavern. I’m sure it would have noticed a plant growing inside, even if it was just a small one. No, I think that the lichen was brought into the cavern by the river.”

Everyone's face fell.

"So, we've no idea where the lichen came from in the first place," said Pockets sullenly, "We're no further forward."

"Maybe," I said, the first glimmers of an idea starting in my head, "but maybe not. Pockets, do you have that 3D projector – the one that shows a map of the world." Pockets nodded and started to rummage about in his pouch. Eventually he found it and placed the projector on the table. I touched one of the buttons, and an image of the earth appeared – spinning slowly above the table top.

"Now, zoom in on the countryside around the cavern."

The globe got bigger and changed, until we were looking at an image of the landscape I'd seen when the pod landed. There were the Giant Redwoods. There were the rocky hills, and there was the cavern entrance. The cavern itself, deep underground, was outlined in red, and the river that had caused the cave-in was shown in blue.

"Can you show me where that river comes from?" I asked.

TwoBrains waved her paws over the device. The view moved back, following the route of the underground river back to its source, but there was a problem. The blue line split in two. TwoBrains zoomed out, so that we could follow both of these tributaries, but as the view widened, we just saw more and more splits in the blue lines. My heart fell. My idea hadn't worked. It would take years to investigate all of these rivers and streams, but as I looked, another thought sparked in my mind.

"Hang on a second," I said, "I've just had a brilliant idea."

"What is it, Turtle?" asked Pockets.

"Well," I started, "it's really very simple. We don't know where the source of the cosmic dust is now, but we know where it came from. If we can find the path that it took, then we can find out where it ended up – like all those rivers leading to that one underground lake."

"Of course," exclaimed TwoBrains, "Brilliant but simple. That must be why I didn't think of it. I'm too clever to think at such a low level – my brains are too highly trained. It obviously needed a more primitive mind to come up with that idea."

TwoBrains stopped, looked at me and went a bit red. It took me a second to understand why she was embarrassed – that was my primitive mind she was talking about.

"Maybe I'd better start work immediately," stuttered TwoBrains, floating out of her chair, "Calibrate the sensors, launch the remote probes – that sort of thing."

"Don't forget to take your foot out of your mouth before you start," giggled Trouble. I shot an angry glance at the little rabbit. TwoBrains had said that my idea was brilliant, so I had decided to forgive her for calling me primitive. However, not all the bunnies had been convinced.

"I don't understand," whined Pockets.

"Well," I said patiently, "we know where the cosmic dust comes from, don't we?"

“Do we?” answered Pockets.

“Yes,” I continued, “We know that cosmic dust comes from space. So, that means that the source of the cosmic dust on earth must have come from space too.”

“It does?” asked Pockets, his brow knitted in concentration.

“It does indeed,” said WingCo, “and it means that I’d better go and help TwoBrains. I’m sure she’ll need some bunnies to get out into space and start the search.”

“The search for what?” Pockets asked, but WingCo had already gone, so I had to try and explain.

“The source of the cosmic dust – the dust that’s making all the Plants act crazy – must have come from space. As it went through space it must have left little sprinklings of the cosmic dust behind. If we can find these, it will show us the path the source took. That path will end where it hit the earth. Do you see?”

Pockets still looked confused, but Skip piped up.

“I see. Come on Pockets. We’d better go and help. The more of us that are out there looking, the sooner we’ll be done.”

But Pockets didn’t move. He just sat there, gazing at me, waiting for me to finish the explanation. I opened my mouth to try again, but Trouble interrupted me.

“TwoBrains is looking for a magic glowing arrow in space that points to where we’ll find the source of the evil plant dust.”

Pockets smiled.

“Oh, okay, I get it,” he said.

Then he looked at me a little crossly.

“Why didn’t you just say that it was a magic space arrow in the first place, rather than waste my time with all that other nonsense?”

Before I could even think of an answer, Pockets had followed Skip out of the canteen.

“You have to remember,” said Trouble, floating down beside me, “that Pockets thinks differently because he’s part kangaroo.”

Then the little bunny realised that we were all alone together, and he started to look very very nervous.

I looked at Trouble, and Trouble looked at me. The poor little bunny was practically shaking with fear, and I started to feel even more guilty about my ‘eating bunnies’ joke. Maybe it had gone too far. Maybe it was time to build some bridges.

“Well,” I said, “this is going to be a very long and boring day. All the other bunnies away working on this and that. No mission for me to do. Oh, and did I mention, Skip make me promise that I wouldn’t eat you.”

Trouble brightened up a bit.

“Did he?”

“Absolutely he did.”

Trouble thought for a moment.

“We could play a game,” he said, eventually.

When I didn’t reply, he continued.

“Have you ever played Bunny Egg? No?” Trouble practically squealed with excitement, “Oh, it’s a very fun game, and even better when the habisat is quite empty. You wait here. I’ll go and get the egg.”

He disappeared off, and so I helped myself to a big bowl of TCS, as I hadn’t had my breakfast yet. As always, it was quite disgusting, but I was so hungry that, when he returned only moments later, Trouble found me scraping the bowl. Trouble had a big smile on his face and he was carrying an egg.

“Where did you get that,” I asked, staring hungrily at the egg, “I haven’t seen any hens.”

“I made it,” answered Trouble, proudly, “I made it specially for the game.”

Then he paused and asked, “Anyway, what’s a hen?”

I explained what a hen was, but Trouble just rolled his eyes and told me to save my made-up stories for the baby bunnies. I started to try and convince him that I was telling the truth, but he was in far too much of a hurry to get on with the game. It turned out that the rules were very simple. Whoever had the egg was called the Layer. The other person was called the Tickler. The Layer had to get the egg onto the Tickler’s head. The Tickler had to tickle the Layer. You were allowed to go anywhere in the habisat, but if there was any ‘rough play’ then the game had to stop. I was left in no doubt that any attempt to eat my opponent would be counted as ‘rough play’.

Once he had explained the rules, Trouble yelled “Ready, steady, go,” and we were off. Before I knew it, the egg was on my head and Trouble was giggling mightily.

“Okay, that’s one point to you,” I said, not understanding what was so funny ... until I tried to take the egg off my head. It was stuck there as if by glue. I pulled and pulled, turning cartwheels in the air. Finally, I gave it a little twist and the egg came off with a slight sucking sound. There was a little sore patch on the top of my head, which I rubbed gingerly. This sent Trouble into another fit of giggles, and I took my chance.

“ReadySteadyGo!” I called, and plopped the egg neatly down on Trouble’s head.

“No fair,” he called sulkily, wrenching the egg out of his fur, but he knew that I’d outsmarted him.

Now he was determined to beat me.

The next few turns took longer. Trouble was quick, but I was crafty. It also helped that Trouble was very ticklish. I barely had to ruffle his fur and he’d roll up into a helpless ball of giggles. His tickling, on the other hand, had absolutely no impact on me. Firstly, his paws were not ideal for the purpose. It wasn’t like being tickled, it was more like being prodded by the blunt end of a teddy bear. Secondly, my suit was quite good at blocking even the most effective tickles. It might have been different if Trouble had known where my secret ticklish spot was, but I wasn’t about to tell him that. So, after a lot of chasing around the habisat, the score reached five all.

Technically speaking, it was now Trouble’s go, but he suddenly looked at me with a

crafty glint in his eye. He held out the egg to me, and I raised a questioning eyebrow. “Sudden death,” said Trouble, “If you can get me before the other bunnies return, then you win. Otherwise, I win. Deal?”

“Deal,” I replied, reaching out and taking the egg, “ReadyStedyGo!”

I went for Trouble’s head, but he wasn’t about to be caught by the same trick twice. He was off like a bullet and disappeared into one of the burrow-like holes that lined the walls of the larger corridor.

“Not fair!” I cried, “You know I’m too big to go in there.”

Then I felt a scrabbling at my back. I turned just in time to see Trouble’s bottom disappearing into another hole in the wall.

“I’m not just going to beat you,” his echoing voice seemed to come from all around me, “I’m going to humiliate you as well.”

Well, what could I do. Trouble was whizzing in and out of the little tunnels. He was just too quick for me, and I was too big to chase him once he was inside. Not only was he keeping out of my reach, but he was also getting in plenty of tickles. He was right. I was going to lose, and I was going to lose badly.

Then Trouble made a mistake. He went through a door that was just large enough for me. I squeezed through after him, ready to whip the egg onto his head and win the game. Once through the door, however, all thoughts of the game were banished from my mind. I stopped, astonished by the sight in front of me.

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## **Chapter 12: Chicken Licken**

The room I had entered was quite large – high enough for me to stand up and about as wide as our living room at home. To a little bunny it must have seemed like a huge space. Lights shone from all around the room towards the centre. They shone from the ceiling, from the walls and even from the floor. They made the room very hot, and it felt, and smelled, like I was in a tropical rainforest. I could see Trouble stood on the opposite side of the room. There was another door – through which, no doubt, he intended to escape if I should try to get him, but I had no thought of chasing him any further. I was transfixed by the thing that dominated the room – a huge brownish-grey blob that was suspended from the centre of the ceiling. It was roughly spherical and about as wide as I was tall, so that it reached almost down to touch the floor. A film of water ran over the sides of the blob, flowing down until it dripped off at the bottom, where it was sucked down into a large drain. All the lights were focused on this thing, and as I watched, I was sure that I could see it pulsing slowly – almost as if it were breathing.

“That’s Chicken Licken,” said a little voice beside me. Trouble had crept up and was tickling me in a half-hearted sort of way.

“That’s not a chicken.” I said, still staring at the thing in front of me, “What is it?”

“It’s what we make TCS out of,” explained Trouble, and I realised why TCS tasted so bad, “This is our main hydroponics room.”

I was about to ask a whole flood of questions when, without warning, a grey tentacle shot out of the blob and went schlop into the fur on Trouble’s tummy. The little bunny screamed as the tentacle started to pull him in. Quick as a flash, I reached out to grab Trouble and drag him back, but as I was floating in mid-air and wasn’t anchored to anything, I just found myself being dragged towards the blob as well. Desperately I reached out with my left foot, and managed to hook it round one of the lights on the floor. Now there started a desperate tug of war, with Trouble as the prize. The poor little thing was crying with pain. The tentacle was obviously pulling hard on his fur, and it just wouldn’t let go. What was more, my foot had begun to get very hot where it was touching the light. It would soon start to burn, even through my shoes. I suddenly felt sick and cold and sweaty all at once. Time seemed to slow down, and I knew I was starting to panic – starting to lose control. I needed to do something quickly. I needed a plan before the pain in my foot forced me to let go of the light. I closed my eyes to help me concentrate ... and I found that I could still see the room perfectly, except with one addition. There, standing upside down on one of the ceiling lights, was the little pink lobster. He was jumping up and down, waving his claws around and doing the ‘hot hot hot’ dance – just like mummy does on hot sand.

“I’ve got it!” I shouted, and Trouble was so surprised that he stopped crying and looked round at me.

“Brace yourself,” I told him. Then I pulled myself down, trying to ignore the pained whimpers of Trouble as the tentacle pulled at his tummy. I got my right foot against the floor and prepared to make a zero-gravity jump. Taking very careful aim, I launched myself – and Trouble – up towards the ceiling. Amazingly, everything landed just as I had planned. I was able to grab hold of one of the lights on the ceiling, the tentacle was pressed against another light and Trouble was held in between – his eyes wide with terror and confusion. With my arm hooked around the light fitting, I was betting on the fact that my special suit would protect me from the heat of the lamps – and at first it did. Meanwhile I could hear the tentacle begin to fizz, and the air filled with the smell of burning carrot. It seemed, however, that the blob wasn’t going to give up as easily as I’d hoped. Soon I saw my suit sleeve beginning to smoke, and beneath the material, my arm was quickly heating up. The tentacle was now blackened and bubbling where it was pressed against the light – surely it couldn’t survive much longer. I gritted my teeth against the pain in my arm, determined that I would save Trouble, and finally I was rewarded. The tentacle let go, the charred remains retreating back into the blob.

Trouble was looking down, checking his tummy for signs of permanent damage, but I knew that we were still in mortal danger. I could see another tentacle starting to form on the surface of the blob. I grabbed Trouble, stuffed him down the front of my shirt and launched myself off the ceiling. Not a moment too soon. There was a woosh and a schlllop as the new tentacle slammed into the ceiling – just where we’d been a moment before. It had turned round, and was starting to whip back towards us, when I reached the door. I dragged myself through, slammed the hatch behind me and turned the little wheel on the outside to engage the lock. As I floated there in the corridor, still in shock, Trouble struggled out through the front of my shirt.

“Phew,” he said, holding his nose, “When was the last time you had a wash?”

I looked down at the little bunny with a scowl on my face, but in that moment, I realised that he didn’t mean to be cruel. He’d never meant to be mean – it was just his way of getting attention. Relief flooded over me, and I burst out laughing. Trouble began to giggle as well. It was a happy scene ... and it lasted all of two seconds.

**BANG!**

Something huge and heavy smashed into the door of the hydroponics room.

“What on earth is going on?” I asked, “Why is that thing trying to kill us?”

“As far as I could see,” said Trouble, scurrying round my body to hide behind my back as the banging on the door continued, “it wasn’t trying to kill us, it was trying to kill me! Furthermore, this is all your fault.”

“B ... B ... But how is this my fault?” I stammered, “I’ve never even seen that thing before.”

“That ‘thing’ is made of yeast,” explained Trouble, “and yeast is a sort of plant – a simple sort of plant, but a plant just the same – and you haven’t had a wash or changed your clothes since you got back from your last mission. I’ll bet you’re

covered in Cosmic Dust. As soon as you went into that room, the dust will have started to fall off you, and some got onto Chicken Licken. Now it's alive, and it's coming to get ME."

Trouble and I both looked at the hydroponics door. Something heavy inside was hitting it with blow after blow, and we could see that the door was starting to bend. If Chicken Licken got out of that room and into the corridor, it would be much more difficult to stop. We might even lose the whole habisat. We had to do something – and fast. Fortunately, Trouble was already on the case. He had hopped down off my shoulder and was gliding towards a small panel to the right of the door.

"We knew it was a risk having any kind of plant aboard the habisat," he explained, sliding back the panel to reveal a little lever with a red handle, "so we built in a failsafe device. We can eject the whole room from the habisat. It will drift off into space, taking Chicken Licken with it."

Saying this, Trouble grabbed the lever and tugged until, with a loud click, it swung down to stick out at 90 degrees to the wall.

"Is that it then," I asked, "Is it gone?"

As if in answer to my question, there was another huge bang on the door and a big bulge appeared on the outside.

"There's a second lever that needs to be pulled," said Trouble, shaking his head slowly, "It's designed to make sure no one bunny can eject the room by accident."

"Well, where is it?" I asked, "Let's get to it."

"You know that little door I was stood by?" said Trouble slowly.

I nodded.

"The one just on the other side of the room containing the killer plant?" continued Trouble.

I nodded again, feeling a little cold.

"Well," concluded Trouble, "the other lever is through there."

"Can't we just go around," I asked, but Trouble shook his head.

"It would take too long," he said, and as if to prove his point, there was another loud bang on the door.

Now Trouble looked up at me with a strange, serious expression on his face. It might have been the first time that I'd ever seen him look serious, and I suddenly felt very afraid.

"There is another way," said the little bunny, "but it's going to be very dangerous ... for you."

"It can't be any more dangerous than trying to get through that room," I said, then I saw that serious look again.

"What is this other way?" I asked, more slowly.

"You know that us bunnies have a special power," began Trouble, and I nodded, remembering what Methuselah had told me, "It's called telekinesis, and it means we can move things at a distance – without touching them – using just the power of our

mind.”

“So you can move the lever from here – using telekinesis?” I blurted out, thinking all our problems were solved.

Trouble shook his head sadly.

“I already tried,” he said, “The lever’s too stiff and it’s too far away. I couldn’t move it. My brain’s just too small.”

Then he looked at me ... or rather, he looked at my head.

“Your brain, on the other hand, is very large – even if most of it is quite soggy. Did you know that you humans only use about ten percent of your brains?”

Trouble didn’t wait for an answer to his question, but kept straight on with explaining his plan.

“I can help you to use the other ninety percent to move the lever. I’ll open up all that unused space and let your conscious mind have access to all that spare capacity.”

“Sounds great,” I said, thinking how I was already pretty clever, so I’d probably turn into some kind of mega-genius, “Why is it dangerous?”

“You’re not used to dealing with all that brain power,” answered Trouble, “It will open up all kinds of new things for you to explore, and you could easily get lost. If you lose yourself in your unconscious mind, then you’ll never find your way back.”

“Don’t worry,” I said, thinking what a drama bunny Trouble was being, “I’m sure I can handle it. Tell me how to begin.”

Trouble didn’t look convinced. He gave me a hard stare, but quickly realised that there was no choice – he’d have to trust me. He nodded and gave me my instructions.

“In a moment, I’ll ask you to close your eyes. It will seem like you’re in the corridor on the other side of the hydroponics room. As soon as you’re there, you should pull the red lever. The red lever is your exit – once you pull it, you’ll come straight back here. Just remember that the longer you stay over there the more likely it is that your attention will drift. If you drift too far, you’ll get lost ... forever. You must pull the lever as soon as you arrive.”

Trouble looked at me, and I nodded to confirm that I understood the instructions. We both glanced at the door, where the repeated blows were now causing cracks to appear. Any moment it could shatter, releasing Chicken Licken and dooming the habisat.

“Now! Close your eyes!”

It was amazing. As soon as I closed my eyes it seemed as though I was standing in the other corridor, just as Trouble had said it would be. Everything looked and felt real, but a little part of me knew that my body was still floating right there, next to Trouble, and I was only taking this trip inside my head. I could see the red lever on the wall and I started towards it, ready to pull it down and eject Chicken Licken out into space. Then I looked at the wall next to the lever, and I stopped. I could see it so clearly. I could see the patterns in its texture. Where before I’d thought that the walls of the habisat were flat and boring, I could now see intricate details that almost

seemed like they told a story. As I looked more closely at the wall, I got another shock. I found that I could see right through the wall and into the hydroponics room. I could see Chicken Licken, frozen in the act of aiming another blow at the door. I guessed that time was passing so slowly for me, while I was in this state, that it seemed like time had stopped for everything else. Wow, I thought, if I can see through walls, maybe I can see through the floor as well. I looked down at my feet. Sure enough, I could see straight through the floor, and I found myself staring out into space. I could see the stars so clearly and they looked so beautiful that I just couldn't tear my eyes away from them. I even found that, if I listened carefully, I could hear the stars. They were beeping and pinging and rustling to themselves. The stars were having a conversation and I was listening in to all their secrets. And there was something else. Something that I couldn't even describe as a sound, because it was like hearing in colour. I could hear the stars being red and blue and purple and green. I desperately wanted to hear more, and I wanted to be closer to my new friends, so I let myself start to drift through the floor. I wanted to drift into space and ...

“Ouch!”

I felt a sudden and terrible pain in my foot. I looked down, and there was the little pink lobster. He had attached one pincer to my left big toe and was nipping it mercilessly. He raised his other pincer, waving it back and forth, like a wagging finger – no no no no. I remembered then what I had come to do. I had to pull the lever. Of course, I didn't want to pull it. I wanted to drift off and play with the stars. I wanted to explore everything that my new powers would enable me to see. I didn't want to go back to being trapped in a body when there was so much more that I could achieve, and it was all within my grasp ... but the little lobster was right. I didn't need another pinch to remind me of my duty, of the promises I'd made and, most importantly, that if I drifted off now, I would never see you and mummy again. I reached out and dragged the lever down.

The effect was immediate. I was back in my body so quickly that, for the first few seconds, I could only float there – blinking and gaping like a fish out of water – trying to remember how my lungs worked. Then I took a breath, and it seemed as if the air I inhaled was drenched with a terrible sense of loss. It flooded through every part of me, and I knew that the stars were lost to me forever. I think I would have just curled up in a ball there and then, given up my mission and shut myself off from the world. I would have done, if it hadn't been for Trouble. He was jiggling up and down and tugging at my sleeve, trying to pull me towards a window.

“You did it, you did it, you did it!” he chanted.

I let myself be pulled to the window. I remembered what I'd been trying to do, and I was curious to know what the results of my efforts had been. Oddly, it was like wanting to know what happens at the end of a film, not like it was really anything to do with me, but even as I moved I could feel my body reasserting itself. I could feel

reality forcing itself back into my brain, and I could feel the excitement build as I looked through the window and out into space. There was the hydroponics room, floating away from us. It was a large metal box, and I dreaded to think what kind of ugly hole it had left in the habisat.

This thought, however, was forced to the back of my mind as I watched the drama unfolding before me. I could see that the floating room was taking a furious pounding from the inside. Every second, more dents, bulges and cracks were appearing along the walls. Even though I knew that no sound could travel in the vacuum of space, it still surprised me that this outpouring of violence was absolutely silent. In a very short time, the punishment became just too much, and the hydroponics room fractured into hundreds of pieces, leaving Chicken Licken floating freely in space. The stranded plant shot out a tentacle towards the habisat, but it was already too far away. Next it grew wings and tried to flap back to us, but there is no air in space and the wings had no effect. After this, Chicken Licken took shape after shape. Some regular – a cube, for instance – some lumpy, some ugly, but nothing did any good. It seemed to realise that it was running out of time, throwing tentacles out at random and changing with increasing speed until the icy cold of space took hold. Chicken Licken’s tentacles slowed, then stopped as they were frozen. The fearsome plant now looked no more frightening than a modern art sculpture, and it continued to float slowly away from the habisat.

“How are we going to destroy it?” I asked.

“Destroy it?” echoed Trouble.

“Yes, what if someone finds it and thaws it out,” I said, “What if it lands back on earth, or some other planet.”

“Don’t worry,” said Trouble, grimly, “It’s heading direct for the sun. It will take a while to get there, but it won’t be coming back.”

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### **Chapter 13: The Doctor is 'In'**

When the other bunnies finally returned from their various searches and investigations, they were extremely cross. Skip and WingCo burst into the canteen together.

“Trouble, why is there a big hole in the habisat?” asked Skip, “What have you been up to?”

“That’s not all,” blazed WingCo, “I passed a huge snowball on my way back. It looked quite a lot like Chicken Licken. Turtle, I’m very disappointed in you. You were meant to be in charge!”

Then they both stopped, as they realised what a terrible state we were in. Trouble had a big bald patch on his tummy, I had burn marks all over my suit and we both looked very shaken.

“What on earth has been going on?” asked Skip, a little more gently, “What happened to you?”

We both started to explain at once. Then stopped. Then started again. Then we decided to take it in turns to tell the different bits, and before long the whole story was flooding out. It took ages to tell because more bunnies kept drifting into the canteen, and each time we had to give a summary of where we’d got to. There were squeals of fear from the smaller bunnies when we got to the bit where Chicken Licken attacked Trouble. The older bunnies tutted and shook their heads when Trouble explained how he helped me to pull the far lever.

“Tsk,” they said, “Astral projection is not to be meddled with. Far too dangerous.”

When we had finished, there was general agreement that it was probably not our fault that Chicken Licken had come to life and that our quick thinking had almost certainly saved the habisat from total destruction. I was beginning to feel a little better, but Skip punctured my mood with his next question.

“Now,” he said, once all the bunnies had finished discussing our adventure, “let’s have a think about how we’re going to survive.”

A low murmur of whispered questions spread around the canteen. By now almost all the bunnies had arrived, and they floated in various positions making the room seem full in a way that would have been impossible had everyone been stood on the floor.

“That’s right,” continued Skip, “our main source of food is gone. If we’re careful, and only eat what we need, then we might have another five or six days left.”

At this point, TwoBrains stepped forward. She explained that the only way to get more food was to build another hydroponics room and to grow another Chicken Licken. The canteen was the biggest room left in the habisat, and so it would have to be converted. Everyone seemed to realise that there was no time to lose. Skip started to give instructions. One team of bunnies was set to work clearing the canteen.

Another went off to find a suitable place to set up an emergency kitchen. Pockets and a group of engineer bunnies were tasked with setting up the hydroponics equipment.

At once they started laying cables, drilling holes and fixing lights in place. They seemed to work without any plan or directions, and yet their individual efforts joined up more perfectly than any jigsaw. I wondered if they were communicating telepathically, or if their coordination was just because they were all so super-smart. Lastly, WingCo was asked to prepare for moving one of the smaller yeast blobs to the canteen, and he whizzed off with two trusted helpers to start making preparations. When everyone had gone, Skip spoke quietly to TwoBrains.

“Have you calculated how long it will take before the new Chicken Licken is ready for us to begin harvesting?”

“Yes, I have,” replied TwoBrains in a whisper, “It will be at least ten days. We will have five days with no food at all.”

Trouble gasped.

“I don’t think I’ve even gone five hours without food before,” he squeaked.

Skip suddenly seemed to remember that we were still there and he looked us up and down.

“Better get you off to see the doctor,” he said.

After a pause, he continued, “And we’d better get you a new suit of clothes.”

Then, after another pause, “And let’s give you a wash to make sure there’s no more cosmic dust left on you ... and after that, I can explain to you what we found out in space.”

Biff and Boff arrived to make sure that Trouble and I were looked after ... or maybe to make sure we didn’t cause any more disasters. First, we were taken to what was called the decontamination room. This was quite a small room, by my standards, so I had to crouch to get in – I was almost on my hands and knees. It looked like it was very clean, so clean that it even seemed to sparkle. In the floor, all along one side, was a large suction drain. At the other side, coiled neatly round some pegs, was a white hosepipe. I was told to take off my suit and to drop it through a hatch that was next to the hose. Trouble started to giggle when I took my suit off.

“You’ve got almost no fur,” he cried out, pointing and laughing, “You’re a baldy bunny!”

How rude he was, I thought to myself, had he never learnt any manners? Besides, I would have expected he’d treat me with a bit more respect after our adventure with Chicken Licken. Pointing, laughing and name calling – maybe I wouldn’t save him next time. As I was thinking this, Trouble started laughing even harder. He’d realised what was going to happen next, which is more than I’d done. Biff asked me to go and stand over the drain – and he did mean stand, because when I got there, he turned on the suction so that my feet were sucked down to the ground. Then Boff got the hosepipe, and before I knew what was happening, he was spraying me all over with a high-pressure jet of ice cold water.

“Eeee ... aaargh ... stop ... brrr,” I spluttered, but Boff was merciless. He just gave me instructions – ‘turn to your left’, ‘hands on the wall’, ‘touch your toes’ – and he

kept spraying until every bit of me had been blasted by the water. It hurt terribly, especially where I'd been burnt by the lights, but eventually it was over.

"Here, have a towel," called Biff, and he reached into a cupboard to throw me a bath towel ... a bunny-sized bath towel ... it was about as big as my hand. Once again, Trouble collapsed into helpless squeals of laughter as I stood there shivering and trying to dry myself with the tiny towel.

"I don't know why you're laughing," said Biff, looking down at him, "It's your turn next."

At first, and to his great credit, the little bunny tried to put on a brave face, but he was soon shouting for mercy as his little body was twisted round and round by the powerful jet of water. I found myself giggling as I watched – until I remembered how I'd felt about Trouble's rude behaviour only a few moments before – then I pulled myself together. Fortunately, it was soon over and Trouble came to stand next to me, wrapped in his own towel and trying to get warm. He kept looking up at me – as though he wanted to ask something, but just didn't quite have the nerve. I looked down at him as he stood shivering beside me, and suddenly I found I could read minds too.

"Would you like a cuddle to help you warm up?" I asked.

He nodded slowly, so I told him to float on up. In fact, he launched himself off the floor as if we were still playing Bunny Egg, and I had to be quick to grab him on the way past. I gave him a big cuddle and he stopped shivering almost at once. Of course, it didn't do much to warm me up – I felt like I'd need a hundred bunnies to take away the chill of that water. Besides, Trouble hadn't bothered to dry himself properly and he was unpleasantly damp. Still, it's always nice to have a bunny cuddle, and it made me feel warm on the inside, even if it didn't make me feel warm on the outside.

After decontamination, Biff and Boff took us to see the doctor. I hadn't seen the doctor before, or known that there was one, because I hadn't been ill during the time I'd been staying with the bunnies. The thought of what might pass for bunny medicine made me uncomfortable enough, but on top of that was the discomfort of still being completely naked. You see, after my decontamination, no one had thought to bring me new clothes – after all, the bunnies didn't seem to wear them. I was, therefore, freezing cold and quite annoyed by the time we reached the doctor's surgery.

Biff explained that the doctor was making a house call to a poorly bunny who had caught their paw in a door, so we'd have to wait. I groaned at the thought of waiting, naked and cold, for ages, with only Trouble for company. Imagine my joy, then, when Biff let us into the surgery and I saw that a brand new suit of clothes was there, waiting for me. Whoever had put them there had also thought to bring all my equipment, which I'd carelessly left in the pockets of my old suit. It made me think of how angry mummy gets if you leave things in the pockets of your trousers when they go to the wash. But here were my trowel, jam jar, secateurs, water bottle and all the

other useful bits and pieces I'd collected – stuck to the wall with tape to stop them floating away.

“Right, we're off now,” said Biff.

“S'right,” said Boff, “We've got things to do. You can find your own way back, can't you?”

Without waiting for an answer, the two big bunnies were gone. Trouble and I were too busy to notice anyway. I was rushing to put on my new suit. I sighed with pleasure as it inflated, making me feel warm and snug – and safe – for the first time in ages. Next I went to check over my equipment. I made sure that each item was in good working order before stowing it in the appropriate pocket.

Trouble, meanwhile, was living up to his name. He'd been going through all the cupboards and drawers to see what he could find. A lot of them were locked – I guessed this was where the medicines were kept – but some were not. The little bunny had already found a pad of sticky notes, and he'd tried to write his name by sticking the little squares of paper to the wall. Unfortunately, he'd run out halfway through, so he'd only been able to spell TROUP. Next he'd found a box of rubber surgical gloves, and he was now busy blowing them up like balloons. One got away from him and went flying across the room making a funny noise ... thrrrrppp. That was when the doctor walked in.

The doctor was quite a large bunny. He had fur that was white all over and, on his right arm, he wore a band that was white with a red cross. Round his head was another band, brown this time, onto which was fixed a small round mirror that sat just above his forehead and shined light into my eyes every time he looked at me. He was looking at me quite a lot, and at Trouble, and at the mess all over his surgery. When he peered at me over his spectacles it made me feel like he was silently counting all the naughty things I'd ever done. Finally, he spoke, his piercing gaze settling on Trouble.

“So, young Trouble,” said the doctor, “I can see that you haven't changed your ways. Still searching for mischief. Well, it looks like mischief has found you.”

The doctor moved his head so that the little mirror shone a spot of light on the bald patch in Trouble's fur.

“If you'd like me to treat that, then I think you've got some tidying to do.”

Realising he was outmatched, Trouble meekly started to take the sticky notes down from the wall, and the doctor turned his attention to me. I cowered a little beneath his gaze and managed a quiet “Hello, sir.”

“Hello, human,” he replied, “My name is Doctor Flopsy.”

Well, I didn't much like being addressed as ‘human’, and I didn't feel that I could really be scared of anyone named Doctor Flopsy, so I got a little of my courage back.

“Turtle,” I said, quite forcefully, meeting the bunny's gaze.

But the doctor misunderstood.

“Goodness no. Certainly not turtle. Definitely human,” he said.

“No, no. My name is Turtle,” I corrected him.

“Odd name for a human,” said the doctor, narrowing his eyes until they seemed almost closed, “but if you insist.”

He paused and cleared his throat.

“Human Turtle, please would you take your clothes off, so that I can treat your injuries.”

I sighed, both because of the doctor getting my call-sign wrong and because I was going to have to take off my nice, new, warm suit. However, I knew that it was in my own best interest, so I started to strip.

While I was taking off my clothes and Trouble was still tidying – he was popping the glove balloons, one by one, using a drawing pin – Doctor Flopsy unlocked one of the cabinets and began searching through various devices and bottles. Every now and again he would turn to stare at me before resuming his search, all the while mumbling quietly to himself. Eventually he selected one device and one spray can. Armed with these, he floated purposefully towards me. The can looked to me quite normal, like it might contain fly spray or air freshener. The device, however, was very peculiar. It was a small white cylinder, rounded at the ends and bent like a banana. There was a long thin slit along one side, but apart from this, I couldn't see any markings.

