

MANY WATERS

MADELEINE L'ENGLE



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For Stephen Roxburgh

Virtual particles and virtual unicorns

A sudden snow shower put an end to hockey practice.

“We can’t even see the puck,” Sandy Murry shouted across the wind. “Let’s go home.” He skated over to the side of the frozen pond, sitting on an already snow-covered rock to take off his skates.

There were calls of agreement from the other skaters. Dennys, Sandy’s twin brother, followed him, snow gathering in his lashes, so that he had to blink in order to see the rock. “Why do we have to live in the highest, coldest, windiest spot in the state?”

Hoots of laughter and shouted goodbyes came from the other boys. “Where else would you want to live?” Dennys was asked.

Snow was sliding icily down the inside of his collar. “Bali. Fiji. Someplace warm.”

One of the boys knotted his skate laces and slung his skates around his neck. “Would you really want to live with all those tourists?”

“Yeah, and jet-setters crowding the beach.”

“And beautiful people.”

“And litterbugs.”

One by one the other boys drifted off, leaving the twins. “I thought you liked winter,” Sandy said.

“By mid-March, I’m getting tired of it.”

“But you wouldn’t really want to go to some tourists’ paradise, would you?”

“Oh, probably not. Maybe I would have, in the olden days, before the population explosion. I’d be famished. Race you home.”

By the time they reached their house, an old white farmhouse about a mile from the village, the snow was beginning to let up, though the wind was still strong. They went in through the garage, past their mother’s lab. Pulling off their windbreakers, they threw them at hooks, and burst into the kitchen.

“Where’s everybody?” Sandy called.

Dennys pointed to a piece of paper held by magnets to the refrigerator door. They both went up to read it:

DEAR TWINS, AM OFF TO TOWN WITH MEG AND CHARLES WALLACE FOR OUR DENTAL CHECKUPS. YOUR TURN IS NEXT WEEK. DON'T THINK YOU CAN GET OUT OF IT. YOU'VE BOTH GROWN SO MUCH THIS YEAR THAT IT IS ESSENTIAL YOU HAVE YOUR TEETH CHECKED.

LOVE, MOTHER

Sandy bared his teeth ferociously. “We’ve never had a cavity.”

Dennys made a similar grimace. “But we *have* grown. We’re just under six feet.”

“Bet if we were measured today we’d be over.”

Dennys opened the door to the refrigerator. There was half a chicken in an earthenware dish, with sign:

VERBOTEN. THIS IS FOR DINNER.

Sandy pulled out the meat keeper. “Ham all right?”

“Sure. With cheese.”

“And mustard.”

“And sliced olives.”

“And ketchup.”

“And pickles.”

“No tomatoes here. Bet you Meg made herself a BLT.”

“There’s lots of liverwurst. Mother likes that.”

“Yuck.”

“It’s okay with cream cheese and onion.”

They put their various ingredients on the kitchen counter and cut thick slices of bread fresh from the oven. Dennys peered in to sniff apples slowly baking. Sandy looked over to the kitchen table where Meg had spread out her books and papers. “She’s taken more than her fair share of the table.”

“She’s in college,” Dennys defended. “We don’t have as much homework as she does.”

“Yeah, and I’d hate that long commute every day.”

“She likes to drive. And at least she gets home early.” Dennys plunked his own books down on the big table.

Sandy stood looking at one of Meg’s open notebooks. “Hey, listen to this. Do you suppose we have this kind of junk when we’re in college? *It seems quite evident that there was definite prebiotic existence of protein ancestors of polymers, and that therefore the primary beings were not a-amino acids.* I suppose she knows what she’s writing about. I haven’t the foggiest.”

Dennys flipped back a page. “Look at her title. *The Million Doller question: the chicken or the egg, amino acids or their polymers.* She may be a mathematical genius, but she still can’t spell.”

“You mean, you know what she’s writing about?” Sandy demanded.

“I have a pretty good idea. It’s the kind of thing Mother and Dad argue about at dinner—polymer virtual particles, quasars, all that stuff.”

Sandy looked at his twin. “You mean, you *listen*?”

“Sure. Why not? You never know when a little useless knowledge is going to come in handy. Hey, what’s this book? It’s about bubonic plague. I’m the one who wants to be a doctor.”

Sandy glanced over. “It’s history, not medicine, stupe.”

“Hey, why are lawyers never bitten by snakes?” Dennys asked.

“I don’t know. And don’t care.”

“Well, you’re the one who wants to be the lawyer. Come on. Why do lawyers never get bitten b

snakes?”

“I give up. Why do lawyers never get bitten by snakes?”

“Professional courtesy.”

Sandy groaned. “Very funny. Ha. Ha.”

Dennys slathered mustard over a thick slice of ham. “When I think about the amount of schooling still ahead of us, I almost lose my appetite.”

“Almost.”

“Well, not quite.”

Sandy opened the refrigerator door, looking for something else to pile on his sandwich. “We seem to eat more than the rest of the family put together. Charles Wallace eats like a bird. Well, judging by the amount we spend on bird feed, birds are terrible gluttons. But you know what I mean.”

“At least he’s settling down in school, and the other kids aren’t picking on him the way they used to.”

“He still doesn’t look more than six, but half the time I think he knows more than we do. We’re certainly the ordinary, run-of-the-mill ones in the family.”

“The family can do with some ordinary, run-of-the-mill people. And we’re not exactly dumb. I’m going to be a doctor and you’re going to be a lawyer, we’ve got to be bright enough for all that education. I’m thirsty.”

Sandy opened the cupboard above the kitchen door. Only a year before, they had been too short to reach it without climbing on a stool. “Where’s the Dutch cocoa? That’s what I want.” Sandy moved various boxes of lentils, barley, kidney beans, cans of tuna and salmon.

