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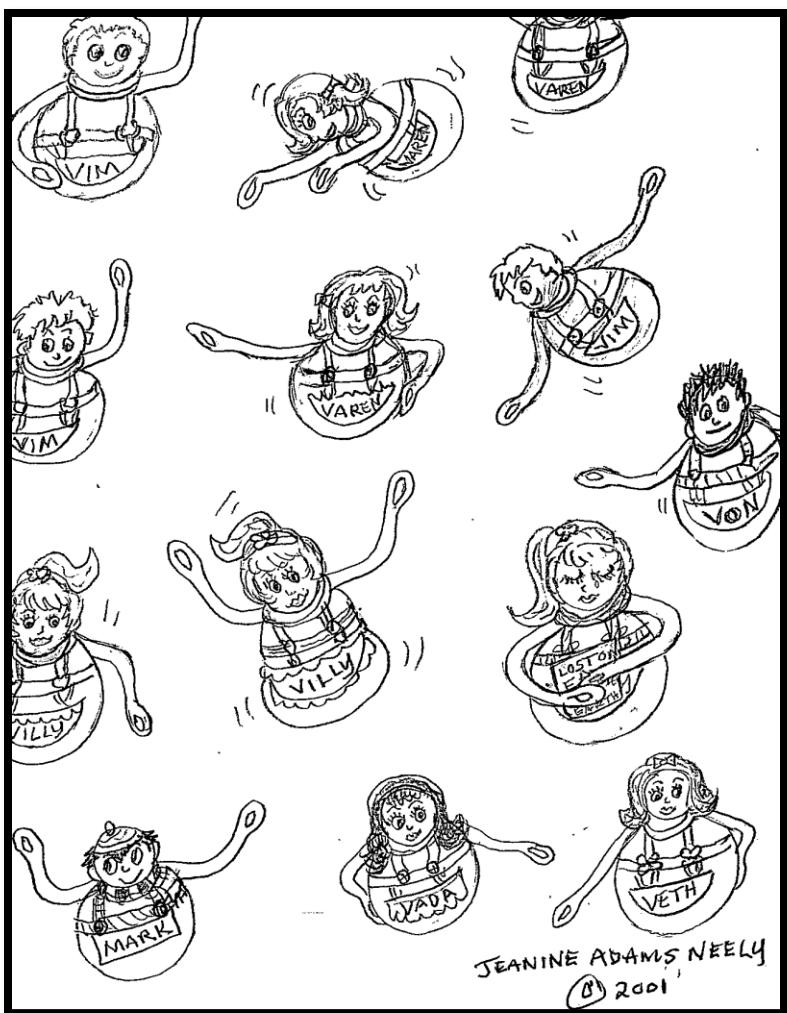


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CHAPTER ONE

THE LAND OF VIRTH

"Varen! Vim! Time for dinner! Mother wants you downstairs in ten minutes." Villy Vanson shouts at her younger sister and brother.

Giggles come from a dark room upstairs, and a boy whispers hoarsely, "Did you hear Villy? She said Mother! Last year it was 'Mom'."

Varen snickers, "Yeah... or 'Mommy'. What a glue stick!"

"A Glue Stick!" Vim repeats loudly, his words echoing. "She heard it somewhere, and it stuck with her!" He laughs. "I bet she's been watching Earth Television."

"No, Vim." Varen disagrees. "She's too scared to get that close to the tunnels."

"That's not true! Last year she played with us, and told us scary stories about the tunnels... and she wasn't scared of them then." Vim reminds Varen.

Suddenly, their mother's voice reaches them from the bottom of the stairs, and she does not sound happy. "Kids, you now have five minutes!"

"She's serious!" yelps Varen, "Come on, Vim."

"I can't-I'm stuck! Help me, Varen... Turn the light on."

Varen comes tumbling out of the long tube they have been playing in.

"Coming, Mom!" She yells as she lands with a bounce on her round bottom.