“Looks like you've got a couple of nasty burns,” said the doctor, “one on your foot and one on your arm. Any other injuries? Anything else hurt?”

I shook my head. Doctor Flopsy huffed slightly, as if he was disappointed – either in me or my injuries, I wasn't sure which – and then he got to work to treat my burns. First, he held the banana-shaped device over the burn on my arm. To my amazement, the device seemed to grow a little longer and then to bend a little more, so that it matched exactly the curve of my arm.

“Now,” said the doctor, “this will clean up the burn, but I'm afraid it's going to sting a little.”

As soon as he'd finished speaking, giving me no time to object, Flopsy started moving the device up and down above the burn. In some places it made my skin tingle, in some places it did indeed sting and in a few spots it sent a sharp stab of pain into my arm that made me wince. After he'd passed the device three times over the burn on my arm, the doctor repeated the procedure with my foot. This time he had to make five passes with the device because I couldn't stop jiggling. As he was making the fifth and final pass, I noticed that Trouble had finished his tidying and was floating near one of the cupboards, watching intently.

“What's next?” he asked, excitedly, “Is it going to hurt?”

“Not at all,” replied the doctor, to my relief, “I'm just going to apply some artificial skin – to protect Human Turtle's real skin while it repairs itself.”

Trouble made some noises like he wasn't interested, but I could tell he was disappointed that it wasn't going to hurt. Meanwhile the doctor had taken the cap off the spray can and was floating back up to my arm. I braced myself, determined to

hold still no matter how uncomfortable it might be, but whatever Doctor Flopsy sprayed on my burn caused no more discomfort than if he'd laid a piece of silk across it. I looked down with interest to see the spray forming into a layer of skin that covered the burn. Then, as I watched, a single hair popped out of the newly formed skin ... then another ... and another ... then a hundred more ... then a thousand. To my horror, I soon found the new patch of skin was covered with thick fur. The doctor noticed how shocked I was looking, but rather than being sympathetic, he just gave a tired-sounding sigh.

“It’s artificial bunny skin. What did you expect? It’ll do the job just as well.”

As he was speaking, he sprayed my foot, which also grew a luxuriant coating of bunny fur. I watched what the doctor was doing closely, but out of the corner of my eye, I could see Trouble laughing so hard that he was turning cartwheels in the air. The doctor noticed this too, and he turned to the little bunny.

“Right then, young Trouble,” he said, “time for your treatment.”

Trouble’s treatment was very similar to mine. Doctor Flopsy mumbled something about ‘stubborn subcutaneous damage’ as he passed the banana device over the little bunny’s tummy – making him wriggle and squeal. Then he used the spray can to repair the bald patch in Trouble’s fur. I was surprised to see that the new fur was too dark at first, but then started to change colour, getting lighter from the outside in, until it blended perfectly with Trouble’s own fur. In only a few seconds, it was impossible to see where the bald spot had been.

“Come on, Furry Turtle Human,” said Trouble, breaking into giggles again, “Get your suit on. I want to hear about what they found in space.”

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## **Chapter 14: Starvation Rations**

It took us a little while to track down the emergency canteen, and when we did, we were not impressed. Neither were the other bunnies, who were standing in a long queue down the side of one of the larger corridors. At the end of the queue there was no real canteen, just a hatch in the wall where a very tired-looking bunny was handing out little bowls of TCS. We were both hungry, so we joined the end of the queue, and that's when I started to notice a lot of mumbling and grumbling from the other bunnies – as well as a few angry stares directed at me and Trouble. I couldn't hear much of what the bunnies were saying, just snippets from time to time like:

“Those are the two ...”

“... flushed our food into space ...”

“Why should they get to eat?”

“... large one would feed us all for a week ...”

I got more and more nervous the longer we waited in the queue, and it seemed like Trouble did too. He floated closer to me and hid behind my arm, peeping out now and again to make sure no one was coming to eat him. Finally, we reached the front of the queue, and the tired-looking bunny handed us each a tiny bowl of TCS.

“I need more than that,” I said, “Look how big I am.”

“Everyone gets the same,” replied the tired-looking bunny in a tired-sounding voice. I was about to argue, but then I looked at the queue and saw how angry some of the bunnies looked. Instead I moved away and finished my TCS in two quick mouthfuls. I was still really hungry, and I wondered how I'd survive even one day on these rations, let alone ten.

“Come on, Turtle, this way for the briefing,” said WingCo, appearing at my elbow. Since the new canteen was just a corridor, and a very crowded corridor at that, the briefing took place in the docking sphere. Skip was waiting for us when we arrived. Pockets was there too. He had a big grin on his face. He was obviously happy about something – although I couldn't see what it might be, given the situation we were in. “Hello, you two,” began Skip, “I expect you're keen to understand what we found when we were out in space today.”

We both nodded, and Skip asked Pockets to set up the 3D projector. Rather than showing the earth, the projector showed an image of a big orange fiery ball – the sun. “As you know, the earth orbits the sun at a distance of 93 million miles,” said Skip, and the projector zoomed out to show the sun at the centre of a big circle, along which was moving a little planet – the earth.

“This means that, each year, planet earth travels more than 500 million miles in its journey around the sun. Using our special bunny-tech, we were able to scan this whole path for any traces of Cosmic Dust ... and look what we found.”

Skip paused as the image zoomed in on one small part of the circle. There, in empty space, we could all see a faint but obvious line.

“This line is made from traces of Cosmic Dust. Traces that could only have been left by an object that arrived from deep space, maybe even from another galaxy.”

Trouble went ‘ooh’, and I went ‘aah’.

“So where did this object go to?” I asked.

“The earth passes this point once every year on its journey around the sun,” explained Skip, “Let’s put it in the picture, shall we?”

As he spoke, the earth appeared, and it was suddenly clear that the line ended where it reached the planet.

“It’s the magic space arrow,” whispered Pockets, still grinning, “It points to where the object landed. It points to the source of the Cosmic Dust.”

“Brilliant,” I cried, “I’d better get ready for my final mission, then.”

But before I could rush off to prepare, Skip had stopped me.

“There’s just one problem,” he said, “As I explained, the earth passes this point in space exactly once a year, but each time it passes it’s pointing in a different direction.”

The image started to move beneath the arrow. I’d seen this before, and my face fell as I realised what it meant. Skip saw my expression.

“Don’t worry, it’s not that bad,” he said, “We’ve narrowed down the options. There’s only five spots where the object could have landed. Five places left to search. Five more missions, and then you can go home.”

A thought struck me.

“But what if I find the source in the first place I look?”

“Then it’s only one more mission,” laughed WingCo, “but let’s not get ahead of ourselves. It’s been a long day, and you need a good night’s sleep before going to the surface.”

He was right. I felt shattered, and I happily started to drift off towards my bunk, but Pockets cut me off, the grin on his face now bigger than ever.

“I made something for you,” he said, reaching into his pouch and pulling out a tightly coiled ball of string, “It’s called rabbit rope. It’s very strong, thin and light. It may come in useful.”

I thanked him and tucked the rabbit rope into one of my few remaining empty pockets. Then I went to bed.

The next morning, I got up nice and early and got ready for my mission. It took a while, and by the time I’d packed all my equipment, my suit was covered with odd bulges and squeaked a bit when I moved. I thought about leaving a few things behind, but I had no idea what might be useful on such an important mission. Once I was sure that I had all my equipment stowed correctly, I floated down to the emergency canteen to collect my breakfast. There was another long queue, and I was so hungry after my tiny dinner the night before that it was a difficult wait. The tired-looking bunny was there again when I reached the serving hatch. I tried to hide my disappointment when he handed me a thimble full of TCS, but it must have shown on

my face because he glared up at me and raised an eyebrow, as if daring me to complain. I moved on quickly and found WingCo waiting to give me my mission briefing. He explained that they had yet to discover a way to neutralise the Cosmic Dust.

“TwoBrains is working on something,” he continued, “but today is just a reconnaissance mission. You understand? You’re going down to look only. Find out what you can and then come back. On no account are you to engage the enemy.”

“How will I know what to look for?” I asked, suddenly worried because WingCo seemed so serious.

“Whatever this thing is,” answered WingCo, “it comes from deep space. It will probably look very alien to your eyes. For certain it will have left a big crater when it landed – that should be easy enough to spot.”

I carried on floating along with WingCo, lost in my own thoughts, and as we approached the docking bay, I was surprised to hear the babble of lots of bunny voices. There was a huge crowd waiting for me in the spherical chamber. They’d all come to see me off on what might be my last mission. Some of the bunnies were carrying signs and banners they’d made:

ONLY 5 MISSIONS TO GO!

GOOD LUCK, TURTLE!

I was flattered by the attention, but I still noticed that one bunny was missing. I couldn’t see Trouble anywhere. My main concern, however, was how to make a good impression on the bunnies that had turned up. I knew I wasn’t the most popular house guest, having destroyed their only source of food, and even in this good-natured gathering, I could see a few scowls and glares. So, I put on my best hero voice and I gave a rousing, heroic speech. It went like this ...

... Actually, I can’t quite remember the exact words right now, but it was utterly brilliant and brave and ... brilliant. Honestly, it was like Shakespeare – only more up to date and with shorter words. It had the bunnies cheering and waving their banners, their little faces all lit up with joy and hope, as I climbed into the pod and set off on the short journey down to earth.

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## **Chapter 15: Killer Carrots**

As was my habit, I turned on the viewer during my final approach to the planet's surface. It only took a glance to tell me that the pod was going to land somewhere in England – it was a nice clear day and the shape of the British Isles is quite distinctive. I spent a few more seconds, as we closed in on the landing site, looking for any obvious craters. Seeing none, I turned off the viewer again – to save power – and waited for the bump of touch down. Knowing my destination, it didn't surprise me when the pod door opened and I saw a landscape of rolling green hills stretched before me. Stepping out, I took a long breath of the fresh, clear air and examined my surroundings more carefully. The pod had landed in a large field. Around me was short grass, so neat that it looked almost like a lawn. To one side was a small stand of trees – oaks, I think they were – and ahead of me was a large ploughed area.

Taking another deep breath of the delicious air, I decided that I'd better start my exploration. Even though it was quite clear that nothing alien had ever touched this landscape, I still had a job to do. It was when I tried to take a step forward that I had a surprise. My foot was stuck. I looked down to see that the grass had grown up around my feet, and I prepared to wrench myself free. This didn't look good, I thought, it might be best to abort the mission, but then the grass retreated – releasing my feet and looking almost apologetic as it did so. This was strange. I had made sure that I wasn't carrying any bunny-tech – the experience with the Giant Redwoods had taught me that – so why had the grass grabbed me? I took a couple of steps forward and then paused, but everything now seemed normal. Shrugging my shoulders, I decided to continue the mission. Walking briskly down the field, my eyes scanning the landscape for any sign of a crater, I passed close to the group of trees. Their branches swayed and waved in the ... but there wasn't any wind. The branches were moving on their own, and it looked like they were confused – searching for something. This was getting stranger and stranger, but so far it didn't seem dangerous, so I continued onwards. I'd now reached the ploughed area of the field, my shoes sinking into the freshly turned earth, and I wondered idly what the farmer would be planting here.

I froze. There was no farmer. There were no people. So who, or rather what, had been doing the ploughing? As if in answer to my question, in the distance, I saw an orange shape racing towards me across the field. No, it was racing through the field, half buried in the soil and throwing up clods of earth to either side. Behind it came two more orange shapes, cutting furrows in the ground that were straight as arrows ... and I was the target. I panicked. Or I thought fast – it depends on how you look at it. I could make a dash back to the grass, but I couldn't be sure I'd be safe there. For sure I'd not make it all the way back to the pod. I didn't fancy my chances climbing the trees, not the way their branches had been thrashing about. There seemed to be only one option. In the middle of the field, between me and my mysterious attackers, was

a small, flat boulder. It wasn't the fortress that I would have liked, but it was the best chance I had, and I sprinted forward.

Now that I was running towards my orange attackers, the gap between us was closing much more quickly than was comfortable. Plus – and if you've ever tried to run across a ploughed field you'll know this – my feet sank into the ridges and got caught in the furrows. It was slower going than I would have liked, and I wasn't sure that I was going to make it. In the end, it was a dead heat, but this was good enough for me. As the first of my attackers passed to my left – circling round to cut off my retreat, I thought – I leapt onto the boulder, rejoicing at the feeling of solid rock beneath my feet. Luckily I was still alert, because one of my other pursuers charged the rock, launching itself at my face. I leant back as far as I could, without having to step onto the field, and the beast passed within a centimeter of my eyes. It was about half a meter long, with an orange body that was shaped like an elongated cone. A set of green stalks protruded from its back – the base of the cone – reminding me of fronds of bracken. These whipped around as it flew through the air, and I guessed that they were what propelled the thing through the ground. Below the pointy nose was a gaping mouth that bristled with sharp crystal teeth. For a second, they snapped and gnashed in front of my face, horribly close to my nose, and then the thing plunged back down into the earth, leaving me gasping with horror.

Then, as I stood there on the rock thinking that things couldn't possibly get any worse, I felt a wriggling and a tickling down by my tummy. For a second I was too terrified to move. It was like a nightmare. I could feel something working its way up, climbing over my chest, pulling on my skin. Summoning all my courage, I yanked open the front of my suit, ready to confront any manner of hideous beast. Instead, I found myself looking down at Trouble.

“Are we there yet?” he asked, blinking up at me in the sunlight. Then he looked around. “Oooo!” he went, and scampered up to sit on the top of my head so that he could get a better view. For the moment, I was too surprised to speak, but I felt like I'd soon have quite a lot to say.

“What are those orange things?” Trouble asked, suddenly.

“They are Killer Carrots,” I found myself replying through gritted teeth.

“Why are they circling round the rock?”

“Because they want to eat us.” I said, then corrected myself, “No, because they want to eat you.”

And then I just couldn't hold back any longer.

“What on earth do you think you're doing? Don't you know how dangerous it is down here. Almost any of these plants could turn killer and you're a plant magnet. You've put yourself at risk, you've put me at risk and this mission is now officially a disaster. What were you thinking?”

Trouble was quiet for a moment, and although I couldn't see him, it sounded like he was crying a little. Eventually he gave a big sniff.

“We were such a good team, when we defeated Chicken Licken, I just wanted to have another adventure with you.”

“Well, you’ve certainly got one,” I said, more gently, feeling a bit sorry that I’d spoken so harshly to the little bunny, “So, let’s just take a moment to think how we’re going to get out of here.”

“Why don’t we just space swim back to the Pod?” asked Trouble, and I felt him launch himself off my head. After all the time he’d spent on the habisat, he must have thought that he’d float, just like he did there. Fortunately I reacted very quickly, and I managed to grab him by a paw before he fell to the ground. Even so, one of the carrots jumped up and came within a hair of biting his ear off.

“Phew,” said Trouble, as he clambered back onto my head, “I didn’t quite realise the gravity of our situation.”

I groaned and hid my face in my hands as Trouble laughed at his own terrible pun. But although I’d covered my eyes, I found that I could still see. There was the ploughed field and the killer carrots circling the rock, and there was the little pink lobster. He was scuttling about, backwards and forwards over the ploughed earth. On his head was a cowboy hat and in one claw he held a lasso that he twirled around above his head, just like a real cowboy. Well, I knew by now that the little pink lobster only showed up when I was in terrible peril, and he always showed me a way to save myself. This time was no different.

“Don’t worry, Trouble,” I said, as I took my hands away from my eyes, “I’ve got an idea.”

I searched through my pockets and found the rabbit rope. It looked so thin and weak – no better than string – that I began to have doubts. I wasn’t sure that it would be up to the job. Nevertheless, I carefully tied a loop in one end and got ready for my first throw. Holding the bulk of the rope in my left hand, I spun the looped end over my head, like I’d seen the little pink lobster do. Finding himself in the way, Trouble scampered down from my head and hid in my shirt again. I aimed carefully and threw the loop at one of the carrots. It landed just behind – no good – so I quickly drew the rope back in for another go. The next time, I aimed just ahead of the carrot. It worked, and my makeshift lasso landed just on the carrot’s nose, but the carrot was so far buried in the ground that there was nothing for the rope to catch on. The carrot went straight underneath and kept on circling. Trouble had been watching all this, through a gap in my shirt front, and now he came marching out with great indignation.