“Bet Mother’s got it out in the lab. Let’s go look.” Dennys sliced more ham.

Sandy put a large dill pickle in his mouth. “Let’s finish making the sandwiches first.”

“Food first. Fine.”

With sandwiches an inch or more thick in their hands, and full mouths, they went back out to the pantry and turned into the lab. In the early years of the century, when the house had been part of a working dairy farm, the lab had been used to keep milk, butter, eggs, and there was still a large churn in one corner, which now served to hold a lamp. The work counter with the stone sink functioned well for holding lab equipment as it had for milk and eggs. There was now a formidable-looking microscope, some strange equipment only their mother understood, and an old-fashioned Bunsen burner, over which, on a homemade tripod, a black kettle was simmering.

Sandy sniffed appreciatively. “Stew.”

“I think we’re supposed to call it *boeuf bourguignon*.” Dennys reached up to the shelf over the sink and pulled down a square red tin. “Here’s the cocoa. Mother and Dad like it at bedtime.”

“When’s Dad coming home?” Dennys wanted to know.

“Tomorrow night, I think Mother said.”

Sandy, his mouth full, held his hands out to the wood stove. “If we had our driver’s licenses, we could go to the airport to meet him.”

“We’re good drivers already,” Dennys agreed.

Sandy stuffed another large bite of sandwich into his mouth, and left the warmth of the stove to wander to the far corner of the lab, where there was a not-quite-ordinary-looking computer. “How long has Dad had this gizmo here?”

“He put it in last week. Mother wasn’t particularly pleased.”

“Well, it *is* supposed to be her lab,” Sandy said.

“What’s he programming?” Dennys asked.

“He’s usually pretty good about explaining. Even though I don’t understand most of it. Tesseracting and red-shifting and space/time continuum and stuff.” Sandy stared at the keyboard, which had eight rather than the usual four ranks of keys. “Half of these symbols are Greek. I mean, literally Greek.”

Dennys, ramming the last of his sandwich into his mouth, peered over his twin’s shoulder. “Well, more or less get the usual science signs. That looks like Hebrew, there, and that’s Cyrillic. I haven’t the faintest idea what these keys are for.”

Sandy looked down at the lab floor, which consisted of large slabs of stone. There was a thick rug by the sink, and another in front of the shabby leather chair and reading lamp. “I don’t know how Mother stands this place in winter.”

“She dresses like an Eskimo.” Dennys shivered, then put out one finger and tapped on the standard keys of the computer: “TAKE ME SOMEPLACE WARM.”

“Hey, I don’t think we ought to mess with that,” Sandy warned.

“What do you expect? A genie to pop up, like the one in Aladdin and the magic lamp? This is just a computer, for heaven’s sake. It can’t do anything it isn’t programmed to do.”

“Okay, then.” Sandy held his fingers over the keyboard. “A lot of people think computers are alive—I mean, really, sort of like Aladdin’s genie.” He tapped out on the standard keys: “SOMEPLACE WARM AND SPARSELY POPULATED.”

Dennys shouldered him aside, adding: “LOW HUMIDITY.”

Sandy turned away from the odd computer. “Let’s make the cocoa.”

“Sure.” Dennys picked up the red tin, which he had set down on the counter. “Since Mother’s using the Bunsen burner, we’d better go back to the kitchen to make the cocoa.”

“Okay. It’s warmer there, anyhow.”

“I could do with another sandwich. If they’ve gone all the way into town, supper’ll probably be late.”

They left the lab, closing the door behind them. “Hey.” Sandy pointed. “We didn’t see this.” There was a small note taped to the door: EXPERIMENT IN PROGRESS. PLEASE KEEP OUT.

“Uh-oh. Hope we didn’t upset anything.”

“We’d better tell Mother when she gets back.”

“Why didn’t we *see* that note?”

“We were busy stuffing our faces.”

Dennys crossed the hall and opened the kitchen door and was met with a blast of heat. “*Hey!*” F

tried to step back, but Sandy was on his heels.

“Fire!” Sandy yelled. “Get the fire extinguisher!”

“Too late! We’d better get out and—” Dennys heard the kitchen door slam behind them. “We’ve got to get out—”

Sandy yelled, “I can’t find the fire extinguisher!”

“I can’t find the walls—” Dennys groped through a pervasive mist, his hands touching nothing.

Came a great sonic boom.

Then absolute silence.

Slowly the mist began to clear away, to dissipate.

“Hey!” Sandy’s changing voice cracked and soared. “What’s going on?”

Dennys’s equally cracking voice followed. “Where on earth ... What’s happened...”

“What was that explosion?”

“Hey!”

They looked around to see nothing familiar. No kitchen door. No kitchen. No fireplace with its fragrant logs. No table, with its pot of brightly blooming geraniums. No ceiling strung with rows of red peppers and white garlic. No floor with the colorful, braided rugs. They were standing on sand, burning white sand. Above them, the sun was in a sky so hot that it was no longer blue but had turned bronze cast. There was nothing but sand and sky from horizon to horizon.

“Is the house all right?” Sandy’s voice shook.

“I don’t think we went into the house at all...”

“You don’t think it was on fire?”

“No. I think we opened the door and we were here.”

“What about the mist?”

“And the sonic boom?”

“And what about Dad’s computer?”

“Uh-oh. What’re we going to *do*?” Dennys’s voice started out in the bass, soared, and cracked to a piercing treble.

“Don’t panic,” Sandy warned, but his voice trembled.