"We'll be right down!" Varen scrambles to find a flashlight and hurries back to shine it in the tube. "What should I do?" She asks her brother.

"Jump on the tube, Varen. Squish me, so I'll fit." Vim says. "Hurry!"

Varen feels along the tube with her hands until she finds Vim, and then she begins to bounce until she is up above the tube, and PLOOSHI. She lands right on him.

"OOF!" He says and pops out the end, sprawling onto the floor in a tangle of arms. Varen finds the light switch and flicks it on. Vim brushes off his blue body, and Varen does the same to her brilliant green body. Velvet emerald green, for they are velvet Virthlings from the land of Virth, which is parallel to Earth, but in its own dimension. Both children have large, round eyes and nice, long arms. Baby Virthlings learn to move along by using their arms to swing their bodies forward, just as a small Earthling baby learns to crawl. As they become older, they learn to levitate themselves several inches above the ground just by thinking about it. Virthlings do not have feet, because they just don't need them. Feet would get in the way.

Varen is six years old, and Vim is nine. Pink Villy is thirteen. Lately, she has been moody and a bit stuck up, which really irritates her younger siblings.

"Hurry, Vim. Mom will be mad," Varen says as she helps him out of his tangle and tries to push him back into shape. "You're still a little flat on one side, Vim," she tells him as she gives him a poke.

"Stop that!" Vim gasps, "You're just trying to tickle me. Stop, Varen! I can do it myself." He gives her a push, and she laughs as she elevates and heads for the door. "Turn the light off," she instructs from the hallway.

As the two rumpled little Virthlings rush into the kitchen, they nearly run into their father, who has just arrived home from work. "Hello, you two... It might be nice if you wash up before sitting down at the table," Verry Vanson reminds them with a chuckle.

"We've been playing tunnel with our tube, Daddy... and Vim got stuck," Varen explains.

Verry pats her head and says again, "Go clean up. I think you need a good brushing as well."

Verry is a captain in the First Virth Force, and he is a truly magnificent Virthling with his bright red velvet, blond, well-cut hair, and kind blue eyes. His job is to lead rescue missions sent out to find Virthlings who have been sucked into the vortex tunnels, which are the only real danger existing in Virth. Each year, many poor, unsuspecting Virthlings disappear through these tunnels. Sometimes, a few find their way back through another tunnel, but most are brought back by the rescue teams sent to find them.

The children's mother, Vecky, hears Varen say they were playing tunnel, and she scolds, "You may think it a fun game... but to really find yourselves in a tunnel would be a very frightening thing. You would not be able to wash up for

dinner and join us at the table. I cannot stand to think of that... please let's have no more discussion of tunnels."

"Tonight is Daddy's last dinner with us until he comes home next week. Let's enjoy tonight, and talk of nice things."

Vecky Vanson is shiny, bright gold, and has green eyes and auburn hair. She is the most beautiful Virthling by any standards, and her family is quite proud of her. Vecky is not vain at all, however, and simply enjoys being a mom and a wife. Her family and home are her life, and all that she could ever want. If she could change anything, it would perhaps be that her husband's job was a little safer.

All are seated around the table, finally, and Varen asks her father, "Are you positive you will be home in time for Christmas, Daddy?"

"Of course! Have I ever missed a Christmas with my family? I have said I will be home, you must count on that, for it's the truth."

Vecky says, "Children, please, wait until we say grace before asking questions, or the food will get cold." She lays her napkin over her velvet, folds her hands, and asks, "Who would like to give thanks tonight?"

"I will," Varen says. "Thank you, God, for Mom's food, and please keep Daddy safe on this trip to Earth... amen."

"Short, but sweet, dear," Verry chuckles. "Vim, please pass the salad."

"I want to go to Earth with you, Dad... Please take me."

"You know I can't, Son. We have had this discussion before. You can't get a passport until you are nineteen."

"... but Dad, some Virthlings go without passports. Von Vester didn't have one. He's only fourteen... he just said he was going to go, and he went."

Villy jumps up from the table and hovers, wringing her hands. "Vim, he did not really intend to go. He was teasing us when he said that... Veth and I were with him... we were making a rope swing at the pool in the creek behind their house, and it just happened. It happened so fast..." Villy sobs and whispers, "He was yelling... He said, 'Get Dad, Veth... tell him...' and that was all. He was gone." Villy bursts into tears and zooms up the stairs to her room, leaving a very subdued family behind. Vim is so startled by her revelation that he doesn't know what to say.

Verry and Vecky look at each other sadly... sorry that Vim and Varen had to hear it like this, and sorry for Villy as well. It is a trauma difficult to recover from, and they can only pray for Von Vester's return.

Verry reaches for Vim and Varen's hands, and holding one in each of his own, he says, "The rescue mission I am going on this time includes finding Von. Vick Vester will go with us, and with luck, we will bring his son home. We will have twenty men and four ships. There won't be much we cannot accomplish when we set all of our minds on it."

Varen, the little peace-maker of the family, gets out of her chair. "I'll go tell Villy. She'll be happy... and then we can eat." Varen bobs away and up the stairs, wishing she could zoom like Villy, but zooming comes with time.

Needing to feel reassured about Von's plight, Vim says, "Vody Varnold's dad says most Earthlings are nice. He was on Earth when he was eighteen, and an Earth boy found him."

He pretended to be a toy for a month, but when he finally talked to the boy, they became friends. Later, he tried to go back, after he'd been rescued, but he ended up in a different place because the tunnel had changed... That time he almost died, and he never tried again."

"The other side of the story, Son," Verry nods and explains, "is the fact that many Earth children are destructive. They like toys for a while, and then they tear them apart... Vody's dad was fortunate and is very lucky to be here with his family."

When Varen and Villy come back to the table, Verry begins to talk about Christmas, a subject that can definitely be guaranteed to take their minds off most problems. "Whose turn is it this year to help me with the outside lights?" Verry asks, as he helps himself to more mashed potatoes.

"My turn, Daddy," Varen answers.

"We will have to get everything done tonight, so if it's your turn to do dishes, someone can trade with you," Verry replies.

"Nope. Vim washes, and Villy dries... It works out just right," Varen says, adding, "Will you be gone when I wake up in the morning?"

"No, sweetheart. We are going on a family picnic tomorrow. I don't have to be at the base until the afternoon."

"I don't want to go on a picnic! Can I go to Veth's house tomorrow instead?" Villy pouts.

"No, you cannot," Vecky states. "Tomorrow is Dad's last day home for a week, and this family will all be there... Besides, Daddy has a big surprise for everyone."

"A surprise for me?" Villy asks.

"A BIG surprise?" Vim inquires, eyes even rounder.

"Is it because it's almost Christmas... and you might not get back in time?" Varen asks sadly.

"Haven't I just said I'll be back for Christmas? If I haven't, well, I will be. I promise. So no, that is not the reason. We often open one present each before Christmas, and this is just one of those times. The truth is, I'm so excited about this surprise that I can't wait," Verry says.

"Well, now they won't sleep all night," Vecky sighs.

"Dad," Vim cries, "give us a hint... Just one hint!"

"I will not. You are all way too good at guessing. You will just have to wait until tomorrow."

CHAPTER TWO

The lights are up around the outside of the house, and the roof, and a Virthling Santa waves from a sleigh pulled by wooden velvet reindeer high up on top of the roof. In the front yard is a manger scene of Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus. They are not Virthlings. Everyone knows that Jesus was born in a stable on earth, and had enough love in his heart for everyone... even the little velvet Virthlings... and so, no matter what land you live in, you always know that Jesus loves you. Little Virthlings are raised knowing this, and never have any fear of being left out of God's glorious circle of love. Christmas is a time for sharing and caring about those around you. It is a time for peace and joy, of giving and receiving, and a time for the first white fluff to fall upon the land. Virth does not have snow. Instead, it has fluff, which is fun to play in and perfect for molding fluff people, pets, and even castles. It is not frozen or cold, and it does not melt. It just mysteriously falls from above, and then is gone as suddenly as it appeared. It only comes in the winter, and by spring, new green grass and flowers appear. Virth is a very pleasant place to live.

The Vanson family bobs about outside looking at the decorations, and then hurries to the garage where mom is busy packing baskets, blankets, and other good things into the family mobile... a small craft that serves as an automobile.

"Where is dad?" Vim asks. "He didn't have to leave early, did he?"

"I think he's meeting us there... right, Mom?" Villy asks.

"Yes. Now, get into the mobile, everyone, and buckle up. We are wasting time," their mother says.

When all the children are seated and have their seat belts on, Vecky looks sternly at the garage door, and it opens. The mobile zooms backward, the door closes, and they are on their way.

Mobiles travel quickly, but safely, about two feet off the ground. With the built-in radar system, they avoid all other objects in their path. Several times, the Vansons come close enough to other mobiles to call out a greeting and to be greeted in return. Virthlings are generally happy creatures and consider everyone they meet a friend. There are not many strangers in Virth. Now and then, a Mirthling, no one knows, comes to visit, but most of the Mirthlings are not strangers and visit Virth often. They are also friendly creatures and can be recognized easily. You will never see a Mirthling without a flashy scarf and a great big smile. They are even more colorful than Virthlings, because they are many colors altogether... with their long arms and no feet, they are thought to be closely related to Virthlings.

Suddenly, a mobile operated by a teenager comes too close, and the evasive action of Vanson's mobile gives everyone a tummy rush.

Vim shouts, "Yes, Mom! Do that again!"

Varen pushes his arm and whispers to Vim, "If you want to learn to drive, you'd better stop acting so juvenile!"

Vim whispers back, "I still have four years to go. Mom will forget by then."

"No, I won't," Vecky assures him from the front seat. "You will be signed up for all the safety courses available, young man."

Vim glares at Varen. "You always say stuff that gets me in trouble."

Villy turns to look at them from the front seat, her blond bangs bobbing on her forehead, and says, "Please don't fight. Just pretend you are mature, and be nice today."

Vim and Varen giggle. Varen points to a green floating sign which reads, 'Entering public viewing area.' She says, "Okay, when we come even with that sign, we will become mature."

Vim cries, "Okay!... here it comes... There it is!"

Both children shout together, "Mature!" as they come even with the sign.

"They're hopeless, mother!" Villy complains. "They'll never grow up."

Vecky smiles fondly at her oldest daughter and says, "There's no hurry for that. Now is the time for silliness, make-believe, playing, and pretending. It's a good time for children. Responsibility comes soon enough."

Villy droops with despair and says, "I feel old then... I can't seem to be happy anymore."

Vecky replies gently, "You miss your friend, sweetie... but today, let your worries float away, and let's concentrate on making it a good day for daddy."

"Wouldn't it be nice to be as carefree as a Mirthling? They never seem to worry about a thing," Villy sighs loudly, sounding more dejected than ever.

"Mirthlings are very special people," Vecky says in agreement. "They have the same feelings we have, and sometimes suffer the same sorrows... but because they always want to make others feel better, they never show their own sadness."

Blinking back tears, Villy asked, "Do Mirthlings ever get stranded on Earth?"

"Of course, they do... but not as often. I think they must be more aware of the tunnels than we are, or maybe they don't have as many tunnels in Mirth... but let's talk of pleasant things today, and concentrate on being a family," Vecky says decisively.

"I'll try," Villy promises, then adds fretfully, "You do think daddy will be safe on this trip to Earth, don't you?"

"Heavens, yes. This is not his first trip to Earth. No, indeed, that happened many years ago, and besides, these new crafts they will be using have marvelous features. They change color to match their surroundings, and can become nearly invisible. Also, the men will wear camouflaged clothing of greens and tans, so that no matter how bright their velvet is, they will be able to hide," Vecky explains reassuringly.

"But Mom... How do they find the tunnel to come home again?" Villy asks.

"What if it closes up, or has no vacuum?" Vill continues to fuss.

"There are many known tunnels, which go in each direction, and the Virth Force knows most of them. They will always have a way to come home." Vecky soothes.

She would have been truly alarmed had she realized that in the back seats, Vim and Varen had grown very quiet, and were listening to every word.

Vim whispers, "Lots of tunnels, and they go both ways..."

"Hush, Vim. Mom will hear you." Varen says softly.

The mobile comes to a stop, and the children realize they have arrived at the park. As the doors open and everyone floats out, Vim notices that his dad's mobile is nowhere to be seen. "Where is dad?... Did he have to go to the base?" Vim asks his mother.

Vecky smiles, "Oh, he will be here any moment now."

"With our surprises?" Varen asks, bouncing up and down.

"But of course... Now let's put the food and drinks on the table. Vim, help me with the picnic baskets. Varen, you get the blankets, and Villy can bring the jars of Kool-Aid."

The park had been decorated for Christmas, in festive reds and greens, with big imitation candy canes, and lots of sparkling lights on the trees and fences.

Villy catches her breath at the sight. "Look! This must be beautiful at night... It looks like fairyland!"

"How do you know what Fairyland looks like?" Vim asks with genuine interest.

Varen says smugly, "Because she has seen Fairylands in books, of course. You would know too, if you liked to read."

Villy smiles, "Or maybe I've been there."

Vim pauses as he is about to dispute this, and then he says in disbelief, "I don't think so."

Villy just continues to smile as she floats away. Vim stares after her, not at all sure if she is just teasing... after all, Villy is four years older... and she isn't always at home. Maybe she does go places and do things he doesn't know about. Last summer, she went to Mirth with Maggie, her Mirthling friend... But exactly where would a person go to find Fairyland?

"Don't worry about it, Vim," Villy says, knowing it's already too late for that. "After all, you're only nine, so someday..."

"That's enough now! Don't get Vim going. It's hard enough to keep him grounded," Vecky insists.

Vim's velvet bristles... He is ready for battle, as it seems to him, they are all picking on him. "I need brothers in this family!" He grumbles irritably. "Maybe I'll go find a family that has some!"

At that precise moment, a sliver object hurtles from the trees and comes right towards them. Villy and Varen shriek, and Vim yells, "Duck! It's an out-of-control mobile!"

The craft veers to the side at the last moment and hangs trembling above them. It appears to be a spacecraft, but unlike any they've ever seen. It is the shape of a large Earth clam shell. As it swings back and forth, the hatch opens slowly. Vim's heart is beating so loud he can't hear anything

else, and he almost melts into a mindless puddle of velvet, as his father pops up and waves at everyone.

"I think you have truly surprised them, dear." Vecky laughs.

"Merry early Christmas, little Virthlings," Dad shouts, pleased as can be at the surprised expressions on the faces of his children. For a blue Virthling, Vim is looking a bit green, and the girls are a shade lighter also. Varen recovers and shrieks, "We have a spacecraft!"

Vim finds his voice, "But it's not real... see, it has elastic ropes."

Verry lowers the craft and swings out. "You are wrong, son." He speaks. "It is real, but for now it is set up for beginners." He walks to a bush and tugs on two ropes. Two more crafts zip out of the trees and sway above them. "And," he adds with a chuckle. "You each have your own."

"Are we better than Santa, or what?" Their mother asks.

Villy and Varen race to Daddy and hug him, but Vim is already getting into the craft his dad appeared in, claiming it as his own. "This one is mine! Can I have it, Dad?" Without waiting for an answer, he closes the hatch and swings it back and forth until he is actually going quite high.

Vecky and Verry help the girls into theirs and show them how to operate them. "Control the movement you want with the placement of your body weight, and use the two levers on the sides to go up and down," Verry Instructs, stepping back, as the girls begin experimenting, and rise into the air, high above Vim.

Vim opens his hatch. "Hey! How did you do that?" But the girls can't hear him.

Verry explains the operation of the craft to Vim, then watches as his daring son zooms away, but only as far as the elastic rope will let him, of course. Varen's craft nearly bumps Vim's, and instantly, he tries to swing far enough to bump hers, but alas, Dad has set them just the right distance apart to prevent that very thing.

Zippering around, bobbing and darting, the children play the morning away, while their parents sit at the picnic table talking to each other, as they watch the fun antics of the little Virthlings.

Sometime later, much later, the children swing out of their crafts and bob to the table looking for food. Vecky hands them plates and Kool-Aid. As they relax and eat together, Verry tells them more about their spacecrafts.

"These are test crafts," he says. "Intended to teach craft control. Right now, you are the only kids who have these. In a year, everyone will have them. When each of you turns fifteen, we will install mobile motors, and you can use them to take your instruction classes. They will be your first mobiles... so take very good care of them."

Vim vows, "I will take the best care of mine, I promise, and I will name him Speck... because someday he will be a small speck in the sky, blending in with the stars!"

Villy mutters, "And now you know why it has no flying capabilities!"

"I will name mine Crafty," Varen decides.

Villy tosses her blond hair and announces, "I will name mine Christmas 2024... but I will call her 'Chris' for short."

Sooner than anyone wants, it is time to pack up and go home. Soon, Dad will be leaving, and this dampens the little Virthlings' high spirits. One craft is attached to the top of Mom's mobile, and two are stacked on the carry rack of Dad's mobile. Villy rides with Dad, while Vim and Varen return with their mother. Soon the little ones are fast asleep, and Vecky is humming to herself, and thinking about the secret she will be telling the family when Verry is home again.

In the other mobile, Villy sighs happily and says, "Thank you for the great present, Daddy. We are the luckiest family in Virth."

Verry smiles over at her fondly, "I am the luckiest dad... I have always known that."

"I hope you can find Von... Veth misses him so much... and so do I..." Villy turns to look out the window, hoping her father has not seen the tear that slips forlornly down her velvet cheek. Dad does not miss much, however, and he wonders how much Von really means to his little pink daughter. He is not ready to think about Villy growing up. The two Vester children and Villy have been best friends since they first played in the sandbox at the park... eleven years ago. My, how time flies... and soon, Villy will be all grown up, in spite of how her father feels about it. Verry sighs heavily, but does try to reassure her. "The prospect is very good, honey. He has only been gone for a month, and we believe now that we have discovered the area he entered. Our first search was off by about fifty miles, and we have

now pinpointed the true entry. We probably know as much, if not more, about Earth's vortex activity than the scientists on Earth do. If they didn't let their scientific minds stand in the way of believing we exist, we might be able to help them out."

"I'm glad they don't know about us, Dad... they might try to study us and turn us into scientific experiments," Villy says with a shudder.

Verry hastens to assure her, saying, "Virth Force would never let that happen. We are quite ready to protect ourselves, if need be. Don't you fret about that. Now then, my dear, I must ask a favor of you."

"Anything, Daddy... what is it?" Villy asks.

Verry continues, "I want you to help your mother while I'm gone, especially when it comes to keeping peace between the young ones. You must all help with the Christmas preparations. You should also remind Vim and Varen that Christmas is a time of peace and joy. A time to honor the birth of Jesus. We may laugh when Santa 'Ho-Ho-Ho's, and we may enjoy giving and receiving presents, but our greatest gift was given to all of us in the stable on Earth."

Villy smiles and says softly, "I know, Dad. Mom tells us that every year, and I will remind my children someday."

"May that NOT be soon!" Verry replies with a frown. "You are still my baby. I remember the day you were born... all soft pink velvet, big blue eyes, and frizzy blond hair..."

"Frizzy?" Villy chirps, "Honestly, Father! Not frizzy!"

Verry laughs. "Well, maybe curly is a better term. You have seen the family albums. We are very proud of our two

blond babies and our little red-headed baby. Varen is very patient, for a redhead, don't you think? And it's a good thing, as she has to put up with Vim."

Villy and Verry laugh together at the thought.

Villy says, "Yes, she does very well... much better than I do. I catch myself being a veritable grouch, and I vow to change, but I'm not having much luck so far."

Villy sighs.

"The fact that you realize you are having the problem is a good thing. You must first admit to having a problem before you can fix it... You are doing just fine. You are a wonderful Daughter... but then you know that, don't you?"

"Yes," Villy grins. "I am just seeking compliments."

The mood lightens, and before long, the two are talking about happier things. The trip home does not seem long enough, because soon they will be apart for a while, and although they should be used to it, it always brings some sadness.

There is not a dry eye as the family watches Verry drive away in his mobile. It will be at least a week before they see him again. Even Vecky needs to brush away a tear or two before putting on a brave front for the children.

CHAPTER THREE

From morning to night, the next two days were filled with holiday preparations. The Vansons worked well together, and Vim and Varen hardly fought at all. Soon, everything was ready for Christmas. All the lights twinkled merrily, warming hearts and bringing a festive feeling.

Each night, a prayer was said for Father to come home safely from a successful mission.

On the third day, morning dawned with land covered in fluff. Every child was thrilled, and they wasted no time getting chores out of the way so they could play.

It did not take Vim long to figure out that the bottom part of his craft made a great sled. He rode it down the hill behind their house at least six times before Villy and Varen finally found him, and ran back to the house for their own crafts. Vecky heard the laughter, screams, and whooping of her offspring as they raced back and forth. From the kitchen window, she watched as they played. More fluff began to fall, and soon they were building fluff people and making angel shapes all over the yard. It truly was a good time of year.

Exhausted, the children finally crash. Lying in the fluff, they exchange stories of other well-remembered incidents from holidays past. Villy tells them what she has heard about December on Earth. "It's very cold. The snow is wet

sometimes, and like ice at other times... except in California and tropical places... oh, and a place called Arizona. Children must be very careful not to get lost outside in the snow, because they can freeze to death if they do."

Vim stares at her in wonder. "How do you know this?" he asks his sister. "Is it from the history books of Earth?"

"No," Villy replies. "Although I am sure the books do mention freezing winters, I know this because Vebe Viller got sucked through two years ago just before Christmas."

"No!" Vim gasps, "Why didn't you tell us?"

"Well... I thought it would scare you. You were little then," Villy confesses.

"Seven is NOT little!" Vim declares, and eagerly demands, "Tell us more."

"As I said, she almost froze to death, but finally, quite by accident, she found another tunnel which sucked her in and brought her back to Virth. She popped back about ten miles from her house, and had to use a stranger's radio to call her parents."

"Wow... She could have ended up in Mirth," Varen whispers.

"Or," Vim said, "In some unfriendly place... One we've never heard of, where they have fuzzy fruit, and some monster might have eaten her..."

"Vim. You stop that. You're just trying to scare Varen."

Varen asks Villy fearfully, "Villy, if Virthlings get sucked into Earth... Why don't Earthlings come here?"

Villy laughs, "They are way too big. Not even a baby Earthling could fit into a vortex tunnel. Now let's stop this talk before everyone has nightmares tonight."

"It *would* be a nightmare if they could get here," Vim says, "They would pull us apart and destroy Virth."

Villy glares at Vim, "That can't happen. Dad told me the Virth Force is prepared and ready to prevent such a thing from ever happening. Now, let's clean up our crafts and see if Mom will let us take them inside tonight. We can suspend them from the ceiling and sleep in them."

Varen claps her hands and shouts to her siblings, "Oh yes! I want to sleep in mine. What fun. Let's hurry. Maybe we can set them up before dinner."

"Yeah," Vim says, "Let's hurry in before a fluff monster gets us!"

"Vim," Villy says in a warning voice. "Varen knows there are no fluff monsters, so you are wasting your time."

"Let's hurry and ask Mom... I do so want to sleep in my craft tonight ... don't you, Vim?" Varen asks, looking at Vim.

"Maybe I'll sleep in mine out here," Vim growls, tired of Villy scolding him for everything. It's not that he pays any attention to her, but it's annoying.

"Hurry, Vim. Do you need help to untangle your cords?" Villy asks as they begin to climb the hill, pulling the craft bottoms behind them.

"No. I'm not a baby. I can get mine up the hill with my mind if I want to," Vim answers as he straightens the cords of his craft. "With me in it," he adds recklessly.

"Now I'd like to see that, Vim!" Villy chuckles.

Varen laughs too, "Yes, Vim. Show us how to do that."

Vim glares up at them and yells, "Watch and learn, you silly girls!" While he thinks, "Now what have I gotten myself into?" Nonetheless, he is determined to give them a show... "Please, please let me do this." He whispers softly, hoping against hope that God will hear him and help him show the girls up. Vim bounces into his craft and begins to concentrate really hard. Before long, the craft rises up a little and slowly moves forward.

"He's doing it!" Varen screams, overcome with excitement, which of course makes Vim take his mind off his objective, and the craft settles back onto the fluff with a thump.

"Now look what you've done!" He yells. "Go on up, and let me do this by myself."

Villy and Varen decide to do just that and start up the hill once more. Vim, determined to achieve his goal, begins to concentrate again. Finally, the craft inches upward until there is at least six inches between it and the fluff.

"Yes! Let it be so... I'll show those silly girls," Vim breathes. Thump, it falls again. Once more, he tries to raise the craft and is successful. This time, he even advances up the hill and makes it about halfway before he loses it, and it hits the fluff again. The craft lands and slides, zipping to the bottom, where it crashes into a tree. Vim sails out and lands in a tangle of arms, in the fluff. Quickly, he bounces up and brushes himself off, hoping the girls did not see him. As he peers up the hill, he sees them just going in the side door of

the garage. He sighs and thinks, 'Oh well... It almost worked. All I have to do is practice. Maybe by the time dad gets home, I'll be able to do it!'

Suddenly, a noise catches Vim's attention. He whirls around, trying to locate the strange crackling sound. Just for a moment, he wonders if there are fluff monsters with heart pounding, and eyes wide with fear, he advances towards the noise, soon discovering that it is coming from the other side of the tree. There! He sees it, a hole partly covered with fluff. A dark hole, maybe a vortex tunnel. Carefully, Vim circles around the hole, keeping what he hopes is a safe distance between himself and the hole. The odd crackling noise is louder now, and then Vim sees an object lying partially covered in fluff. Could it be a little Virthling who's been sucked back to Virth? Right here in his own backyard? "Hey!" He says, "Are you alright? Are you hurt?" It crackles again, and he realizes it's a thing, not someone. But what?

"Can anyone hear me?" a voice suddenly demands, scaring Vim so badly that he falls over, which is nearly impossible for a Virthling to do. More crackling erupts, and Vim inches forward, determined to find out what the talking object actually is. Tentatively, he reaches out and brushes the white fluff off. It looks like a hand-held radio, only it is much bigger than any he's ever seen. Vim begins to realize that it must be from Earth.

"I said, can anyone hear me?" The voice is more demanding this time.

Vim takes a deep breath and stretches his arm a little further until he finds and presses the talk button on the radio. