

Inland

by

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Chapter 1

Bougainvillaea

It was a perfectly normal day in the town of Harmony. The blue sky held the usual clouds you would expect in the late spring. The warm, moist, Gulf air mixed with the cool air descending from the dry mountains. Where they met, moisture condensed into chariots of marshmallows racing across the sky.

The morning had been cool. Now that the sun was arching high across the sky, the temperature was beginning to rise. The songbirds out in the field had quit their chorus. It was time to lay low, beneath the branches of blackberry vines. They would wait until the sun prepared to disappear for the day. It would be cooler and the bugs would fly again, rising from the small ponds and drainage ditches. Only then would the birds fly out of their shelters for the evening meal.

Joe's cat, a tabby named Bougainvillaea, was out hunting for birds. She knew the window of success was about to shut until dusk but she was hungry. Joe had decided she was

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getting fat from the canned cat food and had cut her back to one a day. Bougainvillaea didn't like that aspect of living with Big People. She would rather be responsible for herself, if only cat food didn't taste so good.

Breakfast wasn't enough and her tummy still required more. She decided to supplement her regular diet with wild food. The trouble was, Joe had been right, though she hated to admit it. Bougainvillaea wasn't fast enough to catch anything.

She knew a place where a family of mice lived. She had found the nest last week. There had been eight hairless babies in it. That was when daily life presented three cans of Crystal Star Tuna for Cats. She could afford to look down on such bestial fare.

It's funny how time or perspective can change what you're willing to eat. Breakfast was a long ago event. Those mice would be almost full grown now. Or, at least teenagers.

Joe was at high school and wouldn't be back until after three o'clock. That was a long time to wait. Bougainvillaea knew she could extort an afternoon snack by rubbing against Joe's leg and allowing him to pet her. Getting scratched behind the ears wasn't too big a price to pay for tuna fish; she even liked the attention. Still, there was all that waiting when her stomach was grumbling, complaining, now.

The mice lived in the ground cavity of an old, leafless

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Maple tree. The tree grew next to a long-abandoned mine shaft. The mine had been there longer than any of the people, or animals, could remember. It seemed it had been there forever, since before anybody had ever lived here. Now, that's old, thought Bougainvillaea.

There was a big, thick, branch that hung over the mine shaft. When she was a younger cat, and much more interested in playing, she used to climb the trunk of the tree, trot out to the end of the branch, and sit. There, she could look down into the dark water that filled the abyss. She had drunk, long and often, from the pool but her thirst had never slackened.

There were never any fish swimming in the pool. Neither were there mosquitos like in all the other ponds around the farm. Bougainvillaea didn't like them whining around her ears all the time. One of the nice things about playing near the old tree was the lack of insects.

Bougainvillaea didn't like to think of the water. Even now it made her shudder involuntarily. She was a good swimmer, all cats are, but that wasn't any reason for getting wet. Still, what is life without some element of danger or risk? So, she liked to climb the ancient Maple and sit above the raven-dark water.

She would imagine herself to be a jungle cat, like the relatives in her feline memory. "Bougainvillaea: Lord of the

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Jungle," is how she thought of herself. Those were kitten dreams. Now, she dreamed of lunch.

She followed the well worn path from the house, into the yard, under the fence where the barbed wire would scratch her back, and into the field. This was her territory and she knew it well. There were no other cats in the neighborhood; she had driven the last one away last year. That was when she was still slim and sleek. Oh, well, she sighed.

Joe's family was growing corn and onions this spring. In fact, that's what everyone grew around here.

Bougainvillaea liked to walk through the corn stalks. They rubbed against each other and made a delightful scraping racket like the sound of a can opener cutting into the metal lip of Crystal Star Tuna for Cats. There was the chance a Starling or Blackbird, perched on the corn, had dozed off in the afternoon warmth. Maybe she could save the energy a long walk to the mice would bring.

Bougainvillaea prowled through the corn. She did scare up a flock of Starlings but they were too wide awake to catch. No easy meal here. It would have to be the mouse family.

On the edge of the field of corn was another fence. She would dip under it where a sharp metal barb had worn off many strands of her long brown hair. Then, a quick dash across the little-used road, up the hill and down the other side into the hollow where the tree was. And, an afternoon repast she

hoped.

In no time she was there. She stopped on the side of the mine pool away from the tree. No need in getting the mice excited. They would be bigger now and able to run away without mama's help. A chase would be exciting; food always tasted better when she worked up an appetite. Today, though, the appetite had worked her up; she was hungry and she wanted all the mice.

Bougainvillaea crouched down low. Her ears twitched as they tested the air for sounds of the mice moving under the distant tree. She was pretty sure she heard them. Her tail tested the direction of the wind; it would be foolish to approach from up-wind where the mice could smell her.

There was no breeze. From the corner of her eye she could see the large clouds, high above, moving gracefully across the blue sky. She filed this bit of information along with many others in her mind. Her thoughts, concerned only with what was necessary for hunting, dismissed the cloud movement as irrelevant.

Her sensitive ears detected a squawk emanating from the nest. She smiled, as much as a cat can smile. At least there was one mouse. If she was patient, she would get it. Belly sliding across the ground, like geologic time she inexorably inched forward. There was no hurry now. Even her growling stomach knew the importance of silence. It was content to

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wait.

When she was finally within pouncing distance Bougainvillaea gathered her legs up beneath her and prepared to assault the nest. Her ears detected the sounds of at least two mice. Her mouth began to fill with saliva.

Then, she was off. She jumped into the nest! She landed on the whole family. Her front paws pinned two of the rodents down and with her teeth she caught a third. The rest scattered, willy-nilly, with one racing up the tree and onto Bougainvillaea's branch above the mine.

She saw it out there, plainly enough, and plainly knew the mouse had nowhere to go from there but into the water. She had time, she reasoned, to get this fourth critter so she enjoyed her mid-day meal.

When Bougainvillaea was ready for dessert, she took her favorite route up the old tree. She walked daintily, if a bit sluggish, onto the branch. It wasn't as thick as she remembered, or maybe she had grown a bit thickish herself. The little mouse cowered behind a stub at the branch end.

The cat moved slowly. It would do no good to lose the mouse to impatience. The little critter was directly over the pool. If it froze in fear, Bougainvillaea would get it. However, if its fear of becoming someone else's meal made it try a leap to safety, it would end up drowning in the water below. She would be unwilling to retrieve the mouse.

Bougainvillaea hated to eat wet food.

She was within a couple of cat-lengths away. The beady black eyes of the mouse looked back at her. Its whiskers twitched, sampling its environment. What would it do? If Bougainvillaea charged, would the mouse try to flee, skittering around the cat? Would the rodent try to leap to the ground? The earth below must be terribly far away to so small a creature.

The cat gathered up her legs beneath her and prepared to lunge. It was time to decide. The mouse twitched its whiskers faster and faster. It didn't dare look away from the cat now. Oh, what to do, what to do!

At last, the cat attacked! The mouse ran and tried to squeeze around the other animal. Bougainvillaea saw what the mouse was trying to do and, in mid-jump, reversed herself. But, she was not the kitten she had been in the days when she played Lord of the Jungle. She was a full-grown tabby, and a fat one at that.

Bougainvillaea lost her footing and tumbled down from the tree towards the water. As she went over the edge, turning her body to land feet first, she saw the relieved look on the face of the frightened mouse. She tried to swipe at it with her rear, left paw as she sailed past. If her legs had been longer, she might have succeeded. As it was, she also failed to reach under the branch to grab onto a piece of the grooved

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tree bark with her front paws.

Bougainvillaea was prepared to meet the water's surface. It would be a wet landing, but all four feet were pointed groundward with her legs splayed out. That was how nature had taught her to land the first time she fell from a tree.

She anticipated the splash, the covering of her head by the cold liquid, then bobbing up to the surface and swimming to the shore. Instead, when she hit the surface, there was no splash, no cold water, and no bobbing. She kept falling.

Chapter 2

The Dweeb

School. "What could be more boring?" Joe wondered aloud. He picked up a shriveled onion that was lying on the side of the road. He sighted on a far away road reflector, wound up like a pitcher, and tossed the bulb into the field.

"More boring than what," asked his companion.

"Frank, how do you stand it?"

"Stand what?"

"You know; being in class all day. Especially when the day is as beautiful as this." Joe spread his arms around to encompass all the two high school seniors could see. That included everything from the powder blue sky with puffy white clouds galloping across it, to the corn and onion fields which spread out in every direction to the horizon.

Everyone ate corn here. No one ate onions. But it was a tradition to grow them. Everyone did.

The teens walked home from school along the same route every day. Their parents owned neighboring farms outside of

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town. There were no sidewalks here, just the dirt and gravel roads which led from the main highway. The boys would walk on the road, or along the irrigation ditch, occasionally cutting across fields if no crops were planted.

"Have you ever seen a sky that color before with clouds that shape? Has the corn ever looked so high and green to you? I mean, this has got to be the most perfect day of the year and we had to spend the best part of it indoors."

"Don't you think you're kind of exaggerating?" Frank replied. He was accustomed to his friends comments. Joe didn't like being indoors for any reason. It could be snowing and a hundred below and Joe would find some reason for being outside.

"Well, maybe a little. But, really, Frank. You sat in biology class for a whole hour taking notes about what ole Mrs. Fredricksen says as if it truly was important. What was it all about? Some rabbits in Australia. To me it's just BOR-ing. It's a mystery where you get all the energy to be interested in all that stuff."

"If you think that's a mystery, what do you think about the great onion caper?" Frank thought he would try changing the subject. It wasn't that he didn't want to answer Joe; they had this conversation all the time. Right now, Frank wasn't interested in explaining what he liked about school. He was always afraid it would sound like excuses. He liked to

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learn, that's all.

"Oh, you mean about how you can plant 100 "seed" onions in a field and only harvest fifty?"

A "seed" onion is a small, greenhouse grown, bulb that farmers plant. In science class, back in the sixth grade, all the students had grown onions that way. Growing an onion from a real seed takes too long. By the time the plant should be ready to harvest, it is still too small to be any good.

"Do you suppose someone is stealing them?"

"What? Pulling them up out of the ground before the onion pickers can? No, they're just getting eaten. "'Et," that's what my granny says."

Joe proceeded to imitate his grandmother. He shriveled up his face and crooked his left forefinger like a can opener. Then, he made his voice sound like dried lizard skins scraping against each other. "'Et, I tell you. Someone, or something, 'et 'em all up. Been happenin' ever since I was a little girl. Who knows? But people still plant onions." He enunciated each syllable and emphasized each letter. It came out sounding like "on-yee-quinns," which was how all the old people pronounced the word.

Frank smiled. He knew most of their classmates couldn't see why he and Joe hung out together. Frank had the reputation that comes with being the best student in school and Joe was the antithesis. To be truthful, Frank had to

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admit to himself he didn't understand the reasons either. Unless it was that life didn't lack for excitement or interest when Joe was around.

Actually, it could be downright adventurous. Last summer they had convinced their parents to let them go to Wyoming for a month. No chaperons. They filled up their backpacks, pored over maps, and took the bus to Dubois.

When they arrived, they kept pronouncing the town's name the way their French teacher taught them. The residents of that small ranching community were too polite to correct their mistake. Finally, some old cowpoke had drawled, "Don't know nothing 'bout no Doo-blahs, but this 'a hear'n town's called Dew-boys."

That same cowboy had driven them west, out of town, into the Wind River Mountains. There, they backpacked for three weeks through some of the roughest, beautiful mountains Frank had ever seen. They had to cross some pretty big streams, and one river, without benefit of bridges. One day they had climbed over loose boulders and ice to the top of Mt. Fremont.

They spent three of the coldest, wettest, and most miserable days of their lives in the middle of the trip. They didn't have any rain gear. Their only "tent" was an old plastic paint tarp Frank's father had given them a moment before the bus left.

A storm came up and pelted them with rain and hail the

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whole time. Sometimes lightening struck so close that they saw the flash and heard the boom simultaneously. They had spent those days shaking in fear one moment and giggling from excitement the next. As Joe liked to say, what's a little discomfort when there is fun to be had?

Frank thought about that for a moment, all the while scanning the horizon as they walked. Joe had a point about how pretty the day was.

He was thinking. Some people say mile after mile of corn is pretty dull and boring. It's not what used to be here before we kicked out the Indians and slaughtered the buffalo. But, if someone was to come here and want to pave it over to put up wall-to-wall shopping malls, or build a nuclear waste dump; Frank would fight to save it. This is home. This is what he believed in.

"Rabbits in Australia are like what we've done around here."

"What do you mean?"

"Look around you. Corn and onions. Onions and corn. It could as easily be rabbits. They're examples of how people like us have changed nature around. If the Indians came back, they wouldn't recognize this place at all. Everyone has to realize that everything they do affects everyone else."

Joe smiled. He knew his friend well enough to recognize when Frank was getting involved with what he was saying.

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Frank's eyes would get real large and his faced would glow with some inner energy that Joe wished he had. Sometimes he liked to tease Frank, to egg him on. This time, the topic really interested him so Joe asked for more information.

"Someone imported rabbits into Australia a hundred years ago. There wasn't any natural predator so the population of rabbits took off. Pretty soon, there were rabbits everywhere and you couldn't take a walk without tripping over a few dozen or so."

"I bet there was great rabbit hunting."

"I'll bet you're right. After a few years, there also wasn't anything green left on the ground. The rabbits ate it all. I know it sounds pretty strange, but it's true."

"Strange isn't the word for it. And talk about strange; look at that. I thought Halloween wasn't until October."

Frank looked to where his friend was pointing. There was a tall, very thin person walking towards them. His clothes fit him poorly. His pants were too short and his shirt was too big. He hat was beat, but serviceable; it hid most of this face. "Must be some street person. I saw it on TV last month," Joe said. "There are people without jobs or homes so they live on the streets."

"No, I don't think so. Look at his face. He looks like a ghoul from a Halloween, Part 40, movie."

"Looks like a dweeb to me," ventured Joe.

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"And it looks like he's heading for us. What do you say we turn around and go another way?"

"There are two of us and only one of him. Let's see what the Dweeb wants."

Chapter 3

Adventure

The strange looking person, who Joe chose insultingly to christen the "Dweeb," walked right up to the two boys and stopped. From where he stood the stranger blocked the middle of the road. The boys would have to pass around him or walk in the irrigation ditch. They stopped and chose to investigate the stranger instead.

The man's clothing was old. It was patched well, though. The shirt was indeed far too large for his narrow frame. His skin was pale but his hands were stained a dull brown as if dirt had been rubbed into them. His face was long and drawn; his eyes sunk into his head were large bright orbs. In fact, his eyes were the only outward evidence of life.

"He must be eight feet tall," whispered Frank.

"I bet the Lakers could use him," returned Joe. "What do you suppose he wants? Look at the way he's looking at us."

Indeed, the stranger had a curious manner about him. His eyes moved side to side, from boy to boy, while his head and

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body remained frozen.

"He looks like he wants to eat one of us and can't decide which it will be. Hey, Mister. What gives?" prompted Joe.

"You are Joe?"

The man's first words surprised the boys. They self-consciously, retreated a step or two.

"I have not come to harm you," the stranger continued softly. "I am to invite you to visit our country. They wish to meet you." Here he paused and waited. The boys made no move or sound.

"You will follow me?" the stranger prompted.

"Will we be back in time for dinner?" retorted Joe.

The giant didn't have a sense of humor. He looked confused by the answer.

"What he means," explained Frank, "is that we can't just up and go with you."

"Why?"

"Because we don't know who you are, dummy. How do we know you aren't dangerous? No, I don't think so," said Frank.

"No deal. No way."

"Isn't an adventure worth the unknown? There could be many rewards."

That comment stopped them cold. Frank's inclination was to turn around and walk home some other way. Excitement was fine as long as it didn't entail danger. This adventure had

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all the hallmarks of an unwise decision. The Dweeb was a bad looking character. Still, he hesitated, waiting to see Joe's reaction. Frank didn't want his friend to think he wasn't adventurous.

Joe was both electrified by the Dweeb's offer and cautious. True, the cost of the unknown was adventure. Adventures always held an allure for Joe. Still, this was unconventional.

The Dweeb looked like the man parents always said not to accept candy from. He may not be offering real candy, but the proposition was about the same. On the other hand, this could be incredibly exciting. Joe decided to try and wait for Frank's decision. Frank always did what was right.

In the silence while the boys thought, the Dweeb waited. There was a reason he had been sent. He was patient and not given to rushing through things. His instructions had been plain enough. Find the person called Joe and entice him to the cave. There could be other people on this road who were not named Joe. He would take that chance.