Both boys looked around wildly. The brazen sunlight beat down on them. After the cold of snow and ice, the sudden heat was shocking. Small particles of mica in the sand caught the light and blazed up at them. “Hey.” Dennys’s voice cracked again. “What’re we going to *do*?”

Sandy tried to speak calmly. “We’re the ones who do things, remember?”

“We just did something.” Dennys was bitter. “We just blew ourselves here, wherever here is.”

Sandy agreed. “Stupid. We were stupid, mucking around with an experiment-in-progress.”

“Only we didn’t know it was in progress.”

“We should have stopped to think.”

Dennys looked around at sky and sand, both shimmering with heat. “What do you suppose Dad was up to? If we knew that—”

“Space travel. Tessering. Getting past the speed of light. You know that.” Anxiety made Denny sharp.

The sun beat down on Sandy’s head, so that he reached up and wiped sweat from around his eyes. “I wish we’d never thought of that Dutch cocoa.”

Dennys pulled off his heavy cable-knit sweater. Licked his dry lips. Moaned. “Lemonade.”

Sandy, too, stripped off his sweater. “We got what we asked for, didn’t we? Heat. Low humidity. Sparse population.”

Dennys looked around, squinting against the glare. “Sparse wasn’t meant to mean *nobody*.”

Sandy unbuttoned his plaid flannel shirt. “I thought we asked for a beach.”

“Not on Dad’s gizmo we didn’t. Just sparse population. Do you suppose we’ve blown ourselves onto a dead planet? One where the sun is going into its red-giant phase before it blows up?”

Despite the intense heat, Sandy shivered, glanced at the sun, then quickly away. “I think the sun in its red-giant phase would be bigger. This sun doesn’t look any larger than our own sun in movies set in deserts.”

“Do you suppose it is our own sun?” Dennys asked hopefully.

Sandy shrugged. “We could be anywhere. Anywhere in the universe. If we were going to play with that doggone keyboard, we should have been more specific. I wish we’d just settled for Bali or Fiji. Beautiful people or no.”

“I’d just as soon see a beautiful person. Right now. I wish we hadn’t done whatever it is we’ve done.” Dennys pulled off his cotton turtleneck, stripping down to his white briefs and tank top.

Sandy stood on one leg to start pulling off his warmly lined pants, glanced again at the fierce sun, then quickly closed his eyes. “They’ll miss us when they get back from the dentist.”

“But they won’t know where to look. Mother has more sense than we have. She’d never mess around with anything of Dad’s unless he was right there.”

“Mother’s not interested in astrophysics. She’s into virtual particles and things like that.”

“She’ll still miss us.”

“Dad’ll be home tomorrow,” Sandy said hopefully. He was now stripped to his underclothes.

Dennys picked up his things and made a tidy bundle. “Unless we find some shade, we’re going to have to put our clothes back on in half an hour, or at least some of them, or we’ll get a vicious sunburn.”

“Shade.” Sandy groaned, and scanned the horizon. “Den! Do I see a palm tree?”

Dennys held his hand to shade his eyes. “Where?”

“There. All the way over there.”

“Yes. No. Yes.”

“Let’s head toward it.”

“Good. At least it’s something to *do*.” Dennys trudged off. “If it’s the same time of day it was when we left home—”

“It was winter at home.” Sandy’s eyes were almost closed against the glare. “The sun was already

setting.”

Dennys pointed to their shadows, as long and skinny as they were. “The sun’s slightly behind us. We might be heading east, if it’s our own kind of sun.”

Sandy asked, “Are you scared? I am. We’ve really got ourselves into a mess.”

Dennys made no reply. They trudged along. They had left on their shoes and socks, and Dennys suggested, “It might be easier walking barefooted.”

Sandy bent down and touched the sand with the palm of his hand, then shook his head. “Feel it. It would burn our feet.”

“Do you still see that palm tree?”

“I think so.”

They moved across the sand in silence. After a few minutes it seemed firmer under their feet, and then they saw that there was rock under the sand.

“That’s better,” Sandy said.

“Hey!”

The ground seemed to shudder under their feet. Dennys flailed his arms to try to keep his balance but was flung to the ground. “Is this an earthquake or something?”

Sandy, too, was thrown down. Around them they could hear a noisy grating of rock, and a deep, thunderous roaring beneath them. Then there was silence, abrupt and complete. The rock steadied under them. The earthquake, or whatever it was, had lasted less than a minute, but it had been sufficient force to push up a large section of rock, making a small cliff about six feet high. It was striated and raw-looking, but it provided a shadow that stretched across the sand.

Both boys climbed to their feet and headed into the welcome shade. Sandy touched the sheared-off rock, and it felt cool. “Maybe we could sit here for a minute...”

The sun was still fiercely hot, but the slab of rock they sat on was cool. The relief of the shade was so great that for a few minutes they sat in silence. Their bodies were slippery with sweat; it trickled into their eyes. They sat without moving, trying to take every advantage of the shade.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen next, but whatever it is, I’m not likely to be surprised,” Sandy said at last. “Are you sure it was Dad’s experiment we weren’t supposed to interrupt? Couldn’t it have been Mother’s?”

“Mother’s doing something with subatomic particles again,” Dennys said. “Last night at dinner she spent most of the time talking about virtual particles.”

“It sounded crazy to me,” Sandy said. “Particles which have a tendency to life.”

“That’s right.” Dennys nodded. “Virtual particles. Almost-particles. What you said. Particles which tend to be.”

Sandy shook his head. “Most of Mother’s subatomic experiments are so, oh, so sort of infinitesimal, it hasn’t mattered if we’ve come into the lab.”

“But maybe if she’s looking for a virtual particle—” Dennys sounded hopeful.