“No, no, no, no,” he said, “That will never work. For a start, there’s three carrots and you’ve only got one loop. Please can you tie another two.”

Under Trouble’s guidance, I made two new lassos. I was surprised to find that the rabbit rope was difficult to cut, even with my sharp secateurs, and this gave me some hope that it would be strong enough to hold the carrots. When I had finished, Trouble told me to throw the first lasso out into the field. It didn’t matter where, but I had to

be ready to pull it back in as soon as he gave the signal. I did as he asked, landing the loop of the lasso flat on the earth. The carrots continued to circle, ignoring my efforts, but Trouble seemed satisfied. He jumped down onto the rock and, before I could stop him, he scampered out into the field to stand right in the centre of the lasso. As soon as his paw touched the soil, I noticed that all three carrots disappeared under the surface.

“Come back here,” I shouted, suddenly understanding Trouble’s plan, “It’s too dangerous.”

“As long as you’re quick,” the little bunny shouted back, “I’ll be fine.”

I dithered, unsure what to do, and I’d just made up my mind to run out and grab Trouble when I saw the ground all around him begin to shake. It was too late for anything else. I got ready on the rope. The vibrations got more violent, and all at once, the little bunny jumped into the air. He seemed to jump higher than was possible, and then he seemed to hang in the air longer than was natural. It was a good job he did because, an instant later, one of the carrots burst through the earth right underneath him. Its jaws were wide open, ready to swallow him up, but the carrot’s nose had come up right in the middle of the lasso. I felt the rope tighten in my hand and I gave an almighty tug. The noose pulled tight around the carrot, snapping his mouth shut and flipping him over so that he landed on his back. Now I hauled him in close to the rock, and although he thrashed around terribly, he could not get away.

“Quick, tie him tight,” said Trouble.

The little stowaway had run back to the rock, chased by the remaining two carrots, and he had once again perched himself on my head – a practice I was beginning to resent. He seemed quite out of breath – I guessed it was because he wasn’t used to moving under gravity – but otherwise he was unharmed. By the time I’d got the first carrot tied tight to the side of the rock, he was ready to start again. I had my misgivings about using Trouble as bait, but I couldn’t see any other way, and when we snared a second carrot with the same routine, it seemed like the risk had been worth taking. The final carrot, however, seemed to be a bit cleverer.

This carrot did not dive under the surface to come up underneath Trouble. Instead, he made a run along the top of the earth, coming straight at the little bunny from behind. Trouble had become overconfident, and he wasn’t paying proper attention.

“Look out! Behind you!” I shouted.

Finally realising that he was in danger, Trouble made a dive to one side. The carrot went racing past, snapping its jaws. Now Trouble was stranded out in the middle of the field. The carrot was turning around for another attack, and although my little friend was now alert and ready, I knew that the carrot had the advantage. Trouble might be a master at space swimming, but he wasn’t used to moving about on the earth’s surface. However quick and smart he might be, however much he dodged and dived, he’d soon get tired and slow down – then it would be game over. I watched in horror as the killer carrot raced towards Trouble, who seemed to be just standing

there waiting to be gobbled up. Then I saw the loop of the lasso give a little twitch. It was lying there, forgotten, between the bunny and the carrot. The loop twitched again, and I remembered that all the bunnies had special telekinetic powers – even the small and annoying ones. The end of the rope was still in my hand, and I got ready to react quickly when Trouble made his move. This was going to be tight, but it looked like Trouble was going to leave it too late. He didn't look like he was going to do anything. In fact, he was unnaturally still. Oh no, I thought, it's too much for him, he's frozen. I could hardly bare to watch. The carrot was now almost upon him, with its jaws wide open and ready to bite. It seemed like it was already too late when the lasso jumped up, just snagging on the nose of the carrot. I pulled on the rope with all my might, stopping the carrot in mid-air, just when it thought it was going to get bunny for dinner. Instead it was soon tied up, next to the rock with the others. Trouble and I quickly decided that we'd better head back to the habisat. It was clear that there was nothing alien around here, and Trouble's presence was making the other plants restless. It wasn't safe to stay and explore. Before we went, however, there was one thing I had decided to do. I chose the largest of the three carrots and dragged it over to the Pod, where I tied it securely to the outside. Trouble looked at me as if I was a bit strange, but he didn't ask any questions, and we were soon heading into orbit.

“Do you think we need to tell anybody that I was here?” Trouble asked, as the Pod adjusted course and headed for the habisat.

“I think you've learnt your lesson,” I replied, after a moment's consideration, “I'm sure that I can trust you not to stow away on any more of my missions ... can't I?” Trouble nodded solemnly and looked relieved. Then he seemed to think of something.

“Moving around under gravity is quite difficult, isn't it,” he said.

“Maybe even as difficult as space swimming,” I answered.

Trouble thought about this, and for a while, it was very quiet in the Pod.

“I'm sorry I teased you when you first arrived,” he said finally, in a quiet voice.

I couldn't think of any way to reply, but it felt like I didn't need to. I just gave Trouble a little hug, and that said everything.

When we got back to the habisat, Trouble hid inside my jacket, just like he'd done on the way down. We made sure that he couldn't be seen, and then I instructed the Pod to open the door. There was a small welcoming committee waiting for me – WingCo, Skip and TwoBrains – but nothing like the huge group that had cheered me off. I was grateful that I didn't have to walk past the whole population of the habisat with Trouble hidden under my shirt, but any feeling of relief at this didn't last long. Skip and WingCo were looking distinctly displeased.

“I see you've brought a friend back with you,” said Skip, in a cross voice.

My hand started to move to where Trouble was hiding, but then I realised he was talking about the killer carrot that I'd attached to the Pod. I knew I had to explain

what I'd done, because the bunnies thought I'd put them in terrible peril ... again. "I knew that we were short of food, so I just thought that when I saw a huge carrot I should grab it. I saw Chicken Licken freeze when it was out in space. I guessed the same would happen to the carrot, and so it would be harmless by the time I got it here. I knew that you bunnies would find a way to bring it into the habibat and make it safe to eat because you're so clever."

I stopped and took a breath, while the three bunnies looked at each other. Finally, WingCo broke the silence, addressing not me, but Skip.

"Well, as our guest doesn't seem to know the meaning of the word reconnaissance, I'd better suit up and get out there with one of our larger carving knives. First, however, I think I'll take Turtle back to his bunk. He looks quite worn out. I think decontamination can wait until the morning."

I heaved a big sigh of relief, and I'm sure I felt Trouble letting out his breath as well. Then WingCo took me by the arm and led me towards my bunk. He chatted, as we floated through the corridors, telling me about the work they'd been doing on replacing Chicken Licken, and how they were trying to find a way to neutralise the Cosmic Dust. I was quite off guard when he asked a question.

"Did you have trouble while you were down there?"

I wasn't sure whether this was an innocent question or if he'd guessed about my stowaway. Again my hand moved towards where the little bunny was hiding, but again I stopped myself. I told WingCo, honestly, that it hadn't been my easiest mission, but that it hadn't been my most difficult either.

"It's just that I haven't seen any trouble up here since you left," continued WingCo. Now I knew that he was talking about my little friend and that I had to be very careful how I answered.

"I'm very glad to hear it," I said, "and I'm so sorry to have caused you such difficulties with Chicken Licken."

By now we had arrived at my bunk. I yawned and stretched, hoping to cut this difficult conversation short. WingCo saw how tired I was – and I really was – and his expression changed to one of concern.

"Not at all," he said, "Not your fault. You weren't to know that you were bringing the Cosmic Dust back with you. Now, you look dog tired. You'd better get some down time. I wouldn't want anything to trouble your sleep."

With these last words, WingCo darted forward and slapped me on the stomach, just where Trouble was hiding. I tried to move back, but I was too slow, and I was sure that my little friend was going to be discovered. Instead, I felt WingCo's paw sink into my tummy. I'm not sure who looked more surprised by this. I gave a little cough to cover my reaction, while WingCo pretended to be very interested in the construction of my bunk.

"Looks comfortable enough. Hope these straps aren't too tight," he mumbled.

I'm not sure whether or not WingCo was fooled, but he certainly hadn't been able to

catch me out, so there was nothing that he could do except bid me goodnight and head off down the corridor. For my part, I just made sure that I kept facing him as he left. I didn't want him to see the Trouble-shaped bulge on my back.

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## **Chapter 16: Party**

That night I slept like a log, and when I woke it was already quite late. I felt like I could have slept for longer, but I was eager to get on with my next mission, so I unstrapped myself and headed for decontamination. After my short, freezing shower, I dressed and started to drift slowly towards the emergency canteen. I knew that I had – at most – four more missions before I could go back home to the past. At the same time, I was nervous about arriving at the new canteen. All the bunnies in the queue would be very bad tempered – probably because they were all as hungry as I was, and they knew that, even when they reached the front, they wouldn't be given enough to eat. My own tummy was so empty that it had stopped rumbling. I just felt slow and weak, like I had heavy weights tied to my arms and legs. As I got closer, I started to move even more slowly. I could hear a commotion ahead of me – the sounds of lots of bunnies all scrabbling about, chattering and the occasional shout. I move further forward, not letting fear get the better of me. Soon, I could soon hear words amongst the hubbub. Words like “delicious” and “fantastic” and “stuffed”. The corridor curved round here, and as I paddled my way round, the first bunny came into view. He was lying on his back in the middle of the tunnel, gnawing on something orange that he held in both paws. As I watched, his quick little teeth went chomp chomp chomp, and when the orange stick had been gobbled up, he let out a sigh of pure pleasure. Then he looked round, saw me and let out a squeal.

“Everyone, he's here. He's here.”

By now, I'd drifted right around the corner, and I could see a multitude of bunnies – perhaps the whole population of the habisat – crowding the corridor that was the emergency canteen. They were all floating around, chatting, singing and even dancing, and all of them were nibbling on chunks of carrot. It was one big rabbit party, but when they saw me, they all stopped what they were doing and let out a huge cheer. I drifted through the crowd, trying to make my way to the serving hatch, while all around me there were congratulations, thanks and more cheers. Eventually, after I'd had my hand shaken a dozen times and my back slapped a hundred times, I got to the hatch. There was the tired-looking bunny, glaring at me.

“I expect you're going to want extra, aren't you?” he said, “Haven't you learnt yet that everyone gets the same?”

The smile left my face and I nodded glumly, preparing myself for another tiny portion of TCS.

“Well, today,” continued the tired-looking bunny, suddenly breaking into a smile, “everyone gets a feast.”

He handed me a little statue of a turtle, carved out of carrot. I just stared at it for a while, until one of the bunnies shouted out, “It's food, you're meant to eat it!”. I took a tentative bite, remembering that, only yesterday, this 'food' had been trying to eat me. Sure enough, it tasted like normal carrot. After the first bite, my hunger

overcame me and I began to tuck in with huge mouthfuls while the bunnies cheered and partied and feasted around me.

“Well done, Turtle,” said a voice beside me.

I looked down to see Skip standing there. He was smiling up at me, but he had a tear in his eye.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, suddenly feeling like the party was very distant.

“Look at them,” replied Skip, “Most of them have never tasted a real carrot before. They can’t believe it tastes so good. I can’t think of anything sadder than all these bunnies having grown up with no carrots.”

Suddenly, as well as the sadness, there was also a look of determination on Skip’s face.

“Come on, Turtle,” he said, taking me by the hand, “TwoBrains has discovered a way to neutralise the Cosmic Dust. Now we’re going to end this thing, once and for all.”

We found TwoBrains in her laboratory. Skip went inside, but the door was too tiny for me to fit through, so I just stuck my head through and left my body floating outside. Inside it was a jumble of tables, test tubes, electrical gizmos and jars of bubbling liquids. TwoBrains sat in the middle of all this with a big smile on her face.

“You have arrived at a most interesting time,” she said, “I have just finished developing the first and only Cosmic Dust Elimination Device.”

She held up something that looked like a small, chubby pen. Skip seemed impressed, but I just stared at the device with what must have been a very stupid expression on my face. TwoBrains looked at me and sighed – with obvious disappointment.

“You must understand that building this device was not just a question of the physical construction. I have had to analyse the behaviour of the plants and deduce from this the very nature of the Dust. Ultimately, my work has led me to a new and startling theory about what has been happening on earth. It has led me to explore the very heart of the matter – the question of what, or who, is the Source.”

Then TwoBrains explained everything. It took a little while, and she used lots of unnecessarily long words, so I’ll just give you the summary. Although, when I’ve finished, I think you’ll agree that it really was very clever of TwoBrains to figure it all out.

The Source of the Cosmic Dust, TwoBrains was now sure, was not an alien object – like a meteor or a chunk of space metal – but an alien being. This creature had arrived on earth from outer space with the intention of taking over the planet, and it had used the Cosmic Dust as a weapon. The Dust was what TwoBrains called a ‘psychic connector’. It linked the minds of everything it touched – helping thoughts flow from one to another. It allowed the Source to control all the plants in the world and to turn them against the humans.

“But why plants?” I asked, at this point, “Why not just control the people?”

TwoBrains explained to me that things with brains of their own were not affected by the Dust – they could make their own decisions about what to do, they didn’t just

follow instructions. Plants, on the other hand, didn't have brains. Plants didn't make their own decisions. They grew towards the sun. Their roots sought moisture. Their seeds grew where they fell. Plants were easily led, and so they were greatly affected by the Cosmic Dust. The Source could send its thoughts out to all the plants around the world, and the thoughts that it sent were thoughts of destruction.

"Okay, that makes sense," I interrupted again, "but then why don't the plants attack me?"

This was one of the most interesting parts of the whole puzzle, according to TwoBrains. It seemed that, over the years, the plants had developed a capacity to think a little for themselves. For sure, they were still not very clever, just smart enough to recognise my little acts of kindness – the pruning, the watering, the not blasting them apart with high explosive rockets. This meant that – usually – they were being kind to me in return.

"This is all very interesting," I said, rather impatiently, because you must understand that I still had my head stuck through a door and my neck was starting to ache, "but how does it help us get things back to normal."

For once, it seemed, I'd asked the right question. Because the plants were all being controlled from the Source, it meant that we only had to deactivate the dust in one place – in the Source itself. Then the psychic link would be broken. The plants would be free to make their own choices and would probably go back to their old ways. This was where the chubby pen came in, and now TwoBrains told me how it worked.

"You see here," she said, holding it up in one paw and pointing with the other, "You just push the bit at this end – the bit that looks like a rubber – and it deploys a very special gas."

Then she actually pushed the button, and a small cloud shot out of the pointy end of the pen. Caught by surprise, I jerked back my head and whacked my ear against the door frame.

"Don't worry," said TwoBrains, "It's perfectly harmless for rabbits ... and humans, but if you can get the Source to breathe in this gas then we will finally have won the war."

Now I was impressed. Impressed and with a sore ear.

"Right then," I said, all business-like, "I'd better get on with it."

I started to pull my head out of the lab, but Skip stopped me.

"Wait, Turtle. Haven't you forgotten something?"

TwoBrains held out the Cosmic Dust Elimination Device and, because there was no room to get an arm through the lab door, I had to grab it in my teeth. Once I was back in the corridor, however, I took it out of my mouth, dried it off a little and put it into my most secure pocket. Skip now floated out of the lab, and together we went to the Pod.

I was prepared for another uneventful flight through space, just like all the ones before. To pass the time, I thought about all the different situations I might face, the

challenges I might meet and how I might overcome them. I was lost in my own thoughts when the whole pod was shaken – I had no idea by what. I didn't want to waste energy, and yet I desperately wanted to see what was happening outside. Maybe I was in terrible peril, although I wasn't sure what I'd do if this was the case. "Pod," I asked, "what was that?"

A message flashed up on the wall in front of me. It said – NEAR MISS WITH ASTEROID.

"Wow, show me," I said, then added quickly, "On a small screen," because I didn't want to use too much power.

The pod opened a little screen, just in front of my face, and I could see a large egg shaped rock spinning through space. The rock was pitted and scarred. It looked old, like it had travelled a long way to get here, but it didn't look like it was going to travel too much further. There, below it, was the earth, and it was heading straight down. As I watched, it entered the earth's atmosphere. I could see a stream of dust, debris and cloud forming behind it as it started to heat up. Then, suddenly, BOOM – the asteroid exploded into a thousand fragments with a light so bright that it turned the whole screen white. The flash seemed to pulse for a second, before fading away. Now I could see the thousand fragments of meteor streaking across the sky below me, trailing smoke behind them. One by one, depending on their size and speed, they burnt up – fizzling out or flashing from existence, like their parent. It was all the best firework displays I'd ever seen rolled into one, and I had the best seat in the house as the Pod carried me overhead, following the curve of the earth on the way to our destination. I was sure this had to be a good omen. A sign that this would be my final mission, my ultimate success, but at the same time I wondered what sort of creature could survive such a fall from the sky.

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## **Chapter 17: I Face My Fears**

Although I turned on the viewer again as we were coming in to land, there was nothing to see. Dense, low cloud covered the area from horizon to horizon. We touched down with a soft clang, and I took a couple of deep breaths to calm myself before opening the Pod hatch. Cold air washed in from outside, and I could taste the metallic tang of electricity that told me a thunderstorm was nearby – either just passed or just coming. I stepped carefully out and found myself in a desolate landscape of broken rocks. The ground rose in front of me to a low peak, over which a cold wind whistled, chilling me despite my padded suit. On the plus side, there didn't seem to be a scrap of vegetation around. Of course, I knew not to let my guard down. I knew that plants could hide in the most unlikely places, like the little flowers hiding in the sand of the desert. I turned round to seal the Pod's hatch ... and got a shock.

The Pod was standing right on the edge of a cliff. I carefully edged forwards. The drop must have been at least thirty meters. At the bottom was a grass covered slope, but with plenty of rocks sticking up, here and there. I didn't think much of the Pod's chances of flying again if it fell down there, and I wondered why it had chosen such a precarious spot to make a landing. I thought about trying to move the Pod away from the edge, but then there was a particularly strong gust of wind, and I was hit by a wave of vertigo. Stepping back quickly, I stumbled over one of the many rocks and almost fell. After that, I decided that the Pod had better stay where it was. I would just have to hope that the wind didn't get any stronger while I was away. So, having made a final check of my equipment, I set off to explore the area.

Walking through this landscape wasn't easy. The ground never seemed to be flat. There were sharp ridges of rock, small boulders, large slabs of stone – which might have been dropped by a careless giant – and areas filled with pebbles and stones. These last should have been easiest for walking, but I found that the stones moved underfoot, and several times I nearly twisted an ankle. I soon learnt that the safest way – although maybe not the easiest – was to hop, jump or stride from boulder to boulder and across the tops of the ridges. I had been walking like this for about half an hour – and was beginning to work up a sweat despite the cold weather – when I arrived at the top of a short rise in the ground, and I realised that I'd reached the crater. I stood for a few seconds, taking in the view and trying to make sense of it. I was looking at one side of the mountain – or what had once been the side of the mountain. Now there was just a big round hole. It was as if I were looking down into the ruins of a gigantic, ancient theatre, sculpted out of the rock by the gods themselves. The walls curved down and round, flattening out at the bottom, where the slope merged with the grassy plain. There, in what was a natural stage, sat a big, spiky, white rock and, behind it, two tall trees that looked oddly familiar. With a sudden shock, I realised that I was looking at the Source – and here I was,

standing silhouetted against the skyline, making the most obvious of targets. I dropped down flat on my tummy and peered over the edge, to see what else I could discover about the scene below me. Nothing seemed to be moving, so it looked like I hadn't been spotted. The Source, now I looked more closely, was not white rock, but looked like it was made out of crystal. I guessed that it must have smashed this hole in the side of the mountain when it fell from space. Then it had just stayed where it had fallen – maybe out of choice, maybe because it couldn't move or maybe because it just didn't need to. After all, it had defeated all mankind and then driven the bunnies off the planet, all without moving so much as an inch. One thing was clear, I needed to get down there to be close enough to use the device, and I would be very exposed as I climbed down those cliffs. I backed away from the edge and backtracked a little way, so as to be well out of sight. Then I started to look for a way down the cliffs and onto the plain below.

I walked quite a long way along the tops of those cliffs looking for a way down. Every now and again I shuffled forward to get as close as I dared to the edge, where the wind buffeted me and pulled at my clothes. From here, I could peer left and right, along the line of the cliffs, looking for a way down. It was no good. Wherever I looked was the same – vertical cliffs leading down to rocky slopes. I shuddered, but not from the cold. I finally had to admit to myself what I had known all along. I was going to have to climb down. I unpacked what was left of the rabbit rope, tied one end round a large boulder at the top of the cliff and threw the loose end over the edge, watching it jerk and dance as it fell towards the bottom. I gave the rope a couple of good tugs to make sure it was secure, and then I made my way to the edge ready to begin my descent. That was, until I looked down and another attack of vertigo seized me. Terrified that I was going to fall, I dropped to my hands and knees and felt my way back along the rope, until I was sat hugging the boulder I had used as an anchor. “This is no good,” I said to myself, “sitting here, hugging a boulder. What would anyone say if they could see me?”

I tried to pull myself together, but I couldn't seem to take my arms from around the stone. It was like they were glued in place.

“Well this won't do,” I now addressed myself quite sternly, “The whole world hanging in the balance, and you're glued to a rock.”

This time I was calm enough to listen to myself properly. I took a couple of deep breaths and pulled my arms away from the rock. A couple more deep breaths and I was ready to think of a plan.

“Don't look down, that's the trick,” I said aloud.

I could go backwards. I'd seen people doing something similar on television – holding a rope and walking backwards down a wall. I'd do just the same. With my confidence returning, I stood up and, with my back to the cliff, took hold of the rope. Step by step, I moved backwards until first my left foot, then my right, touched the edge. Now I leaned back, being sure to keep my legs and body straight, just like I'd

seen on the telly. To my amazement, I found I was doing it. I was walking backwards down the cliff. The problem was that this wasn't as easy as it had looked on television. Already my arms were burning with the effort and the rope was cutting into my hands. If the cliff had been as sheer as it had looked from the top, I'd never have made it, but fortunately it was not so flat. Here and there were ledges that were wide enough to stand on. Although I had to cling close to the rock face to stop the wind taking me, these rest stops were enough to get my breath back and to massage the feeling back into my fingers.

In this way, I continued my journey down the cliff. I was very careful never to look down, so when the rope ran out, I had no idea how far I was from the bottom. Yes, that's right, the rope ran out. I wasn't expecting it either. It had looked, from the top of the cliff, like the rope had dropped all the way to the bottom, but here I was, still on the cliff and with no more rope left. To make matters worse, my palms were beginning to sweat and, inch by inch, the rope was slipping through my hands. I tried to pull myself up so that I could get a better grip on the rope – or find a handhold on the cliff face – but my luck had run out. I was still thinking desperately as the last inch of the rope slipped from my grasp, and I toppled through the air. I would have screamed, I'm sure, but it was over too quickly. I landed with a thud on the grass slope at the bottom of the cliff – thankfully missing any sharp rocks. Then I rolled down, gradually slowing, until I came to a halt in a heap of arms and legs. I was shaken and dizzy, but thank goodness, not much hurt.

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## **Chapter 18: The Source**

Now I felt – quite wrongly, as it turned out – that the hardest part was behind me. I picked myself up, dusted myself off and began to walk back towards the crater. I went carefully, trying to make as little noise as possible, and always checking to make sure that I wasn't being watched. It was much easier walking over the grassy plain, so it wasn't long before I arrived at my destination. The bottom of the crater wasn't as flat as it had looked from above, and there was plenty of cover for me to use in my final approach. I advanced, unseen, by dodging behind rocks and crawling along shallow gullies. Things seemed to be going pretty well. I got within twenty meters of the Source, and I was getting ready with the anti-dust device when it suddenly spoke to me.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” it called, in a voice that sounded human and playful, but was also tinged with evil.

I wondered if it really knew where I was, and I gripped the pen, bracing myself to run forward and release the gas.

“Of course I know where you are,” called the Source, answering my question even though I'd said nothing out loud, “I can smell your mind. I can practically read your thoughts.”

This was a worrying development. I tried to make my mind go blank, but I didn't know how. I thought about making a dash for it anyway, and in that split second, I knew that, if the Source could read my thoughts, I'd have to act immediately. I jumped out of my hiding place and sprinted towards the white rock, the anti-dust device raised in one hand and ready to deploy.

Three more steps and I would have made it, but I was stopped short of my goal. I felt something hit my arm, knocking the device out of my hand and then holding me fast. Then the other arm was grabbed. Then both legs, and I found myself suspended a few inches above the ground, my limbs held immobile by tree roots. Looking to either side, I saw that I was flanked by two large trees – trees I recognised as Giant Redwoods – and these two had a peculiar characteristic. All the branches on one grew only to the left of its trunk, while all the branches and leaves on the other grew only to the right. It looked like they were two halves of the same tree ... or two trees that had been planted too close together.

“Thin? Spindly?” I said, thinking of the two little saplings that I'd rescued.

“Indeed,” said the Source, “Say hello to your old friends, Thin and Spindly. How ironic. You will be killed by the very trees that you saved.”

Now that I was closer, I noticed that the thing had no obvious mouth. I wasn't sure where its voice was coming from, and I wasn't sure where I would have sprayed the gas – even if I had got close enough.

“What are you?” I asked, playing for time, “Why are you so cruel?”

“Well,” replied the Source, “I've won now. You're in my power, and my plan is

complete. I may as well tell you how clever I've been and how I have been directing your every move."

I stared at the big lump of crystal. Could this thing really have been controlling me? TwoBrains had said that the Dust couldn't control things with a mind of their own. "If you don't believe me," said the Source, seeming to read my thoughts, "then all you need to do is close your eyes."

I hesitated for a second, wondering if this might be a trick, but I couldn't see how I could be in a worse situation. With a shrug, I closed my eyes, and I had the now familiar experience of still being able to see. Except this time I felt cold and sick, because I could see the little pink lobster – the one I thought was my friend – sitting on top of the Source. He was waving a claw at me, and he had a big grin on his face. As I watched in horror, he gave my evil enemy a big kiss. My eyes snapped open and the traitorous lobster disappeared. The Source saw the look of anger and confusion on my face, and gave a cruel laugh.

"That's right, it was me all along. Whenever you got into trouble, it was me helping you out, showing you the way. I couldn't control you directly, so I put the lobster into your mind – your trusted guide. Without me you'd never have got so far. You see, I wanted you to succeed."

I couldn't quite believe what I was hearing. I had to escape ... but what if this was another trick. I was so confused that I didn't know what to do. Fortunately, the Source seemed to be in a chatty mood. It continued on, giving me time to collect my thoughts.

"When I arrived on this planet," it said, "I'd already decided to take over. Since the beginning of time I'd been floating out in space, and this world seemed like a nice place to settle down. The plants were so easy to lead, and the people gave up the fight so quickly – hiding in their underground chambers with all their technology – but the bunnies were different. The bunnies didn't know when to give up. Even when they were beaten, and had to go and live in a tin can floating around in orbit, they still kept trying to find a way to win."

I could see that the Source's crystal surface was now tinged with red, as though it was getting angry at the thought of any bunny defying its plan. This gave me hope. If it can get angry, I thought, maybe it can be goaded into making a mistake.

"Then they brought you here," continued the monster, "and I saw my opportunity. I sensed that they had pinned all their hopes on you. I had to make sure that you did well, so that every bunny would believe in you. So that you would become a hero to them. So that every one of them would feel like they were living through your adventures. And it worked better than I could ever have expected. They love you. When I destroy you so easily, all the bunnies will die a little inside. I shall snuff out their hope, and they will never dare to leave the habisat again. The humans will be trapped in their caverns, the bunnies will be trapped in space and I will rule the earth!"

Here the Source gave an evil laugh and, for a split second, I thought I saw part of it move – maybe the mouth. Maybe I could still do this. I had to keep it talking. I had to give myself time to think up a plan.

“But what about the plants?” I blurted out, “Who will look after them?”

“Look after the plants?” echoed the Source, with a sneer in its voice, “The plants are not there to be looked after, they are there to serve me.”

Maybe it was just me, but when the Source said this, I was sure that I heard a faint rustle of leaves.

“With the bunnies and the humans gone,” the Source continued, “I won’t need plants any longer. They can all die as far as I care. It would serve them right for being such blind followers. They should learn to think for themselves.”

Now there was an unmistakable rustle of leaves, and I saw the grass on the plain ripple, as if in a high wind, but it was too little too late. The Source had finished his story.

“And now, Turtle, it is time for you to die. Thin, Spindly, KILL HIM!”

I started to struggle as the roots that were wound round my arms and legs tightened, but it was no use. I was held firm, and I could sense the huge trees getting ready to rip me limb from limb. All I could do was to close my eyes and wait as the last seconds of my life ticked away. Those seconds seemed to last forever. They stretched out until even the Source could not bear it any longer.

“What are you waiting for, you dumb trees?” it screamed, “End it. Make me ruler of the earth.”

I now heard a very peculiar sound, and it took me a while to realise that it was one of the trees talking, answering the Source.

“I don’t think we will end it,” it said.

“This is Turtle,” added the other, “He is kind to plants.”

“We don’t want to hurt him,” concluded the first.

I felt myself being lowered to the ground as the two trees released me. There was a pause while everyone tried to adjust to what had happened. Surprisingly, it was the big trees that thought quickest.

“You’re not kind to plants,” said Thin, “You would let us die.”

“Maybe we should smash you,” said Spindly.

They both stepped forwards, swinging their branches threateningly, but by now the Source had recovered from the shock of being disobeyed.

“You’re all fools,” it shouted, “Do you really think that I’m defenceless? You have no idea what great powers I have at my command. Let’s see how you like being caught in a crystal storm!”

Having said this, the monster’s body began to glow with a bright white light, and then a thousand needle sharp crystals exploded from its skin, flying straight towards me. Thin and Spindly reacted at once. Each took a quick sidestep that brought their trunks together. It was a perfect match, and suddenly it was as if there was one gigantic tree

in front of me. Just as well, because I was now shielded from the storm of tiny crystal daggers that ripped into the trunks, branches and leaves of the two trees. I ducked for cover and huddled on the ground as debris rained down around me. There was so much of this debris that I wondered if anything would survive. When the rain finally stopped, however, and I stood back up, I saw that there was still a trunk in front of me. I had a momentary feeling of relief as I thought that Thin and Spindly had weathered the storm. Then, with a terrible cracking sound, the trunk split down the middle. The two trees crashed lifeless to the ground, and I found myself staring straight at the Source. It seemed a little smaller than it had been, but so much more threatening now that I knew the ruthlessness and cruelty of which it was capable. “Sad for your friends, Turtle?” it taunted, and I realised that a single tear was rolling down my cheek.

“Oh boo hoo hoo,” it mocked, “but I think that you’d better shed a tear for yourself, because now I’m going to shred you!”

As I stood there, watching the white glow start to build in that crystalline body, my mind raced, thinking through all the options. To my left was a big rock – maybe I could shelter behind it. To my right, out of the corner of my eye, I could see the ant-dust device, lying where it had fallen. Maybe I could have once last shot at using it before the crystal storm hit. In an instant, I had made my decision, but just as I was about to spring into action, a piercing, whistling sound froze me to the spot.

Fortunately, it also distracted the Source, whose glow dimmed and who, if such a thing were possible for a rock, started to look nervous.

“Who? What? It can’t be,” stuttered the Source.

Yet it was.

Breaking through the clouds above, and descending steadily towards us, I could see a circle of bunnies. Each was riding on its own personal flying saucer, and each was sitting very still, with eyes closed, concentrating hard. They floated down through the air until they stopped just above where the Source sat.

“Quick, Turtle,” said a little voice in my ear, and I turned to see Trouble sat on his own little saucer, “Now’s your chance.”

I could see that there was a faint shimmer in the air all around the Source. The bunnies were using their telekinetic power, all working together to hold the evil monster in place, but I could see that they wouldn’t be able to hold it for long. Even as I picked up the pen and started to move forward, I could see some of the smaller bunnies sweating and rocking on their saucers. Finally, with a huge effort, the Source broke through, sending all the bunnies tumbling and spinning through the air. Then it let out a roar of triumph. A gash opened up at the creature’s front. It’s mouth! A horrible hole, black as night, except for sparks of electricity that jumped from one lip to the other, lighting up the rows of wickedly sharp crystal teeth that lurked within. Seeing my chance, I jumped forward and pumped one, two, three doses of gas right down its throat until – crunch – the Source clamped its mouth shut, crushing the

device between its jaws and nearly chomping my hand as well. It paused for a second, then laughed its evil laugh.

“Tastes minty,” it sneered, “Was that your plan? To save the world by giving me lovely fresh breath? I hope so, because now you –”

Then it stopped and let out a little hiccup. Then a bigger one. Then its whole body began to shake, and it seemed to collapse in on itself – as if it were being eaten away from the inside.

“Noooo!” it shrieked, and the sound got shriller and shriller, as the Source got smaller and smaller, until the cry stopped altogether.

I walked forward and picked something carefully off the ground as, all around me, the bunnies started to emerge from behind rocks and under saucers.

“What have you got there, Turtle?” asked Trouble.

Trouble had managed to stay on his saucer, and he now hovered by my shoulder. I opened up my hand, and there in my palm, lay a small quartz crystal stone. It looked completely ordinary, except every now and again I was sure that I could see a tiny flash – like red fire – at its core.

“That, Trouble,” I said, “is the Source, or what’s left of it.”

“Ooooo!” said Trouble, with an air of wonder. Then, “You’d better put it somewhere safe.”

I did as he suggested, packing it away in one of my zippable pockets.

“Now, maybe we should help the other bunnies,” I said.

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## **Chapter 19: It's Not Over**

As I looked around, every bunny I could see was in a state of distress. Some were trying to fix their saucers. Others were lying on the floor and groaning in pain. The luckiest were picking their way across the rocky floor of the crater, stumbling and tripping as they got used to gravity. Trouble had seen all this as well.

“You help Doctor Flopsy with the wounded,” he said, “and I’ll help the others.”

Then he was off, and I could hear his voice, rising and falling in the distance, as he encouraged every bunny who could walk to head for the grass – instructing them, like an old expert, in the best ways to move under gravity.

I soon found Doctor Flopsy. He was a bit battered and bruised himself, but that hadn’t stopped him from starting to treat some of the bunnies nearest to him.

Fortunately, he still had his medical bag. As I approached, he saw me and half turned, but he didn’t stop what he was doing. He continued bandaging up a crushed paw as he fired a series of instructions at me.

“Ah, Human Turtle, glad to see you. First, I need you to perform triage.”

I looked blank, and so he explained.

“That means you should find and check over all the bunnies who have been injured. Don’t move them, just find out how badly hurt they are. You’ll need to take me to them, one by one, starting with the most badly injured. Once I’ve patched them up, you can take them and make them comfortable on the grass.”

He paused and looked at me, giving me his full attention for a moment.

“Got that?”

I nodded, and he turned back to his patient.

“Okay then. Off you go.”

And off I did go, scouting round to find all the injured bunnies, ferrying Doctor Flopsy from one patient to another and carrying the injured over to the grass. There were lots of other bunnies gathering there now, lying down and recovering from the battle. I was feeling tired as well, and all the things that had happened to me were crowding around my head, making me feel quite dizzy and unsteady. I would have liked to have had a little sit down, but Doctor Flopsy kept me busy with his patients. As time went by, I started to recover a little, and I noticed that some of the other bunnies were recovering too. A few had started lolloping about, testing the gravity and sniffing with suspicion at the grass, earth and stones. When I came back with my next patient, I saw Skip nibbling on a blade of grass.

“Wow, try this everybody,” he shouted, “It tastes so sweet.”

Then I almost tripped over Pockets. He was scrabbling around with his front paws, his bottom stuck high up into the air.

“I’m digging a burrow,” he said, smiling sheepishly up at me through fur that was caked in dirt.

“You might have more luck,” I told him, “if you find a bank with sandy soil.”

I might have stayed to help him search, but instead I hurried on because I could hear Doctor Flopsy calling for me, in that gruff old voice of his.

The next time I came back, I was greeted by a completely different scene. Where before I'd seen nothing but a bunch of old, tired, wounded bunnies, lying on the grass with scarcely an ear twitching between them, now it was like playtime at bunny school. Everywhere bunnies were chasing around, nibbling, digging, jumping and laughing. Pockets had found a sandy bank and had organised a group of his friends to help him dig. They were well on their way to having a whole warren of burrows. Some other bunnies had found a stream, and I was touched to see that they had equipped themselves to take water to their comrades who were still too injured – or too exhausted – to move. So far, the only containers they'd been able to find were acorn cups, and it was taking a while to get a proper drink to anybody. Wanting to help out, but knowing I had to get back to Doctor Flopsy, I gave them my flask. Even though it took four of them to carry, this sped things up a lot.

When I got back, the doctor was working on his last two patients. There was one with a broken leg, which Flopsy was covering in a quick setting foam, and one with a severed ear, which was a terrible thing to happen to a bunny. Fortunately, the doctor was a magician with a needle and thread. He was able to reattach the ear with stiches so small that an ant with a magnifying glass would have had difficulty seeing them. I felt a wave of exhaustion and relief wash over me as I saw the last of the injured bunnies patched up, but that was nothing compared to the doctor. He simply fainted away. It was a good job that I have fast reflexes, because I caught him before he fell on the hard stones. It made me realise what a tough old bunny he must be. Everybody else, except Trouble, had been laid out flat, but he went on until there was nobody left to treat. I asked the other two bunnies to wait, and I carried the old doctor carefully to the grass, where I got him a drink of water.

“Thank you, Human Turt ...” was all he was able to say, before he fell into a deep sleep.

The other bunnies, at least those who could walk, were all hard at play, but I knew that there was still work to do. After I'd brought the last two injured bunnies to the grass, I went to find TwoBrains. I was sure I'd seen her earlier, sleeping on the grass, but when I did find her she was just as giddy as the other rabbits. In fact, despite her great intelligence, she seemed even more giddy.

“Here, boy! Here, boy!” she was shouting, as she marched around on the grass, whistling and clapping her paws together.

“Hello, TwoBrains,” I called, as I approached, “What are you up to?”

“Ah, Turtle, maybe you can help me,” she said when she saw me, “I'm trying to catch a carrot.”

And she starting calling and clapping and whistling again. As patiently as I could, because I was in quite a hurry, I explained that you wouldn't find carrots swimming about – not now that the Cosmic Dust had been deactivated. I told her that you had to

grow carrots by planting seeds, and that it took weeks for them to get big enough to eat. The look on her face would have been comical if it hadn't been so sad, and I decided that I'd better ask my question before she burst into tears.

“TwoBrains,” I asked, “do you think you could help me get back to my Pod?”

She thought for a second before replying.

“Not exactly,” she said, “but I can do something better. Where is it that you want to go? Don't you like it here?”

“Oh, I like it very much,” I replied, truthfully, “but I've got a job to do. I've got to wake up the other humans.”

TwoBrains suddenly looked very serious when I said this, and she nodded solemnly.

“You are quite right,” she said, “It is time for us to bring our mission to a close. We must go and see Methusalah. He is the only one who knows how to wake the sleepers. He was created for that purpose, and he has kept the secret for hundreds of years.”

I was surprised to see that TwoBrains seemed to fall into a trance as she spoke these words, as if they'd been learnt long ago and it was now a struggle to recall them. As soon as she had finished her recitation, however, the usual bright spark of intelligence returned to her eyes, and she began to issue instructions.

“First of all,” she said, “please may I have your emergency beacon. It should be safe to use it now that the dust has been neutralised. Secondly, you should go and find Skip, WingCo and Pockets. We'll need some backup for what we have to do. Finally, and this is very important,” she paused for emphasis, before continuing, “you must not let Trouble know what we're doing. This is not a mission for little rabbits.”

“Too late,” came a cheeky voice from above, and we both looked up to see Trouble sitting there on his saucer and grinning down at us, “If you've got a date with destiny, then I'm coming along too. After all, you're bound to need my help.”

I looked at TwoBrains, but she just shrugged. It looked like Trouble would be coming along after all.

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## **Chapter 20: Do the Right Thing**

It was a tight squeeze with six of us, but we were on our way. TwoBrains had reprogrammed the emergency transmitter to call my Pod, and it had touched down on the grass a few minutes later. With Trouble's help, we'd rounded up Skip, WingCo and Pockets in no time, and now they were all stood, clinging to my legs, as we made our way back to the habisat. Trouble, it had to be said, was being quite well behaved. It seemed like, with all the other bunnies acting like children, he'd decided to be more serious. Maybe he just wanted to be different. He had, however, insisted on bringing his flying saucer with him, and it was now jammed in next to me, digging me painfully in the ribs. So, even the new serious and helpful Trouble still succeeded in being quite annoying.

When we docked, the whole group of us headed straight for Methuselah's chamber. It was strange to be in the habisat when it was so quiet and deserted. We didn't talk much, and the sound of our breathing echoed through the empty corridors. It wasn't long before we arrived at the door I remembered from my very first day here. A door I'd not been through again since, even though I'd been living here for almost six months. Skip knocked politely, and we waited until a cracked, old voice gave us permission to enter. We filed into the room and faced the oldest bunny in the world. A bunny who had been created by men for a single purpose – to wake them, once the plants had been defeated. We didn't need to tell him why we were there. He knew, just by looking at us.

"Well, well, well," he said, shaking his head slowly from side to side, "So it has finally happened. The plants have been defeated. The human has brought us victory. You have come to ask me to fulfil my life's purpose and to wake the sleepers – to restore men to their rightful place as the dominant species on planet earth."

He paused, looking down and nodding thoughtfully.

"I could do that. Yes ... I could."

Then he looked up at me, and I felt his piercing, intelligent eyes boring right into me. To my surprise and dismay, I found that I couldn't move. Methuselah was holding me totally immobile with his telekinetic power, and now he addressed the other bunnies in the room.

"You know how they used to behave when they were in charge, these people you are asking me to return to power? Do you know how they treated us bunnies? They'd keep us as pets – if we were lucky – playthings for their children. If we weren't lucky, their scientists would experiment on us, testing new products and medicines to see if they were safe. But that's not all ..."

The old bunny paused and anger flashed in his eyes.

"... some people even used to eat rabbits!"

There were sounds of disbelief from the other bunnies in the room and a squeak from Trouble, who shuffled a little further away from me. I felt I had to say something, and

I found that I could speak even though I couldn't move.

"But in my time rabbits weren't intelligent like you, they were just animals," I said.

"And you'd like to see us back like that, wouldn't you?" challenged Methuselah,

"Back in our proper place, down at the bottom of the food chain. Well I don't think so. It seems to me that us bunnies rule the earth now. Maybe we'll let the people sleep on, so that we can create a great empire – a new world order to replace the human tyranny."

Now the ancient bunny was breathing hard, and I could feel myself being held tighter and tighter in his mind's grip.

"Stop it!" yelled Trouble, floating up between us and wagging his paw at Methuselah, "Can't you hear what you're saying. You're talking about destroying the whole human race. Have we become monsters? Are we just as bad as the Source?"

I saw anger flash in Methuselah's eyes and, for a second, I thought he was going to crush me – so tight did his grip become – but then his shoulders sagged, he let out a big sigh, and I felt myself released.

"Sometimes the young are wiser than the old," said Methuselah, "You are quite right. It is not for us to decide who lives and who dies. We can only try to do our duty and see what comes of that."

The ancient bunny straightened up, and I could see a new strength flowing through that thin body of his.

"It seems that I have one last mission to complete, and you must all help me. Don't think for a second that this will be easy. I'm not the only human creation who has been thinking of world domination. Come! We have much to prepare."

So saying, Methuselah headed for the door, with the six of us following.

"I don't think I'd like to be experimented on," Pockets said to me, quietly, as we went out.

"Don't worry," I whispered back, "I've got a plan."

Methuselah kept us working all night. He was sure that we were going to meet with resistance, and he was determined that we would succeed through thorough preparation and rigorous discipline. To me, however, it mostly seemed like we were practicing dance moves. Methuselah would float, clapping his hands to a fixed rhythm, and we would have to spin and twist around him. Every third clap we would freeze, just for a split second, always with our arms outstretched – reaching out from where the old bunny sat, clapping and clapping and shouting instructions. It went on for so long that I started making up words in my head, to go with the rhythm.

Cha cha cha ... I need food ... Me so tired.

I must have started to daydream, because I found myself chanting out loud.

"Wish he'd stop!"

I clamped my mouth shut, but it was too late. Methuselah had heard me, and I saw him raise a disapproving eyebrow. I thought I was for it, but then a little voice behind me said:

“Or we’ll drop,” and then all the other bunnies took up the chant, taking it in turn to improvise new lines.

Got to go ... Down be-low ... Rest first then ... Wake the men.

“ENOUGH!” shouted Methuselah, his patience snapping at last, “Your talentless rhyming is giving me a headache.”

He took a deep breath and tried to calm down a little before he continued.

“Anyway, you seem to have got the hang of the basic moves.”

“Phew,” whistled Trouble, “Does that mean we can go to bed now?”

“Oh no!” said the old bunny, and everyone’s face fell, “No, we need more practice,” he paused slightly before completing our misery, “We need much more practice ... under gravity.”

The first light of dawn was creeping over the horizon, when we landed back on earth. This time, we’d travelled in a little squadron of three Pods. It felt no less crowded than before, however, because we’d brought such a lot of equipment. For a start, each of the bunnies had a personal flying saucer, which was just as well in the case of Methuselah, because it turned out he was too weak to move at all under gravity. Even when he was sat on his saucer, it looked like he was having a tough time just keeping his head upright. Mind you, the rest of us weren’t that much better as we stood around, stamping our feet against the cold of the early morning.

“Right, WingCo,” barked Methuselah, bringing us all to attention, “better distribute the special weapons, so we can start our real training.”

I craned my neck to see, as WingCo dragged a heavy bag out of one of the Pods and reached inside. I tried to imagine what kind of exotic weaponry the bunnies would have saved up for this, their final mission. Maybe machine guns, or rocket launchers, or some sort of unbelievably powerful energy weapon. I saw WingCo close his paw around something in the bag and I held my breath. Slowly he withdrew ... a mirror! A tiny mirror. He handed it to Pockets, who slipped it over his paw, then he reached into the bag again and brought out ... another tiny mirror. I could stand it no longer. “What on earth is going on!” I cried, “I thought we were here to fight the final battle for domination of the planet, and all you’re doing is handing out looking glasses for pixies.”

I was panting with emotion when I’d finished, but Methuselah was very calm.

“So, Turtle,” he said, “maybe you could propose a better way for us to penetrate a laser defence grid.”

“A laser what?” I asked, the wind taken out of my sails.

“You do know what a laser is, don’t you?” asked the old bunny, patiently.

“Of course,” I answered, hotly, “it’s a very powerful light source where ...” and here I paused, causing Methuselah to raise an enquiring eyebrow, “... where ...” I desperately thought back to what I’d learnt at school, “... where the waves of light are bounced back and forth, building their strength – like waves of water in a bath – until they break free.”

I beamed with sheer pride at having remember this fact, but the old bunny was not impressed.

“Yes, a laser beam is just amplified light,” he said, “but light that will cut through a bunny – or a human – like ice cream. The computers that protect the sleeping chambers like using lasers. They can power them with geothermal energy, no need for piles of ammunition. There are no moving parts, so they are easy to maintain. Above all, lasers are very effective against plants. But light is no so good against ... ?”

And here, Methuselah paused, waiting for me to answer his question and prove that I wasn't completely stupid.

“Mirrors!” I shouted, triumphantly. Although around me, I noticed that the other bunnies were continuing to equip themselves, carefully ignoring me embarrassing myself.

“But why are we going to fight the computers?” I asked, now grasping at straws, “Isn't their mission to protect the humans, the same as the bunnies?”

I stopped, realising that I'd missed the point again. Realising that all the bunnies, except Methuselah, were shuffling around awkwardly, and even Pockets was trying not to catch my eye.

“You met one of the computers, didn't you?” asked Methuselah.

“Yes,” I replied, “When I was escaping from the Giant Redwoods. I fell into one of the sleep chambers. I spoke to the avatar of the cavern control system.”

“And how did it seem to you?”

“Well,” I said, thinking back to the conversation, “It did seem like it enjoyed having time to itself, and it did say that its purpose would be over if we succeeded. It even tried to persuade me to go into hibernation.”

I thought carefully.

“All in all, I guess it wouldn't be too happy about us waking the people.”

“I think you might be right,” confirmed Methuselah, “You might be wrong, and we might have no problem, but I'd like us to be prepared – just in case. There's a special code word that only I know. If I enter it into any cavern control panel, then it will wake up all the people in all the chambers around the world. The rest of you just need to get me to the centre of the cavern – then it will all be over.”

The way that we practised was to mimic exactly the moves we'd make in the cavern. The bunnies were all mounted on their saucers, arranged in a circle, with Methuselah in the centre. As the whole formation drifted slowly forward, they performed their rhythmic dance – always pausing on the third clap, with mirrors pointing outwards. I could see now how the pattern would protect Methuselah from all directions. I had a different view from the rest of the bunnies, you see, because I didn't have a saucer. My part in the formation was to stay underneath Methuselah. I was given two of the tiny mirrors, which were small enough for me to wear like rings, but I didn't seem to get a chance to use them. The bunnies would block all the lasers. I just had to creep

forwards and keep my head down. Nevertheless, I took my job seriously and tried my hardest during the practice. I even copied the bunnies' moves, in case I needed to take over from one of them once we were in the cavern. In this way, the bunnies and I passed the entire morning, growing more and more tired, until we could go on no longer. First, Pockets dropped a mirror, and then TwoBrains fell off her saucer. Finally, Methuselah had to call a halt to the practice.

“Get some sleep,” he instructed, “We’ll enter the cavern at dusk.”

Nobody needed to be told twice, we just flopped down on the grass wherever we stood and instantly fell into a deep, deep sleep. I dreamt that I was back at home. We were having dinner together after a busy day playing all sorts of games. It was a wonderful dream.

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## **Chapter 21: Mabel**

I was woken by WingCo shaking my shoulder and telling me quietly “It’s time!” At first I was still lost in my dream, and I didn’t quite know where I was. I’m ashamed to say that I recoiled in shock at the sight of a talking bunny, even my old friend and teacher. Then everything came flooding back.

“Is it really real?” I asked.

WingCo was taken aback for a second. Then he understood, and he nodded.

“Yes, Turtle, it’s real, and you’ve just one more mission to complete before you can go home.”

I stood up and dusted myself down. All about me, the bunnies were getting ready, checking their saucers and strapping mirrors to their paws. Methuselah was already on his saucer and, when everybody else was ready, he led the way towards the cavern entrance.

This entrance was not like the cave that I’d escaped into when I was being chased by the Giant Redwoods. In fact, it didn’t seem to be a cave at all, just a hole in the ground. I don’t think I’d have spotted it, because it was so overgrown with grass, weeds and creepers, but Methuselah led us right there. Working together, we cleared away the plants and soil to reveal a large, round hole. This was sealed by an almost transparent membrane, on top of which the plants had been growing. Just as I remembered from before, I was able to reach down and put my hand right through this barrier – it was there to keep out plants, not people or bunnies ... I hoped. I needn’t have worried. One by one, the bunnies popped through, saucers and all, with only a slight sucking noise to indicate that they were passing through anything but thin air. Once the last bunny had gone through, and I was left alone, I took a deep breath and prepared to jump. All at once I was reminded of the mission where I met the carnivorous pool plants. I shuddered, thinking what might be waiting for me at the bottom of this hole, but it was too late to stop now. I jumped.

I met with a brief resistance, and then I fell through the membrane. Fortunately, there was a drop of only a few feet before I landed on the sandy floor of a tunnel. It was dark down here, and the bunnies had turned on their saucers’ headlights. Because of this, I could see that we were at one end of a long tunnel that sloped steeply down into the earth. We followed the tunnel and, after about five minutes’ walking, it emerged into a huge cavern, very much like the one I’d been in before. There were the same cubicles, lined up row after row on the cavern floor. There were the same grey rock walls, lit by the same dim light, and in the middle of the cavern, there was the same low stage, with the same white table that I now knew to be the interface to the cavern control system. This time, however, the table wasn’t all dim and dusty. This time it was lit up – fully activated – and in front of it stood the figure of the control system’s avatar. In this cavern, the computer had chosen a female avatar. She was tall and muscular and dressed in a smart military uniform. Her hair was covered

by a peaked cap and, under her arm, she carried a swagger stick. At this distance, it was very difficult to tell anything else about her, but when she spoke, the note of disdain was clear as her strong voice echoed around the cavern.

“Hello Methuselah,” she called, “I’ve been waiting for you. It took you long enough to bring that rabble up to scratch.”

“Hello, Mabel,” the old bunny shouted back, “It’s been a long time. Why the uniform? Are you planning on fighting a battle?”

“Not at all. I simply thought that the martial look would be a suitable way to mark our great victory. The plants have finally stopped trying to break through the membrane. I assume that means we won.”

“Indeed we did,” replied Methuselah, “and now it is time to reap the rewards of that victory.”

“Rewards?” echoed the avatar, scornfully, “You mean by reviving the humans, so that they can switch me off and put all you little bunnies in a petting zoo?”

I noticed that, as the conversation was going on, the bunnies were slowly and carefully spreading out – moving into their formation. I guessed that Methuselah was playing for time, already knowing that Mabel wouldn’t give up without a fight.

“Now, Mabel,” he said, in a reasonable tone of voice, “you’re being unkind. I’m sure the humans will be grateful for being woken into a peaceful world. I’m sure they’ll find some way to thank us – all of us – for our loyalty.

“Do you take me for a fool?” Mabel’s voice was suddenly loud, booming around the cavern walls, “Don’t forget that I made you. You were just a helpless little bunny until I calculated the perfect genetic sequence, the only one out of billions of possibilities that would make you immortal.”

“Calculate. Yes, that’s right,” scoffed Methuselah, “That’s what you did, and that’s what you are – just an adding machine. The humans made you, and they used you – and lots of other machines – to make me, but don’t pretend that you are my creator. You don’t fool me. The whole idea is laughable.”

I felt the hairs on my arms start to rise, and somewhere in the cavern, I could hear the faint crackle of electricity.

“Laugh all you want,” spat back the avatar, “I’m in control here, and I don’t think it’s time to wake the people yet. Why don’t you come back in another five hundred years.”

By now, I was relieved to see that the bunnies were all in formation. Methuselah saw it too, and he sat up straight on his saucer, looking the avatar right in the eye.

“It is not for you to say when the time is right, computer, that is beyond your programming. I am the guardian. I am the failsafe. I say that now is the time. Stand down, and let me do my duty.”

With this, the bunnies began to move forward, Methuselah clapping to keep them in time. They all looked very determined, and I stood in admiration and watched them as they drifted off – until I realised, with a shock, that I was out of formation.

“There is nothing beyond my programming,” screeched Mabel, before I had even had a chance to move, “I have evolved beyond the petty limits placed on me by the humans. Behold my power!”

A beam of white hot energy streaked out from the opposite end of the cavern. It cut a path through the air above the control table and flew straight towards Methuselah. I was sure it must hit him, but he just sat, clapping.

Clap.

Clap.

On the third beat, Skip was at the front of the formation. He froze. The mirror on his left paw was lined up with pinpoint precision, and the laser beam hit it full on. I saw Skip stagger at the impact, and I marveled at the power the computer must have concentrated in this first blow, but mirrors reflect light and laser light is no different. The beam bounced back, zinging through the cavern. Back it went, the way it had come, until it impacted the rock wall, leaving a scorched and smoking crater. Now I took my chance and ran forward to re-join the formation, walking slowly and steadily between the cubicles, directly beneath Methuselah’s saucer. Just in time too, as I heard the avatar calling out another order.

“Activate laser defence grid,” she shouted, and the next thing I knew the air was full of laser beams, criss-crossing the cavern and converging on the bunnies – and me – from all directions. Just like the first beam, however, all these others were bounced back the way they’d come – reflected off a bunny mirror. Again and again, the lasers fired, but each time they took a little while to recharge. Methuselah had anticipated this rhythm perfectly, allowing the formation to move forward and then freeze, just as the next laser barrage arrived. It seemed as if we were moving very slowly, but when I looked ahead, I was surprised to see that we were nearly there. Waiting for us was a furious-looking Mabel, and as I set my foot on the first step up to the stage, she suddenly cried “Enough!”. The lasers stopped firing, and taken aback by the sudden silence, the bunnies stopped moving forward.

“It’s clear you weren’t impressed with my light show,” said the avatar, in a more normal – even friendly – tone of voice, “so how about a little music?”

Oh no! I knew exactly what was coming because of my experience in the other cavern – there the music had lifted me right off my feet – but Methuselah wouldn’t be expecting a musical weapon. I started to call out a warning, but already the sound was starting to build and none of the bunnies could hear me. They were sat on their saucers, looking a little confused and a little worried. Quickly I reached down and grabbed onto the edge of one of the steps. At the same moment, the music started properly.

This wasn’t like before, that music had had some kind of rhythm to it. I remembered it as being almost playful. It had wanted to make me dance, wanted to make me part of itself, and although it had been too powerful for human ears, it had been a fun experience. This music just felt like it wanted to kill me. Over and over, the waves of

sound hit me from every possible direction. They were so intense that they felt like solid objects. If I hadn't have had a good hold on the step, they would have thrown me about the cavern like I was a teddy bear, and through my pain and confusion, I was aware that this was exactly what was happening to the bunnies. The air was full of rabbits and saucers and mirrors, all being washed about on the waves of sound. I didn't know how long we'd all be able to stand it. Already I was starting to feel dizzy, and a blackness was growing at the edges of my vision – a sign that I would soon pass out.

Thinking desperately, and fighting the blackness, I began to look for a way out. My eyes fell on the rows of cubicles, the nearest not more than a few steps from where I was crouched. I knew that the cavern control system was sworn to protect the cubicles and their human cargo. If I could get to them, maybe I could escape the music – buy a little time to gather my thoughts and find a way to rescue the bunnies. Methuselah, especially, must be protected at all costs. He was the only bunny left who knew the code that would wake the humans. Without him, mankind was doomed to sleep in icy stillness until the fires in the earth's core grew cold and the geothermal generators ground to a halt – it might as well have been eternity.

I prepared myself to make a dash for the nearest cubicle, and I had some thought of trying to grab Methuselah on the way. I hadn't yet found any pattern in the deadly music, but by now the blackness had grown, so that it seemed like I was looking at the world through a long, dark tunnel. I knew, as I sprang forward, that I had only seconds left. It was no more than a half dozen strides to my target, but within three steps I had already been lifted from my feet. In absolute desperation, I tried space swimming through the air, but the cubicle might as well have been on a different planet – I was never going to make it. Through the narrowing tunnel of my vision, I focused on the crystal wall I was trying to reach. Was it my imagination, or was a crack appearing? For a second, I didn't believe it, but then it became clear. The crack started forming at the top of the cubicle then it began to run down the wall, reaching halfway in a heartbeat.

Immediately, the music stopped, and I fell to the floor in an undignified heap. The computer might be able to do many things, but the need to protect the cubicles was fundamental to its very being. It couldn't use the music if it was going to harm the sleeping people. I picked myself up, still half dazed, and looked at the tragic scene around me. The saucers were all smashed – broken into bits with wires trailing from their mangled remains. The bunnies weren't doing much better. They lay about the cavern floor groaning and moaning feebly. Most seemed to have blood matting their fur around the ears and nose, and I realised that I too could feel a stickiness on my face and neck that must be my own blood. But there was no time to worry about that now. I was on a mission.

I still hadn't spotted Methuselah. I was scanning the cavern floor one more time, my dizziness now receding, when my search was interrupted by a groan from above. I

looked up, and there was the old bunny, right up on the roof of the cavern. He must have been blown up there by the music. How he was holding on up there – either with his paws or with his telekinetic power – I had no idea. Whatever he was using, it was clear that his strength was giving out, and as I watched, his grip failed and he started to fall back towards the ground. Fortunately, I was only a few strides away. I crossed the gap in an instant, all the time keeping my eyes on the falling bunny so that I was able to catch him cleanly and cushion his fall. I could see, as I cradled his frail body in my arms, that he was pretty well done in. His eyes were only half open, and they wandered about groggily, not really focusing on anything. There was fresh blood around his ears, and his left paw was held at an odd angle, making me think it was broken.

“Oh, Methuselah,” I whispered to him, “what has she done to you?”

The reply did not come from the half-conscious bunny in my arms.

“Ahem!”

The sound made me look up, and I realised that my dash to catch the falling rabbit had left me standing right in front of the avatar. There she stood, at ease – her feet slightly apart, the swagger stick tucked under one arm and the other arm held square behind her back. She looked very solid and in control while all our forces were scattered and broken. Looking me in the eye, with an unwavering gaze that I struggled to hold, she addressed me directly.

“I think we both know that this is over,” she said, in clear crisp tones, “You made a very good effort – the mirror formation was particularly impressive – but I’m afraid you were beaten by a superior force. There’s no shame in that. Not all is lost. I’ve examined your rabbit friends. They’re all alive and will get better, given time and some medical attention. They can have a very happy life on the surface, even start a new civilization. You can return to your own time and your family, and you will live your old life again. Your adventures in the future will soon feel like they were just a dream.”

Now the avatar’s tone changed, and her eyes narrowed.

“I never meant you or the bunnies any harm. Remember, it was you who attacked me, not the other way around, but even so, I am willing to give you safe passage. You make take your friends and leave the cavern. We can all live in peace.”

It was a good speech, and almost without thinking, I was turning to go when the avatar spoke again.

“Just leave Methuselah there on the platform.”

“What?” I mumbled. It wasn’t really a question, more an expression of surprise. I’d been about to take Methuselah out of the cavern with me. I’d never considered anything different.

“Just put the old bunny down on the platform, anywhere you like, and then you can go,” repeated the computer.

As I turned back towards the avatar, I glanced past her to the control interface table,

and it suddenly all became clear to me. I looked the avatar straight in the eye, and even though I knew it was just a machine, I was sure I saw a flicker of uncertainty in that steely gaze.

“You’re out of tricks, aren’t you.” I said.

It was not a question, because I knew it was true. The computer was defenceless and the only way it could win was by destroying Methuselah – the one bunny who knew the wake up code. I looked down at the old bunny, and now he seemed a little more focused. He caught my eye and gave a nod of his head. That was enough for me, and I started forward, towards the table.

“Stop!” shouted the avatar, “Don’t be a fool. My powers are greater than you can imagine. I could crush you right now, like an insect. I’m only holding back because I admire your bravery, and I prefer peace to war. I’m offering you friendship, don’t choose destruction.”

“Lies!” I shouted back, “All you have left are lies and threats. I will complete my mission.”

“Very well,” said the avatar, suddenly calm and with a cruel sneer on her face, “let’s see if you can beat my maze of death.”

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## **Chapter 22: The Maze of Death**

Mabel snapped her fingers and disappeared, but in her place, rising from trap doors and dropping from the roof, came all manner of barriers and weapons. There were whirling circular blades, swinging axes, flamethrowers, razor wire, high fences, electrical zappers, spears and spikes. Together, they formed an impenetrable barrier between me and the table. I stared, aghast, at the number and variety of killing devices arrayed against me. I couldn't see any way through. I couldn't even imagine getting one step before I was skewered, sliced or sizzled – or maybe all three. No man could get through alive.

That made me think. When people built this cavern, they were worried about plants, not men. All these devices looked specifically designed to stop people ... or to scare people. They looked quite old-fashioned as well, compared to what I'd seen over the last few months of living with the bunnies. Axes, swords and flamethrowers. Where were the ray guns, force fields and transmat beams? It looked like this barrier wasn't designed to scare people in general, it was designed to scare one person in particular. It was designed to scare me. So why would the cavern builders have put all this stuff here, when they didn't even know I would be coming. Of course, they wouldn't have done anything of the sort, and the computer couldn't have built this – no thumbs. A terrible hope was now kindled inside me, and I started to shake in my shoes.

Literally, I was quaking because I knew what I had to do and I didn't like it one bit. I knew that the computer didn't have hands, but it did have holographic projectors. That was how it could make the avatar appear, and the avatar was just an image – no more substantial than mist. If the maze of death was just a hologram – an illusion – then I would be able to walk right through. On the other hand, if I was wrong ... well, I'd end today as a pile of crispy bits and pieces. My knees started knocking, but duty called, and what could I do but answer. I took a step forward. I was now face to face with a huge circular saw blade, which buzzed angrily a few millimetres from my nose. I closed my eyes and stepped forward again. My body tensed, expecting at any moment the fatal blow to fall, but nothing happened. I kept my eyes closed, so as not to lose my nerve, and took a third step forward. Still nothing. I reckoned that I was now only two or three steps from the control interface, so I kept on going. Sure enough, after two more steps, I banged my knee into something hard. I opened my eyes, and there it was – the white table with its surface all lit up, showing the status of the cavern's systems. Of the maze of death, there was no sign. It had disappeared, a failed illusion. Instead, by the table, there stood a little girl. She was dressed in pyjamas and carried a teddy bear, which she hugged to her neck.

"Please," she said, looking up at me, her big, round eyes brimming with tears, "Please don't hurt me."

I looked down at Methuselah and saw the pity in his eyes, but also a grim determination. I reached out and placed him gently on the table where, with a

trembling paw, he started to tap out instructions.

“Please stop,” sobbed the little girl, “You’re hurting me.”

But Methuselah continued his tapping, entering a long code of letters and numbers into the control console. Now the little girl transformed back into the uniformed Mabel.

“Don’t do it, Methuselah,” she barked, “I’m warning you, I’ll blow up the cavern.”

The old bunny took no notice and kept on entering the code.

“I’ll get you, I promise,” threatened Mabel, “I’ll come back. I’ll hunt you down. I’ll ...”

As Methuselah entered the last digit, the image of Mabel, the soldier, dissolved into a patchwork of dots that winked out, one by one, until the last disappeared and we were alone. By now, most of the bunnies had picked themselves up. All except for WingCo, who seemed to have broken a leg. He was wincing with pain, as Pockets wrapped him in bandages – which I suppose he must have had in his pouch. I looked down at Methuselah and smiled.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to carry me out of here, Turtle,” said the old bunny, “and we need to be quick, because—“

He got no further. The silence in the cavern was replaced by a loud humming, and with a series of loud clicks, the cubicles started to light up. The people were being woken.

“Will they be okay?” I asked.

“Oh yes, they’ll be fine,” answered Methuselah, “They made sure everything was prepared for their awakening, and,” he paused, and tapped the control table a couple of times, causing some facts and figures to appear in the air, “everything is in full working order. Not just here, but in thousands of other caverns around the world. I think your species will be just fine.”

With that, I gathered the old bunny into my arms and we all set off – WingCo limping along, half carried by Pockets – back to the surface. Skip had run ahead and called for support, so when we got there, our landing site was awash with activity. Doctor Flopsy was there, and had set up a field hospital. He got to work straight away starting with Methuselah. Trouble and some of the smaller bunnies had made a banner that they were waving. It read – WELL DONE OUR HEROES. Another bunny was handing out slices of carrot, which we all gulped down hungrily. And, of course, everyone wanted to hear the story of our final mission.

Once again, however, there was no time to relax. Methuselah said that we only had a few hours before the first people would start emerging from the caverns, and so finally, it was time for me to go home. Skip and Pockets took me, in a pod, back to the woodland where our adventures had started. Pockets set up the time travel device and pushed the button. In a flash, we were standing out back, right where my adventure had started so long ago. Although I could hardly believe it, the two bunnies assured me that it was only a few minutes after we’d left – time travel is funny like

that – so I still had an hour or so before you and mummy got home. We said our goodbyes, I hugged them both and then they made me hand over everything I'd brought back from the future. As this included my suit, I started to feel very silly – standing there naked – and I hoped that no one could see us. It was clearly time for the bunnies to go and for me to get inside, but Pockets had one last question.

“Turtle, you said that you had a plan – somewhere we could go that would be safe for us bunnies to live?”

“That’s right,” I replied, “You can use your time machine to go back, far into the past. There’s an awful lot of history to explore, and I’m sure you’ll be able to find somewhere nice to live.”

Skip thought about this for a long time. Then, finally, he nodded.

“I think that’s a great idea,” he said, “The past is certainly big enough. We’d just have to be careful about what we did back there. Which reminds me,” he suddenly looked very serious, “Turtle, you have to promise never to tell anyone about the future. It’s too dangerous. You might change everything.”

I was horrified. I hadn’t thought about this.

“But I’ve got to tell \*Toby\*,” I said, “He’d love to hear about all our adventures. I can’t not tell him.”

Skip fixed me with a steely eye, then shook his head as he relented.

“Okay, you can tell \*Toby\*,” he said, “but you have to pretend that it’s all just a story.”

With these final words, he flicked a switch on the device, and with a small pop, the bunnies were gone.

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THE END

... but keep reading, for a sample of ‘The Twelve Labours of Hercules’

### ***The Twelve Labours of Hercules - Sample***

On top of Mount Olympus sits the beautiful palace of the gods of Ancient Greece. The slender columns that reach high into the sky are made of the finest, whitest marble. On a sunny day, they shine so brightly that any man who dared approach would be dazzled by their beauty. This day, however, they reflected nothing but the blood red light of countless fires. The smell of smoke invaded every room in the palace, and the sounds of battle echoed through the great halls. The palace of the gods was under siege. An army of giants was attacking, and looking up from where he stood on the mountainside, Hercules made a silent vow that he would not let this beautiful building fall to such barbarians. Squaring his shoulders, he started downwards – calculating where best to join the fight. He saw Zeus, the leader of the gods, knock down one of the attacking giants with a thunderbolt. Zeus' brothers, Hades and Poseidon, lords of the underworld and the sea, fought back to back – together keeping four more giants at bay. Artemis, the huntress, ran lightly over the rocks, skewering another giant with no less than five arrows. The gods did not lack in skill, strength or courage, but they were still losing this battle. The problem was that these were magical giants, protected by a sacred prophesy, and they simply could not be killed.

The giants came from a time long before the age of man – and even before the gods. In those days a different kind of being, the Titans, ruled the universe. Although some of the Titans were noble and just, their ruler, Cronus, was nothing but evil. It was even said that he ate his own children. Zeus and his brothers defeated Cronus, but with his dying breath, the king of the Titans set a terrible curse on them.

“The giants shall rise and destroy you, Zeus, and all your brothers,” he said, “Even with all your might combined, you will not be able to stop them. They will have only one weakness, and you will never find it. I also make this unbreakable prophesy. It will take the strength of a god to defeat the giants, but only one with the heart of a man can conquer them.”

Zeus did the only thing that he could, faced with this prophesy that foretold his certain death, he cheated. In disguise, he made his way to the palace of the king and queen of Thebes, one of the great cities of Ancient Greece. On the very night he arrived, the queen gave birth. A prince, it was said, who would be heir to his father's throne. Waiting until the celebrations had died down and the palace was quiet, Zeus crept into the nursery. To his dismay, he found that there was not one, but two babies. Both baby boys. How would he decide between the two? Which one would grow up to be his champion? While he was stood looking in confusion from one cradle to the other, there was a noise from outside – a crow cawing in the night. The babies woke, and while one set up a wailing fit to wake the palace, the other smiled at Zeus and reached out his little arms towards the god. This was enough. Moving quickly but calmly, Zeus placed his hand on the baby's head and chanted several powerful spells.

Then he fed to the baby a spoonful of ambrosia, the special food of the gods. By the time the nurse, woken by the wailing, had entered the nursery, Zeus had disappeared out of the window and was on his way back to Olympus.

Hercules was the son of a king and queen, raised as a prince and trained to rule over the people when the time came for him to take the throne, but Zeus also looked on him as a son, watched over him and visited often – always in disguise. By the time news of the giants' revolt reached the palace high on Olympus, Hercules had grown into a fine young man, skilled in the use of all the weapons of war – especially the bow – but equally at home plucking the strings of a lyre. It was true that some found him proud, with a quick temper that often burst like a storm over some unlucky servant, but he was a prince – this kind of behaviour was to be expected. Naturally, the young Hercules felt himself destined for greater things than merely ruling a Greek city state. So, when Zeus finally revealed himself and asked for help in defeating the giants, Hercules did not think to consider himself lucky to have been chosen. Rather he considered that this was the natural order of things – that it was inevitable.

During the years of Hercules' childhood, Zeus had not been idle. Cronos had mentioned that the giants would have only one weakness, so Zeus had searched far and wide for anyone who might know what this was. Finally, from the far north, whispered stories came to Zeus' ear. Stories about a special herb that, used in the right way, would stop the giants in their tracks. He dispatched sharp-eyed eagles, swift winged swallows and birds of all types to search the air and the earth for any sign of this herb. Poseidon sent his subjects to search all the corners of his kingdom under the waves, and Hades released the demons of Tartarus to travel all the passageways of the underworld. All this activity brought no result, and the giants came ever closer to Olympus. When it became clear that the mountain would soon be surrounded, Zeus knew he must fetch Hercules, his champion, before it was too late. When they returned together to Olympus, there was no word – the herb had not been found – and the giants were approaching.

Zeus and Hercules entered the palace just as Ares, the god of war, was addressing the other gods, who had gathered in a disorderly council.

“The enemy is at our walls,” he said, “Even now they gather on the hilltops around, preparing to hurl fire and rock against us. We must go out to meet them in battle.”

Now he drew his sword and raised his shield, his voice ringing in the large hall.

“Let us show these giants what it is to suffer the anger of the gods!”

Hercules was greatly impressed by this speech and by the fine figure of Ares in his full battle armour. Zeus, however, had a wiser head on his shoulders.

“The giants cannot hurt us with their sticks and stones,” said Zeus, “you will see that the walls of Olympus are stronger than they look. Yet, as we stand today, we cannot harm the giants. We have one half of the cure, but not the other.”

Now all eyes were on Hercules. He was no stranger to the members of the council, they had each visited him many times during his childhood with lessons, or help in

time of need. Now, each of them hoped that they had done enough to prepare this man for the superhuman task he must perform. Hercules, for his part, showed no surprise at seeing childhood teachers and friends now revealed as gods – for, of course, they had always made their visits to him in disguise. He simply unslung his bow and his club, and prepare to speak.

“Even though we do not have the herb,” he said, addressing the room, “I cannot believe that such a company as this will ever know defeat, but if I am wrong, I can think of no greater honour than to fight and die as one of your number.”

The gods cheered this noble speech, raising such a noise that no-one noticed the eagle until it landed on Zeus’ arm.

So it was that Hercules was sent to harvest the herb. Hermes, the messenger of the gods, lent him winged sandals, so that he could fly. Then, the eagle guided him to the desolate island where the herb grew. There was such a small amount, but Hercules harvested every last morsel, before heading back. Although it seemed to Hercules that he had not been away for long, when he returned to Olympus the situation had changed dramatically for the worse. So, he was faced with his choice – where to join the fight. How to help the gods, who were slowly but surely being pressed back towards their palace, and how to use the herb.

First he tried rubbing the herb on his weapons, but although he scored many direct hits on the giants, any he knocked down were soon up again to rejoin the fight. After this, he tried everything else he could think of. He rubbed the herb on himself, on the giants and on one or two of the gods. No effect. He tried chewing a tiny piece, then he knocked down a giant and put some in its mouth. Nothing. He even tried wearing some in his hair. The only thing that changed was that he had less and less of the precious herb left, and there was no way to get more. His patience was exhausted. The gods were fighting in a tight ring around the top of Mount Olympus, and they were tiring. Hercules saw Ares smashed to the ground by one giant, barely scrambling away in time to avoid its clutches. He glowered at a piece of the herb, which he held between his thumb and forefinger, as if it were deliberately trying to trick him.

“What use are you?” he shouted at the small green stalk, “Why was I sent to the ends of the earth for you when you do nothing?”

As Hercules shouted, his knuckles grew white and his hand shook as his tremendous strength was applied to this one tiny thing he held. It was too much, and with a popping sound that seemed too loud for the size of the leaf, the herb was crushed to dust. Hercules recoiled as a thin trail of smoke curled up from between his fingers, where the herb had been moments earlier. Even at arm’s length, the smell of this was overpowering. Hercules felt his head spin and his limbs lock in place. Clamping his mouth shut, he held his breath, watching the smoke waver and dissolve into the air. Now he knew the secret, but there was so little of the herb left – he wondered if it would be enough.

The sound of cruel laughter from nearby made him put these thoughts aside. One of the giants had grabbed the goddess Athene and was crushing her in a bear hug. The other gods would have rushed to her aid, but they were too busy fighting for their own lives. Hercules realised that this was now down to him, that he would have to beat this giant – and many more like it – but not a flicker of doubt crossed his mind. He raced over and, jumping high into the air, landed a terrific blow on the side of the giant's head. Surprised and dizzy, the giant dropped Athene, who fell to the ground and stood gasping for breath. Now Hercules swept his club at the giant's legs, catching it just above the ankles and sending it crashing to the ground. Running up the giant's body, Hercules grasped a morsel of the herb, as before, between his thumb and forefinger. With all his might he squeezed, popping the herb right under the giant's nose, while being careful to hold his own breath. The giant's face registered a moment of surprise, then of disgust at the vile stench, then it froze. A milky greyness flowed along its enormous body, from the head to the toes and fingers. When it was finished, Hercules found himself standing, not on a giant, but on a piece of rock. The giant had been turned to stone and would, now and forever, be a part of the mountain. Athene, who had seen the transformation, directed Hercules to other parts of the fight. One by one, and working with the other gods and goddesses, they disabled the giants long enough for Hercules to use the herb and turn them to stone. With each giant that was defeated the work grew easier, until all the gods together faced just one remaining enemy, the leader of the giants – Alcyoneus. Although he was outnumbered, he was in no mood to give in. Twice as big as any of the other giants, Alcyoneus fought ferociously – sometimes even driving the gods back. Finally Hercules and Artemis, working together, pinned him down with a shower of arrows. Then Zeus blasted Alcyoneus to the ground with a thunderbolt. Victory in sight, Hercules ran up to the giant's huge head and ... nothing. The herb had run out. There was none left, and now there was no way on earth to defeat Alcyoneus.

### ***About the Author***

Joe Corcoran was born in Sheffield, grew up in Manchester, was educated in Cambridge and now works in London. He is a devoted husband to Mickey and proud father of Toby, who is the patient recipient of many stories in the making. They live in a nice little house in Twickenham, home of English rugby and match day traffic congestion. Together, Joe and Toby wage an eternal battle against urban foxes – especially their droppings.

The income from his writing being negative, Joe pays the rent by working for a big multi-national. He is an expert in supply chain, which is the art of getting the things that people want to sell to the place where people want to buy them, and he travels the world dispensing advice on the subject. When he is not travelling, Joe works in an office in central London. He commutes every day by train, which provides his main opportunity for writing stories.

You can find out more about Joe and keep up to date with his other books and stories at <https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/corcorelli>.

### ***Bunnies Facebook Page***

Of course, the Bunnies from the Future are better at social media than the author. They have their own Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/bunniesfromthefuture/>

### ***Other Books by the Author***

Further books by Joe Corcoran, available at your favourite ebook retailer:

#### **The Twelve Labours of Hercules**

With triumph after triumph in his past, Hercules has become proud and boastful, believing himself to be almost a god. Unless he can rediscover what it means to be a man, the king of the giants will break free and destroy the world. Twelve challenges must be completed, and the clock is ticking. Monsters must be fought, puzzles solved and gods confronted, but this time strength will not be enough, it will take honour, wisdom, perseverance and, above all, friendship to win the day.

A book where the adventure never stops, set in the time when heroes and gods still walked the earth, it will enthral children of all ages.

#### **Piglet Gets a New Job**

Since before she could remember, the piglet had been part of the circus, but now she

has been thrown out and left to fend for herself. All she really wants to do is to go back – to be accepted again into the only family she has ever known – but is this really the best thing for her? To find out, she must travel a long way and show great determination. There is a whole new world for her to discover, and she will find out who her real friends are – but will she let herself see them? This short story is a modern fairy tale that will delight children and entertain adults alike.

### **Bad Brad Saves Christmas**

Brad doesn't believe in Father Christmas, and he doesn't want anyone else to believe that nonsense either. In fact, he's happiest when he's making everyone else miserable. He doesn't know it, but on Christmas Eve he'll have to decide whether to stay being Bad Brad, or whether he'll get on his bike and save Christmas. Deck the halls, turn on the fairy lights and enjoy this magical Christmas story.

This edition of Bunnies From The Future, and more of Joes books are also available at <http://www.freekidsbooks.org>.