Then there was the other reason, his reason. Actually, his and a few others. He would not be able to be a part of that. This was his job. There were two parts to it. One source knew only about the first part; the other source knew about them both.

They had given him some suggestions to follow. He didn't

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know where the information came from, but the Big People were never wrong. He had tried what they said to try and it may be working. The teenagers were silent; they appeared to consider his offer.

"I don't think we should go," said Frank. He was addressing the Dweeb, but the statement was really for Joe. Frank was relieved when Joe nodded his head, agreeing with him.

The Dweeb looked disappointed. "Follow me to the cave," he said. "Then decide."

"That sounds reasonable," Joe spoke without thinking. He looked quickly at Frank.

"Good. Follow me." With that, the Dweeb turned and began to walk away. The boys remained a moment and the Dweeb turned. "Be with you in a moment!" Joe called, with false cheer. He turned to Frank who wore a look of impatience.

"Don't look at me like that!"

"Like what?"

"Like I just stepped in something and brought it into the house."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't be mad at me, Frank. Let's just follow him to the cave, whatever that is, and take a peak inside. What harm could it do?"

"Well..."

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"There are two of us, right?"

"And we don't hardly equal one of him."

"Yeah, he is kind of on the large size, I'll admit. It isn't as if he was beefy. He's as skinny as a shovel handle. I don't think he wants to hurt us. He said so, didn't he?"

"Then, what do you think he does want?"

"To show us something, I guess."

"Why does he keep talking about showing us his country? Is he going to take us somewhere?"

"To the cave. Wherever it is."

"I don't know." The more cautious boy was beginning to waver; Joe could feel it. It wouldn't be hard to convince his friend to follow the Dweeb as long as it remained a safe idea.

"Look, Frank, let's just follow him and if it looks like he's going to pull a fast one, we'll bail out quicker than you can sing "happy birthday" in Nepalese."

Frank's family had hosted an exchange student from the Himalayan country the previous year. One of the useful things the two friends had learned from the student was the Nepalese equivalent for the current pop songs as well as a few time-worn classics.

"O.K. But the first sign of something fishy and we leave. No discussion. We get out of there."

"Agreed," said Joe with a smile. Seeking to reassure the other boy, he added, "It'll be fine; you'll see."

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"I hope so," was Frank's reply. "I hope so."

Chapter 4

Into the Cave

The Dweeb led the two friends on a familiar walk. They followed the road for half a mile, turned left at Mr. Mackinaw's corn field, passed through a barbed wire fence, topped a small hill overgrown with an old crop of onions, and descended to the old flooded mine shaft. The dark, crystal blue, color of water glinted in the sun.

Not many people went out this way. None of the parents wanted the kids playing around the shaft. No one in town knew how long the mine had been there. Even the oldtimers couldn't remember when any mining had been done in this part of the country.

The pit was rumored to be "bottomless." One fact was sure, mine shafts were dangerous. People had wanted to board up the hole, or at least fence it off.

Joe and Frank had explored in the area a few times but it didn't have much to offer. The big old, dead, Maple hung over a little hole filled with water as far as they were concerned.

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There weren't any fish, they had tried. It was too small to swim in. The water was tasteless. Frank thought it didn't even taste "wet" but Joe had always laughed at him for saying that.

The boys followed the Dweeb to the deep pit. The hole was filled with water, as they remembered. Neither could think of a reason for coming here.

To their surprise, the Dweeb walked purposefully into the water. It wasn't until he was waist deep that the boys said anything.

"We're not going in there," Frank said.

"We'll drown," added Joe.

The Dweeb turned around and looked at the boys. He appeared to mull this over before he spoke. "Follow me."

Frank shook his head left and right. "No way, Jose."

"Trust me," said the Dweeb. "The ground slopes underneath and you won't slip. There is a door at the bottom. Through the door is the way we must go.

The boys looked dubious.

"You can hold your breath, if that makes you feel any better."

"That's pretty silly. We don't know how far it is," said Frank.

"Yeah. What happens if we run out of air and we're nowhere near your silly old door? What then?"

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"I promise you; you won't need to breathe once you are in the water."

"Then why did you say we can hold our breath?" queried Joe suspiciously.

"To make you feel more comfortable. All is not what you are trained to see or believe." He waited while the boys looked first at each other and then at the Dweeb. No one moved. "Trust me," he repeated.

The silence was absolute. Not a bit of breeze stirred along the ground. High, wispy clouds traveled across the sky, oblivious to the little drama being enacted at the old mine. The maple tree near the pit stood like a guardian. One large branch hung over the water. It would make a fine place for an old tire swing. Why hadn't anyone ever put one there?

In situations like these Joe had learned to follow the lead of his friend. He decided to wait and see what Frank decided. Finally, after what felt like hours of thought, Frank turned to him and whispered, "How long can you hold your breath?"

Joe considered. It is one thing to hold your breath sitting on the sofa watching TV; yet another to do it underwater sitting on the bottom of the pool; still another to do it while swimming or walking into a bottomless pit when you didn't know when your next breath would be taken. He made his best guess and then shaved off 10 seconds to be safe. "About

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40 seconds."

"Me too," replied his friend. "Let's give it a try."

"O.K." said Joe. "You first."

All this time the Dweeb had been standing in the pool of blackened water, silent and motionless. When the boys advanced to the edge of the water, he grunted, turned and advanced downward. "Follow me," he said. In a moment, while the boys debated removing their sneakers, the Dweeb had progressed until only the top of his head showed. Then, it too, was gone.

"Wait!" called out Joe.

The Dweeb's head poked out of the water.

"What about flashlights?"

The Dweeb smiled, said nothing and was gone.

"I guess we don't need them," Frank commented wryly. "No use in taking off the shoes, I guess." He stepped into the pool. "Not cold at all," he said over his shoulder. "Water's fine."

Joe followed him in. Both boys were surprised at the firmness of the bottom. It was almost sandy, with a hardness that accepted each step. The water temperature was that of a warm bath. Joe preferred showers, he thought to himself as the water level approached his chin. They both stood in that position a moment and looked at each other. "Well, here goes," said Frank and he took a breath and proceeded under the

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surface of the water.

Chapter 5

Breathing - Underwater!

Joe followed his friend under the pool of water. There was an unusual lack of buoyancy, like they were wearing diver's weight belts. He silently counted the seconds he held his breath. He was sure Frank was doing the same. He would wait until 40 seconds were up, then turn around and swim up to air as fast as he could.

Being underwater always brought an element of panic to Joe. He had learned to control it, somewhat, but the thrill of the unknown was strong in him. It was all he could do, now, to stay calm.

Joe always admired Frank's way of methodically approaching any problem, coolly think over all the possibilities before deciding. As odd, and unsafe, this following of the Dweeb seemed, Joe knew that Frank had considered all the alternatives. The Dweeb, in himself, was unusual and called for special consideration and thought. This was no commonplace mystery they were investigating. It

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belonged in a Stephen King book. Or a dream.

Was it possible? Instead of needing to swim down, Joe was able to keep walking. But the deeper he went, the darker it became. Pretty soon, Joe couldn't see Frank or the Dweeb. He wished for a flashlight. It was faith, not trust, that led him on now. Faith there must be a bottom to every hole.

After an eternity, 40 seconds was up. They should have reached the door by now, Joe decided. He wanted to turn around but he wouldn't do it without Frank. The problem was, he couldn't see Frank at all. He reached out his arms and took a large step hoping to touch his friend. No one was there!

The panic of being underwater now rose from his heart to his throat and was replaced with terror. Where was Frank? He took another large step, this time almost launching himself into the swimming position. Rather than gliding through the water he kept sinking!

In a mixture of panic, terror, and confusion, Joe lost his head. He was sinking, and fast too, tumbling downhill like in a waterslide. The constriction in his chest told him he had seconds of air left. He tried valiantly to figure out what to do but his brain refused to work. All he could think of was, "I'm going to drown."

Joe tried valiantly not to take a breath for he knew the moment he did the gag response would begin. There was no

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chance, once that happened, to recover. And still, he felt himself sinking. Finally, he could hold his breath no longer. He would have to breathe. Could Frank have turned around in the dark water and returned without him? Why had they followed the Dweeb in the first place? The creature hadn't acted dangerous. No use in thinking about that now.

Joe took his first breath of water, expecting to gag and then sputter and cough. Good bye, world, he thought. Life was too wonderful to waste like this. However, instead of what he expected, Joe felt nothing. Am I dead, he thought? Was it that easy? At least I didn't suffer.

Then, Joe realized he was breathing, and, underwater! It wasn't like being in the open air. It was more like being in a crowded room with lots of people. The air is thick with the smoke of cigarettes. The windows need opening but they've been painted shut. There is a stale taste to everything as if, for all the crowd that is there, nothing new has entered or left the room for a thousand years.

With the awareness that Joe was breathing came the realization he was no longer sinking. He lay, sprawled, on dry ground. Joe saw, or rather felt the presence of Frank, beside him. "What kept you?" asked his buddy.

Frank's voice was clear as a bell, though somewhat of a dull bell, as you would expect in a deep cave where all sound is absorbed by rock walls. Joe felt his racing heart slow

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down to a fast walk at the sound of his friend's voice. He replied as nonchalantly as possible, "Took a wrong turn," and proceeded to dust himself off.

The Dweeb grunted. "Follow me. Close the door behind you."

The boys had no idea where the Dweeb had gone and walked with arms outstretched. Joe found the door first. "This way, Frank," he said. "Here. Grab my hand." He felt the hand close on his. The boys passed through the portal and shut the door. It closed on well greased hinges.

"What happened to the water?" asked Joe.

"I don't know. All of a sudden it wasn't there. Did you notice you're not wet?"

Joe felt his clothing. A sound of surprise exited his mouth. Even his shoes were dry. "What?"

At that moment two things happened. First they bumped into the Dweeb and when he moved to the side, the boys saw a small light on the wall. It illuminated the passageway they were in so the boys could see about 100 feet ahead. Then, either the light petered out or the tunnel curved.

"Soon. Almost there." said the Dweeb. "Quiet. Listen."

They did as they were bade. A faint clamor drifted through the tunnel to them. "Sounds like machinery," said Frank. The Dweeb nodded. "What happened to the water?" Frank added.

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The Dweeb smiled. "I told you; everything is not what it appears. Your eyes fool your brain and your brain fools you. That is how they keep people away from here."

"Oh," said the boys in unison. Neither was quite sure what the creature meant but one thing was for certain. They were here; dry, warm, and safe. Well, maybe dry and warm. Time would tell on the last point.

Chapter 6

A Horrible Sight

The triad moved down the corridor. The sounds of machinery grew louder and the lights along the wall grew brighter and closer together. The further they moved into the deep earth, the slower the Dweeb walked. It was as if he didn't want to go in the direction they were heading.

The din of machinery was soon so great that conversation turned into a shouting match. Even the normally soft voice of the Dweeb was raised. Still, the boys had to strain.

"I will leave you here."

"What?" shouted the boys in a fright.

"My job is done. It would not be good to be seen with you or they would know I had succeeded."

The Dweeb said curious things but this was, by far, the most peculiar. "We don't understand," said Frank after the boys had exchanged looks of stupidity.

"They sent me to find you and I have. It would not be good for you to be found."

The Dweeb's logic was impossible to figure out. The noise was deafening. Frank held his hand up to Joe not to pursue the matter. They would find out the answers soon enough. "What do we do now, then?" he shouted into the Dweeb's ear.

"I go on. You wait."

"And..?"

"Someone will come for you."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Someone."

"How will we know who they are?"

"You won't. They will know you."

"Is it safe to stay here?" Joe asked. He was beginning to have serious second thoughts about the whole expedition. There was something fishy about the Dweeb and his reasons for wanting them to follow him.

"No," was the shouted reply. The surprise stood out clearly on the boy's faces. "But, there is no choice." He turned to go, leaving the boys alone. "No one knows you're here but me," he added over his shoulder, "and I won't tell."

"Then how will anyone know to come for us?"

The Dweeb shrugged his shoulders and kept moving. He turned sharply left in a few feet and was gone. Cautiously, Frank and Joe crept to the turn and looked. The Dweeb's uncertainty of their future was unsettling, but his manner

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instilled caution.

What they saw was shocking. The Dweeb was standing in a large room filled with machinery. Here was the source of all the noise. The Dweeb and a taller, muscular man were arguing. The boys couldn't hear the exchange but the other man was involved in what was probably a vociferous harangue.

The Dweeb's shoulder's were bent and he had slumped to nearly half his height. The Haranguer towered over the Dweeb, no small feat, and began to beat him with a long stick, or wand. It was thin, like a noodle and almost invisible. Each time the Haranguer struck, the Dweeb diminished in size until he disappeared. The Haranguer had, literally, beaten the Dweeb into the ground.

Frank and Joe crept back from their vantage point. They looked at each other. Joe wiped his brow. The blast of heat from the machinery room had made his face break out in a sweat. Frank did the same. Then, he motioned with his head that they should walk back down the hall.

When the noise had lessened to a dull, faint roar, they held a huddled conference. They stood just out of the flickering light of the wall light. They hadn't noticed before, but there were many other hallways and corridors entering the passageway they stood in.

"What are we going to do, Frank?"

"I don't know. I'm not even sure what is going on."

"Did you see what that guy did to the Dweeb? Beat him until there was nothing left. I wonder if he knew that would happen." He was feeling bad about the negative name he had assigned the man who was no longer. It was a poor sign of respect.

"Probably. It's no wonder he was moving slow the further we got along." Frank took a long pause before continuing.

"It's obvious something is wrong down here. The Dweeb seemed to think there was something we could do to help."

"But, what?"

"Good question."

"Perhaps I can be of some assistance," came a high pitched voice. When the boys looked around, they could see no one who could have uttered those helpful words.

Chapter 7

"Perfervid P. Perfection, At Your Service"

"Who said that?" the boys chorused defensively.

"I did. Please direct your gaze downward at an angle approximating minus 52.89 degrees from the horizontal plane of your eye. There, you will be rewarded by feasting your orbicular objects upon my visage."

"Wha-what?" said Joe, about ready to burst into laughter.

"I think he said we can see him if we look down," said Frank a bit doubtfully.

"That would be an excellent interpretation of my vocabulary use, my fine young man."

"Oh! Aren't we the 'cat's meow?'" said Joe, amused with the new stranger's manner of speech. Looking down at his feet he saw a man who was no taller than his knees. Feigning a phony English accent and a monocle, Joe asked who the small man was.

"Allow me to introduce myself. 'Perfervid P. Perfection.' At your service." The little man continued to

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speak with the same degree of formality of his earlier speech.

"Though, the denizens of this locality prefer to refer to me as Three-P. Considering an expected lack of couth, education, and breeding, due to your lack of advanced years, should you find yourselves unable to allocate the necessary cerebral attentiveness to the proper vocalization of my moniker, then you too, may refer to me as Three-P."

"What does the middle 'P' stand for?" asked Joe, sarcastically. He was beginning to tire of the pompous little man.

"The middle 'P?' Do you, perchance, allude to the iconographic representation between my first name (Perfervid), and my last (Perfection)?"

"Um. If that means, 'What is your middle name,' Yes."

"Paul." Three-P looked downcast at this pronouncement.

"Paul?" echoed Joe. "That doesn't quite fit with the rest, does it? Where did it come from?"

"My mother. I was named after her favorite brother."

"Oh. I see." Though he didn't.

"We're very pleased to meet you, Mr. Perfection, but..."

"Do call me Three-P. I understand the obstacles to conversation presented by the apparent cumbersome nature of my name. Even if your attentiveness and vocal dexterity have proven to be of the highest caliber, I have grown accustomed to being referred to in what I have come to appreciate as an

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endearment. A 'nick-name,' I do believe, is the proper term."

Frank had to smile at Three-P. He had never met anyone with so pompous a manner. "Can you tell us what is going on around here?"

"Certainly. It would be my most estimable pleasure to recount to you, 'The Story of Inland.'"

"Inland?" chorused Frank and Joe.

"Of course. Inland. Have you no idea of where you are? What sort of geography do you learn in school?"

"Frank's the best student at Harmony High," said Joe, defensively. "Have you ever heard of a place called Inland?"

"Don't get excited, Joe. But, no, I've never heard of such a place. On all the continents I've never seen the name Inland."

"You certainly are not going to see Inland on any of the continents. We lie below."

"Below?"

"Yes, yes, yes. Below." Three-P was acting impatient. "Haven't you learned anything about the countries that lie above and below you?"

"Well, er, um, that is," stammered Frank.

"We know everything that is important about you Notinlanders."

"You do?" asked an incredulous Joe.

"Most certainly positive."

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The boys exchanged looks. Three-P went on to recite. "Your people are heavy, bipedal organisms belonging to the mammal group. Though you are not so highly evolved as Inlanders, some measure of success has been yours in spreading your numbers across the surface of the planet." Three-P paused, for effect. "Shall I continue?"

The boys nodded, yes.

"You consume vast amounts of energy in traveling to, and fro. Your dwellings are multi-storied in some places and inefficiently built in others. Your race delights in covering the ground with hard, impervious surfaces, when they should be involved in the production of spheroid plantaceous material for the sustenance of Inlanders. Such was the agreement entered into between your people and mine during the time of the earth boring through which you entered."

"Fascinating," Joe said, facetiously.

"I knew you would find it thus. Should you have need for further elucidation, please do not hesitate to inquire of my services."

"There is one thing you could tell us."

Three-P inflated his tiny chest. He was trying to look important. It reminded Joe of the male pigeons. They puff out their chests in an attempt to impress the females. "You may present your question."

"Would you please tell us why we were brought here?"

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"Am I to comprehend you wish information on the raison d'etat for your sojourn to Inland?"

"Yes!" cried Joe, exhibiting his impatience. He had been hopping on one foot, then the other, during Three-P's recitation. The little fellow took too long to say anything. Joe imagined that if anyone asked Three-P, "What time is it?" he would tell them how to build a clock.

Three-P cast an imperious look at Joe which quelled the boy at once.

"In our country, size is simple," said Three-P. The bigger you are, the taller you are."

"That makes sense," said Joe. "It's like that everywhere you go."

"No. Negative. Absence of the affirmative. I'm afraid you don't understand. Let me explain."

"We're all ears," smirked Joe. Three-P ignored the comment. Frank's elbow gave him a nudge in the ribs.

"Stature is tied to accomplishments. If you do something positive, you grow in proportion to the usefulness of your accomplishments. Thus, the person who helps society the most becomes taller. By becoming taller, they are better able to help society. They are referred to as Big People."

"Why are you so small?" asked Frank. "I can't imagine you being less helpful than the Dweeb."

"The Who? Dweeb, you say? What sort of term is that?"

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Frank and Joe looked at their feet. Sensing there would be no reply to his question, Three-P continued, "You must mean Dwayne, the Inlander who brought you here."

"Sure; Dwayne. What has he done that you haven't?"

"All in good time, my friend. In good time. Let me see. Where was I?" He considered a moment, little chin on his little palm. "Oh, yes. I remember."

"The problem with Big People is they require more food. This is not actually a problem, you see, for the bigger a person is, the more work they can do. The more work they do, the greater their contribution to society.

"You've seen our machines? Yes, I thought Dwayne would show you. They provide the power which runs Inland. It takes a big person to be in charge of such responsibility. Without the machines we would be unable to dig the tunnels. Without the tunnels, we would have no food. Dwayne was foreman of the machines until the Big Cheese replaced him." The boys exchanged glances. "But, I digress.

"A person's size is actually easy to control. Any society has rules and, no matter how good you are, invariably you break a rule. Depending on how big a rule you break, or how you break it, your stature is diminished. It is important to remember that Inlanders are, intrinsically, nice. They will not go out of their way to be involved with reciprocatingly evil activities.

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"In this manner, tasks are recycled. Someone is always rising in eminence while another was on their way down. We all make mistakes, you know. It isn't possible to act properly all the time. We are not unthinking beings; please do not misinterpret. However, it is possible to be careless. Such things happen to even the humblest people."

Frank and Joe assumed Three-P was talking about Perfervid P. (for Paul) Perfection.

"Not long ago, a person of devious means worked his way into being a Big Person. This person discovered a way to make the merit system for his own, devious, means. He convinced others to follow his path and corrupted the law. They were able to change the laws so what was good is now bad and vice versa.

"Some Inlanders, as mentioned previously, of looser morality, were won over to this new way of life. Others, yours truly included, refused to participate in such a society. It became impossible for us to grow. We're stuck.

"Currently, the only way to grow is to appease the Big Cheese. People who fall into disfavor are beaten back down into molecules or atoms. They are so small they cannot be seen. That was what happened to Dwayne. He is still alive, just small. It will take him a long time to get back to size."

Frank interrupted. "I still don't see how we fit into

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all this. Why did the Dweeb, ah, Dwayne that is, come for us?"

"The Big Cheese sent for you. Dwayne was his messenger. He belongs to the Loyal Odor of the Onyquinn."

"Don't you mean, Loyal Order?" asked Joe.

"No. I mean Odor."

"Oh. And the Loyal Odor works for the Big Cheese?" asked Joe, trying to redeem himself in the little man's eyes.

"Absolutely not!" exclaimed Three-P. "We are against him and everything he does!"

The "Loyal Odor of the Onyquinn" was a secret society. At first, Inlanders had tried to oppose the Big Cheese through normal means. They had suffered terrible defeats.

They now worked quietly with subterfuge. They were getting successful in convincing the people of the righteousness of their cause. Dwayne was an original member. He had gone "under cover," working for the Big Cheese so he would become a Big Person and be trusted with important missions. Like the one that brought Frank and Joe to Inland.

"No one knows the purpose of the mission. All that is known is its importance. The Odor conspired to subvert the Big Cheese but we don't know why. Do you have any idea why the Big Cheese would want to see you?" To Three-P's disappointment, the boys shook their heads, "No."

"There has been a new weapon introduced by the Big

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Cheese. It is a creature of great strength and ferociousness. It has a horrible temper and is used to keep the smaller people in line. Especially the ones who are dissidents.

"It is getting harder and harder to grow because the Big Cheese makes more rules which are easy to break. In the meantime, he gets bigger and bigger and consumes more food. All his Cronies are the same.

"Some Inlanders think the Big Cheese is so big that he cannot do anything on his own anymore. That is why he needs the new creature, Timba."

"Timba?"

"Timba. Also, the Big Cheese continues eating up all the food we have."

"Is this Timba getting bigger too?"

"Yes it is. And it is hungry all the time! Believe me when I say that most of us are beginning to fear for our lives. The Big Cheese rewards his pet with food and complements, so it grows."

"What is the main food around here, anyway?" Joe was looking around the corridor. "I mean, all I've seen are these hallways and the machine room. If it wasn't for these light bulbs, it would be darker than the inside of a cow around here."

For an answer, Three-P reached into his pocket and pulled out a round object. It was about the size of a marble. He

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showed it to the boys. "This is an Onyquinn." He pronounced in on-yee-quinn. "They come in various sizes. This is a modest representative."

Frank and Joe exchanged glances. "Onions?"

"Where do you get them," Joe asked.

"There are tunnels which we dig close to the surface. I explained this earlier. The machines in the room you saw provide energy to equip the lighting apparatus and the digging equipment we use."

"Then what?"

Three-P looked blankly back at the boys.

It dawned on Frank, first. Excitedly, he turned to Joe and ejaculated, "They eat onions!"

"Quite a delicacy," chimed in their short companion.

"Care for one? No? Then you don't mind if I do?"

"No, go ahead," Frank replied, the excitement still thick in his voice. Joe was still standing bewildered at his side.

"O.K. Maybe I'm the dumb one in the group. Do you want to tell me what you're so happy about?"

"Don't you get it, Joe? They eat onions."

"Yeah. Three-P said so. Big deal."

"They dig tunnels near the surface. Under the onion fields. They're like gopher tunnels. Do you get it now?"

In a moment, Joe saw what Frank was telling him. A big grin spread across his face. "Onions!" he shouted with glee.

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The great onion caper: solved!"

Neither the boys nor Three-P had realized how their voices had risen during the onion discussion. Now, Three-P was holding his finger in front of his lips, shushing them. He was encouraging them to keep their voices down. His thin, reedy voice was entreating them to be quiet. It took a moment for the boys to hear him since they were unaccustomed to looking down at that level.

Finally, they got back on track. Frank remembered the danger they could be in if they were discovered by the Big Cheese.

"What about us," he asked. "Are we in danger of shrinking or growing?" Frank was beginning to feel a bit taller than usual. He wasn't sure if the passageway was shrinking or he was growing. Or, maybe it was standing next to Three-P that made him feel that way.

"No. Only a Big Person can award the complements that will make a person grow. They all carry sticks which they use to beat people back down to size. Stay out of their way and you will be safe."

Good advice, but given too late. A large shadow fell across them. When the boys looked up, they were staring into the eyes of the largest tabby they'd ever seen. It had stalked them from behind them, out of the light. "Look out Three-P! Run, Frank!" exclaimed Joe.

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The cat grinned, as much as a cat can, and licked its chops. Then, mouth open, it reached down to grab them like they were mice.

Chapter 8

Captured by "The Big Cheese"

"Welcome, my Notinlander Friends!" came the loud, yet muted, voice of the giant before them. He made the Dweeb seem like an ant. This fellow was big! He occupied almost the whole barn-sized room they were standing in. There was a little bit of room for Frank and Joe to stand. One of the Giant's Cronies stood by the door. He held a stick which looked identical to the one that had beaten Dwayne.

The Big Man looked very uncomfortable. To fit inside the room he had to sit, leaning forward until his head touched his feet. Sweat, from his brow, ran down his nose and pooled under his chin. A mud puddle had formed. Each drop of sweat fell into the puddle and splattered mud on the Giant's neck.

There were signs that the room had seen recent construction. No doubt the chamber needed to reflect the big man's increase in size. The earthen floor and walls had fresh shovel marks. In front of the Giant was a large pile of onyquinns from which he freely snacked.

The man's bulk had the effect of soaking up the sound of his voice the moment it left his mouth. There was just enough force for it to reach the boys before the sound dried up. They felt the vibrations of words and the man's breath like the pulse of a drum beat. Actually, they smelled his breath.

"I think he eats too many onions," whispered Joe.

"I am the Big Cheese! You may call me Mr. Cheese!" he announced. His breath fell on them like a heavy curtain. When the sound of the Big Cheese's voice died away into his blubber, all that remained was his pungent breath.

Frank surmised it was a good idea not to antagonize anyone large enough to squash him like a bug. "We're pleased to meet you," said Frank politely as possible. His hand covered his nose, attempting to filter out the foul smell. He tried not to take deep breaths.

"What happened to Three-P?" demanded Joe. Frank tried to shush him, but the headstrong teen-ager went on. "He didn't do anything wrong, you know. Where did that cat take him?"

"Cat? No, we have no cats here. We have Timba."

"You mean the big gray thing with the sharp teeth?" replied Joe. "You must have some pretty big mice around here to have a cat that size."

"Timba is more than a cat! Timba is "Lord of

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the Jungle!" Timba comes from Notinland! Like you!"

"Bougainvillaea!" exclaimed Joe. "I knew that rascal looked familiar."

"Boo-gen, who?" asked the Big Cheese.

"Oh, nothing," replied Joe. His thoughts were turning fast, wondering how the cat had got down here.

Based on what Three-P had told him, Joe knew how the cat had become so big. What he really wanted to know was if the cat remembered him. More importantly, Joe began to wonder if his pet had retained any feelings of affection for his master. It's so hard to tell with cats sometimes. Joe realized he needed to tell Frank about this. But how. When?

The smell of old, partially digested onions was beginning to be overpowering. The unpleasant quality of the air was getting to be more than Frank could stand. "Can we go outside?" he asked.

The Big Cheese looked incredulous. "I never leave this room!"

"Why not?"

"Because I can't! I'm too big!"

Frank almost felt sorry for the big man; his voice sounded so sad. Then he remembered Three-P. Their last view of him had been in Timba's mouth. The huge cat had picked all

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three of them up. It was a wonder the sharp incisors of the feline hadn't done more than scratch their skin.

Timba had taken them to the Big Cheese. The cat had gently laid the boys down at the entrance to the Giant's chamber. Then, the cat had trotted off with the thoroughly frightened Three-P. The cat looked hungry. At that size, it probably had a large appetite. It wouldn't be satisfied with onions.

"Who's fault is that?" he asked instead.

"Not mine! Duty weighs heavily upon me! It is the terrible burden of responsibility that has done this to me!"

Joe snorted with contempt. Frank gave his friend a warning glance but was chagrined to see it had no effect. Joe was in the process of confronting the Big Cheese face to face, or at least eyeball to eyeball when Frank caught him by the arm. "Joe!" he said urgently, "Be cool. This guy could squash us like insects if we get him angry. Besides, his breath is so bad it smells like something died in his mouth."

Joe allowed himself to be restrained. "That 'Timba' is really Bougainvillaea." Frank registered surprise. "I don't know how the Cheese got her down here but I can guess why she's so big. We could be in a bunch of trouble, buddy-boy, if that cat forgets who we are."

They held a quick, whispered conference. They would try

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to find out why the Big Cheese needed them. Joe promised to control his temper. "But, we've got to find Three-P," concluded Frank.

"You're right. He's the only one who can help us out of this mess."

All this time the Big Cheese had been waiting silently. His beady eyes moved from one boy to the next, trying to follow their conversation. Now, in a burst of anger and impatience, he demanded to know what they were talking about. "I can make it hard on you!" he threatened. "I can make you shrink down to atoms if I want!"

"Cool your jets," replied Joe. Then he turned to Frank, gave him a wink and a smile, and went on. "We were trying to decide if we would cooperate with you."

"Oh?" said the Giant, his eyebrows arching in curiosity.

"Except, you're going to have to tell us what you want us to do."

"Yeah," agreed Frank, following Joe's lead. "Not to mention why you wanted us in the first place."

"Well, that's easy!" The Big Cheese was suspicious, though. "What did Three-P tell you?"

"Nothing," the boys announced together. The Giant looked doubtful. The bellows effect of his lips opening and closing, while he thought, sent pulses of onion breath at the boys.

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"O.K!" he said at last. "But it's a secret! Don't tell anyone!"

"We promise," said Frank.

The Big Cheese lowered his voice but neither of the boys found any reason to move closer. His request was simple, the Giant said. Return to the surface and bring back more cats. "Cats are what Inland needs!"

"Why do you want so many cats? Do you have a problem with mice?" Frank queried.

"Yes. Mice like Perfervid P. Perfection and his friends!" the Big Cheese roared suddenly. Then he tried to check his anger and continue. With a conspiratorial tone of voice the Big Cheese said, "I read your name on the cat collar," directing his breath at Joe. "Do you have any others? They are quite effective at controlling vermin in the tunnels!"

"I don't think so," said Joe. "Why don't you go up and get them yourself?"

"It is not a good idea. We don't know where the cats reside! It was dangerous enough to summon you! You will do this task for us! I will reward you handsomely!"

The Big Cheese paused to fill his cavernous mouth with

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more onyquinns. The sound of his teeth mashing the little bulbs was nerve-racking to the teen-agers. What if the Big Cheese wasn't a vegetarian?

In return for supplying Inland with cats, the Big Cheese promised to award Joe and Frank with a bushel of onyquinns, each, for every cat. "We consider that quite a prize down here!"

"Why do you really want them?" Frank prodded. I haven't seen evidence of any mice."

"That's none of your business!" Suddenly suspicious, The Big Cheese asked, "That twit Three-P told you something! What was it?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all," the boys replied.

But the Big Cheese didn't trust them. With a roar he called for his Cronies. The haranguer from the machinery room, stick in hand, grabbed the teen-agers by their collars and hauled them outside. "Give them to Timba! Have her take them to the dungeon!"

As the boys were hauled away they heard the Big Cheese jeering, "We'll see how a little time in jail changes their attitude about helping me!"

Chapter 9

Bad News

Timba carried Frank and Joe gently to the dungeon. It wasn't a pleasant ride though. Imagine how you would feel held by teeth as sharp as knives. Consider that the force required by a set of jaws to carry two, healthy, teen-aged boys is slightly less than what is necessary to bite those same people.

She let them down in front of a narrow doorway, then nudged them with her head to enter. Inside, they were relieved and pleased to see Three-P. He warmly embraced them around the shins. He appeared to be a few inches shorter than the last time they had shared company.

"Yes, I am afraid your observation has a striking veracity in conjunction with the truth," he squeaked. "My castigation at the hands of these philistines could have had more dire consequences though. I suppose I should be indebted to the Big Cheese that it isn't any worse. I could be like poor Dwayne. He's in here, with us, somewhere."

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The boys experienced a momentary feeling of panic. "Should we watch were we walk?" asked Frank with concern deep in his voice.

"That is not imperative. Dwayne is riding on the shoulders of our fellow captives."

Frank and Joe took a moment to look around their prison. They were in an enormous room lacking in any kind of furniture. A group of about 30 Inlanders, of various stature between seven and two feet were congregated along one side. There was no telling if any shorter people were there; the lights were very dim.

Three-P explained to the boys that this was a detention area. The Big Cheese liked having all the "trouble makers" in one place. "He can decide what to do with us at his leisure. Rest assured, each of us will be beaten down to molecules, if not atoms."

Frank commented that it didn't look like the Big Cheese could do much of anything except eat onyquinns. He recalled the size of the Giant and the lack of space in the newly enlarged room.

"You are directly in the affirmative with that expression of your observations. However, he has Timba to enforce his edicts as well as several others who have subscribed to his doctrine."

"How many, exactly, are we up against?" asked Frank.

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"In the manner of eight, I should think if I were required to broach an estimate to the general public."

Frank couldn't believe there were so few Cronies enlisted in the cause of the Big Cheese. "How was it possible to change all the laws? Did the Inlanders really allow someone to make decrees that were so against their beliefs?"

"It was quite simple. We Inlanders are a kind and trusting people. When the Big Cheese first ascended to Big Personhood, we naturally thought his ideas were best for all Inlanders. Little did we know the Cheese had ulterior motives. When he said the laws must change, we supported it."

"What would happen if you could assemble all the Inlanders? Could you have another election and change the laws back to the way they were before the Big Cheese messed it all up?"

"I do believe you have something there, my wonderfully fine-tuned young man!" exclaimed Three-P with more excitement than Frank had ever seen in the little man. "What a growth inducing statement that is!" he added. "There must be some reason no one has thought of this before."

"What's all the shouting about?" Joe had returned from exploring their jail. He had met their fellow prisoners. All were in poor spirits. Frank quickly filled him in on his latest idea.

Joe agreed that was the best course of action. He had

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one bit of information both Frank and Three-P were dismayed to learn. "We better do something soon. Fred Fafoothnick, over there," Joe indicated the tallest Inlander standing by the opposite wall, "says we're in danger of a food shortage."

"How can that be?"

"Fred says that the Big Cheese and his Cronies are so big they eat almost every onyquinn that is harvested. He ended up in jail because he complained. He told the Big Cheese that the rate of onyquinn consumption was exceeding the rate of harvest. Soon, there won't be enough onyquinns to go around."

"This is most distressing to the highest degree. There have always been more than enough. Ever since the founding of Inland, we have only taken what was necessary of the onyquinn crop from you Notinlanders which was necessary for our sustenance. It has been a guiding principle of our society to use only what we need. In this way we fulfilled our compact with your forefathers. They insured that onyquinns would always be planted for our harvest."

"What was the cause of the issuance of such a decree?" asked Frank. Three-P paused before answering, not certain if Frank was making fun of his peculiar manner of speech. For his part, Frank was beginning to feel Three-P was rubbing off on him. Pretty soon he would be talking like the little man all the time!

Three-P finally explained, "The terms of the agreement

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were quite plain. Long ago, before any of us were born, Notinlanders dug the tunnel through which you entered. They happened upon one of our food storage facilities. Oh, there were many Inlanders upset with this invasion. To avert catastrophe it was decided: in exchange for providing us with the delicacy we so enjoy, Inlanders would furnish the proper soil conditioning agents to insure Notinlander plant materials were successful."

"You mean," said Frank, "that Inland provides the fertilizer for our trees and grass?"

"No. I hasten to elaborate that more is involved in the growing of plant materials than photons of light energy, soil, and water."

This was intriguing to Frank. He was well aware that the building blocks of all life on earth depended on photosynthesis. This is the process of capturing light energy by plants which then make their own food. Soil provided nutrients and a place for roots, so a plant wouldn't fall over, since it had no legs. All living things needed water. He couldn't think of what Three-P meant. What else of importance was there?

"It is quite elementary. By living in the soil, as we do, Inlanders provide the infusion, or breath of existence, which is invested in all life."

Frank didn't really see Three-P's explanation as being

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all that elementary. There wasn't time to ask him to expand on what he said. Frank made a mental note to ask for more details when the time was ripe. For now, Joe was impatiently tapping on his shoulder.

"We need to start planning on how to get out of here."

There was only one way in and they could easily see the face of Timba through the portal. They felt trapped like mice. The cat looked larger than she did during their first encounter with her underground.

"Yes," Three-P said, confirming their observation. "She is getting larger all the time. And hungrier as well. Many of us are worried she will be consuming her next meal forthwith."

"What do you mean?" asked Joe. "She's a cat. If she doesn't eat Crystal Star Tuna from a can, then she'll eat mice and birds. That's what a cat does."

"That may be so in Notinland where you reside, my fine friend. To the contrary, here, there is much to concern us. You have noted Timba's fantastic size increase, no doubt."

"Yes. And?"

"You are, also, I must presume, aware that larger animals are required to consume vastly different quantities of carbohydrates and proteins than those creatures of a smaller dimensions."

"What's your point, Three-P?"

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"Simply this. When Timba was of a more diminutive size, only a short elapse of time ago, her hunger and natural hunting instincts were sufficient in eliminating the resident population of ground burrowing mammals with which we shared our tunnels.

"As I have questioned, and you have stated, in the exceedingly recent past, Timba has grown. With that increase in size will, no doubt, arrive a concomitant increase in food requirements. With naught but Inlanders within reasonable reach, we have reason to fear for our lives!"

"Bougainvillaea would never eat us," exclaimed a shocked Joe.

"Who is this Bougainvillaea?"

"Timba."

"I fear I lack in the complete understanding of our conversation to interpret correctly the meaning of your previous statement."

"Tell him, Frank." Joe was beginning to feel a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. It didn't go away when he looked to the only door out of the dungeon. Bougainvillaea was beginning to exhibit what Joe interpreted as a hungry look in her eye.

Chapter 10

A Plan for Getting Out

While Joe tried to re-establish a relationship with his immense cat, Frank and Three-P called their fellow prisoners together for a meeting. They briefly explained where the boys had come from, the reason they had been brought to Inland, and the plan for overthrowing the Big Cheese. Fred reiterated his concern for the food supply.

An older Inlander, Hildeeharhar Hammernocker agreed that an election to reverse the Big Cheese's laws was a good idea. "But," she said, "as chairman of the election board, I must tell you it will be necessary to assemble the entire population for the election. That is how we do things here, young man."

"I knew there was a reason we hadn't done this before," exclaimed Three-P. "The Big Cheese won't let large groups assemble. He says it's bad for our health. Humph!"

"Thank you Miss Hammernocker. Three-P and I didn't realize that."

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"Ms. Hammernocker. You're very welcome, young man."

"Ms. Hammernocker." Frank was amazed at how similar their two worlds were. There were just enough differences to make it interesting. "Does anyone have an idea on how to do that?"

Fred spoke up, "We'll have to do it next to the Big Cheese. He's too big to move now."

"But how will we all fit into the room with him?"

"How many Inlanders are there?" Frank asked.

There was a general mumbling amongst the crowd. Finally someone said, "A lot."

"A lot? How many is that?"

"Definitely more than a little."

"Three-P, I thought you said that Inlanders only took what was necessary of the onyquinn crops. How can you do that unless you know how many of you there are?"

Three-P looked embarrassed. It was difficult for the little man to admit he didn't have all the answers. He mumbled something about "The question was never asked so how can I be expected to know the answer?"

Fred Fafoothnick, the onyquinn harvester explained, "Big People have always been assumed to know about these things. It's their responsibility."

"You're a Big Person, Fred. How many Inlanders are there?"

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Now it was time for Fred to look embarrassed. "Um," was all he said.

"I think I understand. You thought someone else knew and that it was their responsibility, right?"

Fred nodded his head, as did some of the others. "There's so much to know, Frank. I guess the rest of us just, sort of, forgot to pay attention."

Once again, Frank was impressed at how similar Inland was to his home. "Does anyone have an estimate, then?"

Three-P was quick to speak. "We could all fit inside this room." Lots of heads moved up and down. "Of course, we would have to be careful. Some Inlanders are quite small." Once again, many heads moved up and down.

"O.K. Then here's what we'll do. Fred, Three-P, and some others will be in charge of rounding up all the Inlanders. How many will you need to help?"

Three-P and Fred held a hurried consultation. There was much arm waving and finger wagging before they decided on a number. Then, it was agreed that Ms. Hammernocker was to take five assistants to prepare the proper paperwork for the election. "We must be very very very legal, young man," she admonished.

Frank and Joe would be in charge of creating a disturbance so their compatriots could accomplish their tasks. It was hoped that the Big Cheese's Cronies would be drawn away

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to concentrate on the boys. The others could then accomplish their tasks. The teens would draw the Cronies to the chamber of the Big Cheese. The vote would then be held. Lots of Inlanders would have to wait out in the halls, but many would be able to fit inside with the Cheese. Ms. Hammernocker felt that would satisfy the election laws.

"There is only one problem," spoke up Jillian Bee. Jillian was a tall onyquinn allocator who was imprisoned when she refused to shortchange Inlanders of their fair share. "How do we get past Timba?"

All eyes gravitated to the door. There they saw Joe holding a regular sized tabby in his arms. The cat was purring loudly as the boy scratched behind her ears.

Chapter 11

Victory

Joe was instantly surrounded by over 30 people, all shouting and slapping him on the back. The congratulations ran around him like he was a boulder in a deep river. No one was as proud of him as Frank. "How did you do it?"

When it was quiet, Joe explained. "It was easy. I remembered something Three-P said to us." All eyes turned to the perfervidous little man but his face was a blank.

"Remember when we asked him, Frank, if you and I should be worried about shrinking or growing?"

"He said we wouldn't have to worry as long as we stayed away from Big People. Big People were the only ones who could praise or censure." Frank smiled, inwardly. He was beginning to pick up some of Three-P's vocabulary!

"Right."

"But," said Jillian, "you are, that is, were, so much smaller than Timba."

"That's true. Except, you're only thinking about my

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height, not my stature!"

Three-P cut into Joe's explanation. "I comprehend what Joe is conveying to us! Notinlander's stature amongst cats is very big. Isn't that within the venues of validity, Joe?"

"Exactly. Even though I was smaller than Timba, she was still my cat, Bougainvillaea. Once I started talking to her and realized she remembered me, the rest as simple. I told her she was a "bad cat" for helping out the Big Cheese. She didn't want to hear it, but she shrank a bit. While the rest of you were making plans for what to do after we got out of here, I was able to get her down to normal size."

Congratulations were offered once again. Joe felt himself grow, if not in size, then at least in the eyes of his many new friends. "Well, there's work to be done, isn't there? Let's get to it!"

With that encouragement, the small band put their plans into action.

Three-P, Fred, and the others gathered up all the Inlanders and prepared to rendezvous at the Big Cheese's quarters. Frank made an appearance in the machinery room and soon had half the Cronies in pursuit. Joe had done the same in the onyquinn tunnels. They allowed themselves to be captured and brought to the Big Cheese.

Joe still held Bougainvillaea in his arms when the boys confronted the Giant. His bulk had doubled and his chambers

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had grown immeasurably. The boys were certain that many Inlanders would be able to fit into these new, spacious quarters.

"What have you done to Timba?" the Big Cheese demanded.

"Turned her back into a good cat, that's what!" retorted Joe. "Something you wouldn't know about."

The Big Cheese shook with rage. Even his Cronies shrank back to avoid the burst of rank onion breath that splattered against the walls. "I'll have you reduced to atoms for this!" he ranted. "There will be nothing left of you but quarks when I'm done with you!"

"I think not."

"Who said that!"

"I did." It was the simplest speech Three-P had ever delivered. He stood, all three feet of him, in the doorway to the Giant's quarters. His arms were folded, resolutely, across his chest. Behind him, filling the corridor, Frank and Joe could see the assembled people of Inland.

"Seize him!" shouted the Big Cheese. He even attempted to move his fat, meaty hand to do the chore himself. There just wasn't enough space in the room for him to accomplish that.

Inlanders filed into the room and filled up every bit of

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available space. Some of the Cronies tried to resist but they were quickly quelled and their sticks taken away.

"Your days of being a Big Person are through!" said the little man. His voice was firm and unwavering as he announced the special election, all within the laws of Inland. The Big Cheese and his Cronies were frozen into inaction by Three-P's audacity.

"As all members of Inland are gathered here in order to decide if the Big Person who has come to call himself, Big Cheese, is worthy to be our leader," intoned Ms. Hammernocker. "All in favor of getting rid of the fat slob, say 'Aye.'"

A loud chorus of "Aye," reverberated in the chamber. "All opposed?" asked Ms. Hammernocker. Not a voice was raised, though the Big Cheese did whimper a bit.

"Then, the motion is carried!" Hildeeharhar Hammernocker turned to the former Big Cheese and announced, "You're no longer leader of Inland, you big buffoon. Now, get out of our way so someone with the best interests of us all can be in charge."

Then, right before their eyes, Frank and Joe saw the Big Cheese shrink down to the size of a mouse. All his Cronies did too. They scampered out of the room to the sounds of Inlanders joyful laughing.

Everyone was jumping up and down, slapping each other on the back, and, generally speaking, having a good time. Four

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or five Inlanders were hugging Frank and Joe, shaking their hands, when Joe felt Bougainvillaea leap free.

Chapter 12

Going Home

All the people of Inland assembled to wish Frank and Joe a safe journey home. Even though it was a short walk back to the land of light, the boys appreciated the sentiment. Three-P, looking almost as tall as the teen-agers was to be their official guide.

He was unanimously elected Inland leader following the Big Cheese's overthrow. Three-P's first act of office was in awarding Dwayne a special citation for action "above and beyond the call of duty" for his bravery in bringing the boys to Inland. He had known all along that to admit failure in that task would mean being beaten down to atoms by the Big Cheese's Cronies. Already, Dwayne was a foot high. The boys were sure that it wouldn't be long before he was a Big Person.

Bougainvillaea was safely in the arms of Joe once more. She had been recovered in one of the onyquinn harvesting tunnels by Jillian Bee. Bougainvillaea had allowed herself to be lifted and taken back to Joe without problem.

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She had experienced a long and trying day since first falling off the tree branch. Poor girl, she was very tired and rested comfortably against Joe's chest. She had eaten quite a bit today and it was beginning to catch up with her. She would snooze, her head cradled by Joe's arm, until it was time to go.

The last anyone had seen of the Big Cheese and his Cronies, the cat was chasing them out of the chambers. Where they were, now, was anybody's guess. Some had a pretty good idea where to look for them.

In his official capacity, Three-P escorted Frank and Joe from the Big Cheese chambers through the passageways leading to the Notinland world. They paused, briefly, at the door to say farewell. Three-P thanked the boys, again, for all they had done to help Inland.

Hand on the doorknob, Joe had a question. "I still don't understand how I could breathe under water when Dwayne first brought us here. And, how did all the water disappear when we got down here? There wasn't an airlock as far as I could see."

Three-P chuckled before replying. "You simply allowed the delusion brought by ignorance to cloud your judgement. As I am sure Dwayne explained to you, what you see is not always the truth. Truth requires examination below the surface before one can say it is known."

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Joe wasn't sure he understood what Three-P meant, but he was willing to listen. He stored away, in the back of his mind, what the man had said, determined to sort it all out later. "Just as long as I don't have to hold my breath for the return trip!"

"Don't worry; you'll be fine."

Frank had a question also. "Three-P, could you explain what you meant about the Inlander's contribution to plant growth? If you aren't involved with fertilizing the ground, providing water, light, or nutrients, what exactly do you do?"

"As I am sure you are aware, all life requires oxygen. Animals must breathe; you do it all the time and it is such a natural act you are not even aware of it. The earth is alive also and must breathe."

"And, you mean..."

"Exactly. Inland is that breath."

Frank wasn't sure he understood any better than before. Three-P, on the other hand, was content to end the matter there. "Goodbye, my friends. Inland will always remember you. Goodbye." With that, Three-P closed the door. It moved on well-greased hinges.

In a moment, Frank, Joe, and Bougainvillaea were out of the tunnel and into the light. Looking back from whence they came, Joe examined the pool of water. It was as he remembered it always to be. He knelt down and dipped his hand, releasing

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the cat, and tasted the water. His hand came back dry. I think I'm beginning to see what Three-P meant, he said to himself.

"What do you say about coming over to my house, Frank? You can call your parents and tell them you're staying for dinner."

end