“No. It sounds to me more like something of Dad’s. It was just sort of wishful thinking when

asked if it could be something of Mother's. Why didn't we see that notice on the door?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"And I wish our parents did ordinary things," Sandy complained. "If Dad were a plumber or an electrician, and if Mother were somebody's secretary, it would be a lot easier for us."

"And we wouldn't have to be such great athletes and good guys at school," Dennys agreed. "And —" He broke off as the earth started to tremble again. It was a brief tremor, with no heaving of stone, but both boys sprang to their feet.

"Hey!" Sandy jumped, almost knocking Dennys over.

From behind the rock cliff came a very small person, perhaps four feet tall. Not a child. He was firmly muscled, darkly tanned, and there was a down of hair across his upper lip and on his chin. He wore a loincloth, with a small pouch at the waist. As he saw them, he reached for the pouch in a swift, alarmed gesture.

"Hey, wait." Sandy held up his open hands, palm forward.

Dennys repeated the gesture. "We won't hurt you."

"Who are you?" Sandy asked.

"Where are we?" Dennys added.

The small man looked at them in mingled curiosity and fear. "Giants!" he cried. He had a man's voice, a young man's voice, deeper than Sandy's or Dennys's.

Sandy shook his head. "We're not giants."

"We're boys," Dennys augmented. "Who are you?"

The young man touched himself lightly on the forehead. "Japheth."

"That's your name?" Sandy asked.

He touched his forehead again. "Japheth."

Perhaps this was the custom of the country, wherever in the universe it was. Sandy touched his own forehead. "Alexander. Sandy."

Dennys made the same gesture. "Dennys."

"Giants," the young man stated.

"No," Sandy corrected. "Boys."

The young man rubbed his head where a purplish egg was forming: "Stone hit me. Must be seeing double."

"Japheth?" Sandy asked.

The young man nodded. "Are you two? Or one?" He rubbed his eyes perplexedly.

"Two," Sandy said. "We're twins. I'm Sandy. He's Dennys."

"Twins?" Japheth asked, his fingers once more reaching for the pouch at his side, which appeared to be filled with tiny arrows, about two inches long.

Dennys opened his hands wide. "Twins are when"—he had started to give a scientific explanation, but he stopped himself—"when a mother has a litter of two babies instead of one." His voice was soothing.

"You're animals, then?"

Sandy shook his head. "We're boys." He was ready to ask "What are you?" when he noticed a tiny bow near the pouch of arrows.

"No. No." The young man looked at them doubtfully. "Only giants are as tall as you. And the seraphim and nephilim. But you have no wings."

What was this about wings? Dennys asked, "Please, J—Jay—where are we? Where is this place?"

"The desert, about an hour from my oasis. I came out, dowsing for water." He bent down and picked up a wand of pliable wood. "Gopher wood is the best for dowsing, and I had my grandfather—" He stopped in midsentence. "Higgaion! Hig! Where are you?" he called, as the twins might have called for their dog at home. "Hig!" He looked, wide-eyed, at the twins. "If anything has happened to him, my grandfather will—there are so few of them left—" He called again urgently, "Higgaion!"

From behind the outcropping of rock came something grey and sinuous which the twins at first thought was a snake. But it was followed by a head with small, bright, black eyes, and great fan ears, and a chunky body covered with shaggy grey hair, and a thin little rope of a tail.

"Higgaion!" The young man was joyful. "Why didn't you come when I called you?"

With its supple trunk, the little animal, the size of a small dog or a large cat, indicated the twins.

The young man patted its head. He was so small that he did not have to bend down. "Thank you're all right." He gestured toward the twins. "They seem friendly. They say they aren't giants, and while they are as tall as seraphim or nephilim, they don't seem to be of their kind."

Cautiously, the little animal approached Sandy, who dropped to one knee, holding out his hand for the creature to sniff. Then, tentatively, he began to scratch the hairy chest, as he would have scratched their dog at home. When the little animal relaxed under his touch, he asked Japheth, "What seraphim?"

"And nephilim," Dennys added. If they could find out what these people were who were as tall as they, it might give them some kind of a clue as to where they had landed.

"Oh, very tall," Japheth said. "Like you, but different. Great wings. Much long hair. And the bodies—like you, not hairy. The seraphim are golden and the nephilim are white, whiter than sand. Your skin—it is different. Pale, and smooth, and as though you never saw sun."

"At home, it's still winter," Sandy explained. "We get very tan in the summer when we work outdoors."

"Your little animal," Dennys questioned, "looks sort of like an elephant, but what is it?"

"It's a mammoth." Japheth slapped the creature affectionately.

Sandy withdrew his hand from petting Higgaion. "But mammoths are supposed to be huge!"

Dennys saw in his mind's eye a picture of a mammoth in a nature book at home, very like Japheth's animal. Japheth himself was a miniature version of a strong and handsome young man, not a great deal older than themselves, perhaps as old as their sister's friend Calvin, who was in graduate school. Perhaps in this place, wherever it was, everything was in miniature.

"There aren't many mammoths left," Japheth explained. "I'm a good dowser, but mammoths are very fine for scenting water, and Higgaion is the best of all." He patted the little animal's head. "So

borrowed him from Grandfather Lamech, and together we found a good source of water, but I'm afraid it's too far from the oasis to be much use."

"Thank you for explaining," Sandy said, then turned to Dennys. "Do you think we're dreaming?"

"No. We came home from hockey practice. We made sandwiches. We went into the lab to find the Dutch cocoa. We messed around with Dad's experiment-in-progress. We were stupid beyond belief. But it isn't a dream."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Japheth said. "I was beginning to wonder, myself. I thought I might be dreaming, because of the stone hitting my head in the earthquake."

"It was an earthquake?" Sandy asked.

Japheth nodded. "They come quite often. The seraphim tell us that things aren't settled yet."

"So maybe this is a young planet." Dennys sounded hopeful.

Japheth asked, "Where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"Take me to your leader," Sandy murmured.

Dennys nudged him. "Shut up."

Sandy said, "We're from planet earth, late twentieth century. We got here by accident, and we don't know where we're going."

"We'd like to go home," Dennys added, "but we don't know how."

"Where is home?" Japheth asked.

Sandy sighed. "A long way away, I'm afraid."

Japheth looked at them. "You are flushed. And wet." He himself did not seem to feel the intense heat.

Dennys said, "We're perspiring. Profusely. I'm afraid we'll get sunstroke if we don't find shade soon."

Japheth nodded. "Grandfather Lamech's tent is closest. My wife and I"—he flushed with pleasure as he said *my wife*—"live halfway across the oasis, by my father's tent. And I have to return Higgai to Grandfather, anyhow. And he's very hospitable. I'll take you to him, if you like."

"Thank you," Sandy said.

"We'd like to come with you," Dennys added.

"At this point, we don't have much choice," Sandy murmured.

Dennys nudged him, then took his turtleneck from the bundle of clothes and pulled it back on, his head emerging from the rolled cotton neck, which had mussed up his light brown hair so that a tuft stuck out like a parakeet's. "We'd better cover ourselves. I think I'm sunburned already."

"Let's go, then," Japheth said. "I'd like to be home before dark."

"Hey—" Sandy said suddenly. "At least we speak the same language. Everything's been so weird and weird I hadn't realized it till—"

Japheth looked at him in a puzzled manner. "You sound very strange to me. But I *can* understand you, if I listen with my under-hearing. You talk a little like the seraphim and the nephilim. You can understand me?"

The twins looked at each other. Sandy said, "I hadn't really thought about it till now. If I think about it, you do sound, well, different, but I can understand you. Right, Den?"

"Right," Dennys agreed. "Except it was easier when we weren't thinking about it."

"Come on," Japheth urged. "Let's go." He looked at Sandy. "You'd better cover yourself, too."

Sandy followed Dennys's example and pulled on his turtleneck.

Dennys unrolled his flannel shirt and draped it over his head. "Sort of like a burnoose to keep you from getting sunstroke."

"Good idea." Sandy did the same.

"If," Dennys added morosely, "it isn't already too late." Then he said, "Hey, Japh—" and stumbled over the name. "Hey, Jay, what's that?"

On the horizon to the far left, moving toward them, appeared a creature which shimmered in and out of their vision, silvery in color, as large as a goat or a pony, with light flickering out from its forehead.

Sandy also shortened Japheth's name. "What's that, Jay?" The mammoth pushed its head under Sandy's hand, and he began to scratch between the great fan-like ears.

Japheth looked toward the barely visible creature, smiling in recognition. "Oh, that's a unicorn. They're very odd. Sometimes they are, and sometimes they aren't. If we want one, we call and it usually appear."

"Did you call on one?" Sandy asked.

"Higgaion may have thought about one, but he didn't really call it. That's why it isn't all the way solid. Unicorns are even better about scenting for water than mammoths, except that you can't always count on them. But probably Higgaion thought one might be able to confirm where we thought there was a spring." He smiled ruefully. "Grandfather always knows what Hig is thinking, and I make guesses."

The twins stopped and looked at each other, but the mammoth had left Sandy and was trotting after Japheth, who was walking toward the oasis again, so they followed. In the intensity of the desert heat their limbs felt heavy and uncooperative. When they looked to where the unicorn had been, it was no longer there, though there was left in its place a mirage-like shimmering.

Sandy panted. "I don't believe this."

Dennys, jogging beside him, agreed. "We've never had very willing suspensions of disbelief. We're the pragmatists of the family."

"I *still* don't believe it," Sandy said. "If I blink often enough, we'll be back in the kitchen at home."

Dennys took one of the flapping sleeves of his shirt and wiped his eyes. "What I believe right now is that I'm hot. Hot. Hot."

Japheth turned his head and looked back. "Giants! Come on. Stop talking."

With their long legs, it was easy enough for the twins to catch up with Japheth. "We're not giants," Dennys reiterated. "My name is Dennys."

“Dennysim.”

Dennys touched his forehead, as Japheth had done. “One Dennys. Me.”

Sandy, too, touched his forehead. “I’m Sandy.”

“Sand.” Japheth looked around. “We have plenty of Sand.”

“No, Jay,” Sandy corrected. “It’s short for Alexander. Sandy.”

Japheth shook his head. “You call me Jay. I call you Sand. Sand is something I understand.”

“Talking of strange names”—Dennys looked at the mammoth, who was again butting at Sandy, to be petted—“Hig—”

“Hig-gai-on.” Japheth sounded it out.

“Are all mammoths his size? Or are there some really big ones?”

Japheth looked puzzled. “Those that are left are like Higgsaion.”

Sandy looked at his brother. “Didn’t horses start out very little, back in prehistory?”

But Dennys was looking at the horizon. “Look. Now you can see that there are lots of palm trees.”

Although they could now see that there were many trees, the oasis was still far away. Despite the much longer legs, the boys began to lag behind Japheth and the mammoth, who were moving across the sand at an easy run.

“I’m not sure I can make it,” Dennys said, grunting.

Sandy’s steps, too, lagged. “I thought we were the great athletes,” he said, panting.

“We’ve never been exposed to heat like this before.”

Japheth, evidently realizing that they were no longer behind him, turned around and jogged back toward them, seemingly cool and unwinded. “What’s the matter? You’re both all red. The same red. You truly are two people?”

“We’re twins.” Sandy’s voice was an exhausted croak.

Dennys panted. “I think—we’re getting—heat—heat prostration.”

Japheth looked at them anxiously. “Sun-sickness can be dangerous.” He reached up and touched Dennys’s cheek. Shook his head. “You’re cold and clammy. Bad sign.” He put his hand against his forehead. Appeared to be thinking deeply. Then: “What about a unicorn?”

“What about it?” Sandy asked. He felt tired and irritable.

“If we could get a couple of unicorns to become real and solid for us, they could carry you to the oasis.”

The twins looked at each other, each seeing a red, sweating mirror version of himself. “We’ve never gone in for mythical beasts,” Dennys said.

Sandy added, “Meg says unicorns have been ruined by overpopularity.”

Japheth frowned. “I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

Dennys, too, frowned. Thinking. Then: “Jay’s unicorns sound more like Mother’s virtual particles than like mythical beasts.”

Sandy was exasperated. “Virtual particles aren’t mythical. They’re theoretical.”

Dennys shot back, “If Mother can believe in her way-out theories, we ought to be able to believe

virtual unicorns.”

“What kind of unicorns?” Japheth looked puzzled. “Is it because you’re some strange kind of giant that there’s all this confusion?”

“Unicorns have never been a matter of particular importance before.” Sandy wiped his hand across his face and was surprised to find that the beads of sweat were indeed cold.

“They’re important now.” Dennys groaned. “Mother believes in virtual particles, so there’s no reason there can’t be virtual unicorns.”

“Hig—” Japheth urged.

The mammoth turned and faced the horizon. A faint shimmering glimmered on the sand in front of him. Slowly it took the shape of a unicorn, transparent but recognizable. Beside it, another unicorn began to shimmer.

“Please, unicorns,” Dennys begged. “Be real.”

Slowly the transparency of both creatures began to solidify, until there were two unicorns standing on the sand, with silvery-grey flanks, silver manes and beards. Silver hooves, and horns of brilliant light. They looked at the twins and docilely folded their legs under to lie down.

“Oh!” Japheth exclaimed. “It’s a good thing you’re both so young. For the moment, I’d forgotten that unicorns will not let themselves be touched by anyone who is not a virgin.”

The twins glanced at each other. “Well, we don’t even have our driver’s licenses yet,” Dennys said.

“Get up on them before they decide they aren’t needed,” Japheth ordered.

The twins climbed each onto the back of one of the silver creatures, both feeling that this was a dream from which they could not wake up. But, without the unicorns, they would never make it to the oasis.

The unicorns flew across the desert, their hooves barely touching the surface. Occasionally, when the sand had been blown clear and there was rock, a silver hoof struck with a clang like a bell, and sparks flew upward. Small desert creatures watched them fly by. Sandy noticed, but did not mention some scattered bones bleached by sun and wind.

“Hold on!” Japheth cried in warning. “Don’t fall off!”

But there was a sense, in riding the unicorns, of unreality. If this was no stranger than the mother’s world of particle physics, it was at least equally as strange.

“Hold on!” Japheth shouted again.

But Dennys felt himself sliding off the smooth flanks. He tried to grasp the mane, but it sifted through his fingers like sand. Was the unicorn becoming less real, or was the still-blazing sun affecting him?

“Dennys! Don’t fall off!” Sandy shouted.

But Dennys felt himself slipping. He did not know whether it was himself or the unicorn who kept flickering in and out of being.

Then he felt something solid, Sandy on his unicorn pressing against him. Sandy’s strong arm shoving him back onto the unicorn, the virtual particle suddenly real, not just something in the la

His head hurt.

Japheth and the mammoth were running beside them, amazingly swift for such small creatures. “Hurry,” Japheth urged the unicorns. “Hurry.”

Sandy, his flannel shirt still draped over his head, was hardly aware that he was supporting his brother. His arms felt as fluid as water. He was breathing in great searing gulps which burned his throat. His head began to swell, to be filled with hot air like a balloon, so that he was afraid he was going to float off into the sky.

The mammoth passed Japheth and the unicorns, leading the way to the oasis, so that his stocky legs were no more than a blur of motion, like hummingbirds’ wings. Occasionally he would raise his trunk and make a trumpeting noise, urging the unicorns along. Japheth ran alongside, beginning to breathe, open-mouthed, with effort.

But they were not fast enough for Dennys, who was slipping into unconsciousness, and as the world blackened before his eyes, his unicorn’s horn became dim and the silver creature began to dissolve as Dennys lost sight and hearing and thought. And Dennys flickered in and out of being with his mount.

Sandy, barely holding on to consciousness, was not aware that the arm he had held Dennys with was now holding nothing. He felt himself drop to the ground. He did not land on searing sand but on soft green. His burning body was shaded and cooled by the great fans of a palm tree.

His unicorn had made it to the oasis.

Pelican in the wilderness

Sandy slid slowly into consciousness, eyes tightly closed. No alarm clock jangling, so it must be Saturday. He listened to hear if Dennys was stirring in the upper bunk. Felt something cool and wet sprayed across his body. It felt good. He did not want to wake up. On Saturday they had heavy chores. They washed the floor of their mother's lab, of the bathrooms. If it was snowing again, there would be snow to shovel.

“Sand—”

He did not recognize the odd, slightly foreign voice. He did not recognize the smell that surrounded him, pungent and gamy. Again his body was sprayed with cool wetness.

“Sand?”

Slowly, he opened his eyes. In the light which came from directly above him, he saw two brown faces peering anxiously into his. One face was young, barely covered with deep amber down. The other face was crisscrossed with countless wrinkles, a face with ancient, leathery skin and a long beard of curling white.

Unwilling to believe that he was not waking from a dream, he reached up to touch Dennys's mattress above him. Nothing. He opened his eyes more widely.

He was in a tent, a sizable tent made of goatskins, judging by the smell. Light came in from the roof hole, a rosy, sunset light. A funny little animal crossed the tent to him and sprayed his body with water, and he realized that he was hot with sunburn. The animal was bringing water from a large clay pot and cooling him with it.

“Sand?” the young man asked again. “Are you awake?”

“Jay?” He struggled to sit up, and his burned skin was scratched by the skins on which he was lying.

“Sand, are you all right?” Japheth's voice trembled with anxiety.

“I'm okay. Just sunburned.”

The old man put his hand against Sandy's forehead. “You have much fever. The sun-sickness is hard on those unaccustomed to the desert. Are you from beyond the mountains?”

Sandy looked at the ancient man, who was even smaller than Japheth but had the same bright blue eyes, startling against the sun-darkened skin. Sandy touched his forehead as Japheth had done. “I'm Sandy.”

“Sand. Yes. Japheth has told me.” The old man touched his forehead, tipped with softly curling white hair. “Lamech. Grandfather Lamech. Japheth carried you to my tent.”

Sandy looked around in alarm. “But Dennys—where's Dennys?” He was now fully awake, aware

that he was not in the bunk bed at home but in this strange desert place which might be on any planet in any solar system in any galaxy anywhere in the universe. He shuddered. "Dennys?"

"He went out with the unicorn."

"What!"

"Sand," Japheth explained patiently, "Dennys must have fainted. I told you about unicorns. Sometimes they are, sometimes they aren't. When Den fainted, the unicorn went out, and took Dennys with him."

"But we've got to find him, bring him back!" Sandy tried to struggle to his feet.

Grandfather Lamech pushed him back down onto the skins with amazing strength for so small a person. "Hush, Sand. Do not worry. Your brother will be all right."

"But—"

"Unicorns are very responsible," Lamech explained.

"But—"

"It is true that they are unreliable in that we cannot rely on them to be, but they are very responsible."

"You're crazy," Sandy said.

"Hush, Sand," Grandfather Lamech repeated. "We do not know where the unicorns go when they go out, but when somebody calls the unicorn again and it appears, Den will appear, too."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. I am sure," the old man said, and for a moment Sandy relaxed at the authority in his voice.

Then: "Well, call a unicorn, call him now!"

The old man and Japheth looked at Higgaion. Higgaion raised his trunk toward the roof hole of the tent. The rosy glow had faded, and the old man and Japheth and Higgaion were barely visible shadows in the tent. There was a sudden flash, and Sandy could see the shimmering silver body of a unicorn. But no Dennys.

"Dennys!" he cried.

And heard Japheth echo, "Den!"

Higgaion appeared to be consulting with the unicorn. Then he looked toward Japheth and the old man. Trumpeted.

There was another flash of light, and then a faint glimmering and the unicorn was gone.

Grandfather Lamech said, "It would appear that someone has already called the unicorn on which the Den was riding."

Sandy jumped to his feet, but was so weak that he sank back onto the skins. "But he could be anywhere, anywhere!" he cried wildly.

"Hush," the old man repeated. "He is on the oasis. We will find him."

"How?" Sandy's voice was a frightened small boy's squeak.

Japheth said, "I will look for him. When I find him, I will bring him to you."

"Oh, Jay—I want to come with you."

“No.” Grandfather Lamech was firm. “You have the sun-sickness. You must stay here until you are well.” He looked up at the roof hole. The fading sunset was gone, and the moon, not full, but beaming bright, shone down on them. The old man touched Sandy’s arm, his thigh. “Tomorrow you will be a blisters.”

Sandy’s head felt strangely buzzing and he knew that it was from fever and that Grandfather Lamech was right. “But Dennys—”

“I will find him and bring him to you,” Japheth promised.

“Oh, Jay, thank you.”

The young man turned to his grandfather. “One of the women—my wife, or one of my sisters—will bring you a night-light, Grandfather.”

The old man looked at the moonlight which brightened the tent. “Thank you, my dear grandson. My grandchildren are kind to me, so kind...” His voice faltered. “My son...”

Japheth sounded embarrassed. “You know I can’t do anything with Father. I don’t even tell him when I’ve come to your tent.”

“Better that way.” The old man was sorrowful. “Better that way. But one day—”

“Of course, Grandfather. One day. I’ll be back with the Den as soon as I can.” He pushed out of the tent, and the flap slapped closed behind him.

Higgaion dribbled cool water from the jar onto the cloth on Sandy’s burning forehead.

“Giant”—the little old man leaned over him—“where do you come from?”

“I’m not a giant,” Sandy said. “Really. I’m just a boy. Dennys and I are still growing, but we’re not giants, we’re just ordinary tall.”

The old grandfather shook his head. “In our country you are giants. Can you tell me where you come from?”

“Home.” Sandy felt hot and feverish. Home might be galaxies away. “New England. The United States. Planet earth.”

The wrinkles in the old man’s forehead crisscrossed each other as he frowned. “You don’t come from around here. Nor from Nod. The people there are no taller than we are.” He put his hand on Sandy’s forehead. The hand felt cool, and dry as an autumn leaf crumbling to dust. “Your fever will go down, but you must stay here, in my tent, out of the sun, until the burning is healed. I will ask one of the seraphim to come tend to you. Seraphim do not burn in the sun. They are better healers than I.” Sandy relaxed into Grandfather Lamech’s kindness.

The mammoth started toward the water jar, then dropped to its haunches, whimpering in terror, and something screeched past the tent like an out-of-control jet plane. But on this planet, wherever it was, there were no planes.

The old man leaped to his feet with amazing agility and grabbed a wooden staff.

The hideous screech, not bird, not human, came again, closer, and then the tent flap was pushed aside and a large face peered in. It was the largest face Sandy had ever seen, a man’s face with filthy hair and a matted beard, tangled eyebrows over small, suspicious eyes, and a bulbous nose. From the

mat of hair came two horns, curved downward, with sharp points like boar's teeth. The mouth opened and shouted, "*Hungry!*"

The rest of the creature pushed into the tent. The head did not belong to a man's body but to a lion's, and as it came all the way into the tent, Sandy saw that the lion did not have a lion's tail but a scorpion's. Sandy was terrified.

The old man beat at it futilely with his staff. The man / lion / scorpion knocked the staff out of his hand and sent him flying across the tent. Grandfather Lamech fell onto a pile of skins. The mammoth lay flat on the skins by Sandy, trembling.

"*Hungry!*" The roar made the skins of the tent tremble.

Instinctively, Sandy thrust the mammoth behind him and, exerting the last remnant of his strength, rose, tottering, to his full height and took a step toward the monster.

"Giant!" the man's head screeched. "Giant!" And scorpion's tail, lion's body, and man's head backed out of the tent, so that the flap snapped back into place.

The old man pulled himself out of the corner where he had been flung. "Ridiculous manticore," he grumbled, "wanting to eat my mammoth."

Higgaion got unsteadily to his feet, raised his trunk, and trumpeted, but it was more of a whiff than a call of triumph. He rubbed up against Sandy.

The old man retrieved his staff. "Thank you. You saved my mammoth from being eaten."

"I didn't do anything." Sandy's legs crumpled under him as he fell back onto the skins. "It's the first time I've ever scared anybody, just by being tall and sunburned."

"A gentle giant," the old man said.

Sandy felt too weak to contradict him. "Anyhow, the manticore is a mythical beast."

Grandfather Lamech shook his head. "I don't know what you mean."

"Things like manticores are mythical," Sandy stated. "They aren't supposed to be real."

Grandfather Lamech's smile crinkled. "You will have to ask the seraphim to explain. In this time, many things are real, you see." He looked around. "Where's the scarab beetle?"

The mammoth, too, looked around, but they both stopped, and the old man's face lit up as a soft scratching was heard on the outside of the tent flap. It was obviously some kind of signal, because Lamech called out gladly, "Come in, Granddaughter." Then he turned courteously to Sandy. "Yalith, my youngest granddaughter."

The tent flap opened enough to let a girl through, a girl about the size of the old man, barely four feet tall. She carried a shallow stone bowl which contained oil and a softly burning wick. By its light, which was brighter than the moonlight, which had moved beyond the roof hole, Sandy could see the girl, who wore only a loincloth, like Japheth and Grandfather Lamech, was gently curved, with small rosy breasts. Her skin was the color of a ripe apricot. Her softly curling hair was a deep bronze which glimmered in the lamplight and fell against her shoulders. She looked, Sandy thought, about his age, and suddenly his burning skin was not as painful as it had been, and he felt energy returning to his limbs. He got to his knees and stood to greet her, bowing clumsily.

She saw him and almost dropped the stone lamp. “A giant!”

The mammoth reached up with his trunk to Sandy, and Grandfather Lamech said, “He says that he is not a giant, dear Yalith. Japheth carried him here, and they tell me that there is another one just like him, but he went out with a unicorn. Japheth is looking for him. This one”—he beamed at Sandy—“appears to be human, and he just saved Higgsaion from the manticore.”

Yalith shuddered. “I heard it screeching and going off with a rat.” She put her stone lamp on a wooden keg. “I’ve brought your night-light, Grandfather Lamech.”

“Thank you, my dear.” There was a deep tenderness in the old man’s voice.

Sandy bowed again. “Hello. My name’s Sandy Murry.” He could not keep a foolish grin off his face.

She looked at him dubiously, backing away slightly. “You do not speak like one of us. Are you sure you’re not a giant?”

“I’m a boy. I’m sorry I look so awful. I have a fierce sunburn.”

Now she looked at him without flinching. “Oh, yes, you do. How do we help you?”

Higgsaion dipped his trunk into the water pot again and showered Sandy with it.

Grandfather Lamech said, “Higgsaion is keeping his skin wet. But I think we ought to get one of the seraphim to look at him.”

“Yes. That would be good. Where did you say you were from, giant—Sandy?”

“The United States,” Sandy said, though he knew it would mean nothing to this beautiful, strange girl.

The girl smiled at Sandy, and the warmth of her smile enveloped him.

“The United States is—are—a place,” he tried to explain. “You might say that my brother and I are representatives.”—Even if inadvertent ones.

“And you have a brother, who is out with a unicorn?”

Her question made it sound as though Dennys and the unicorn had gone off cavorting someplace together.

“My brother Dennys. We’re twins. Identical twins. We do look a lot alike to people who don’t know us well. Your brother Japheth is trying to find him.”

“Well, he will find him, then. Do you need anything more, Grandfather Lamech?”

“No, my dear Yalith.”

“I’d better go home, then. My brothers’ wives are all there, and our mother likes to have me around to help keep everybody from fighting.”

She smiled, turning from the old man to Sandy, who was dizzy with fever, but also with Yalith. He gazed at her as she said good night to them. For the first time in his life, Sandy had a flash of gratitude that Dennys was not with him.

Then anxiety surfaced. “Dennys—”

“Japheth will find him,” the old man said. “Meanwhile—Higgsaion, see if you can find our scarred friend.”

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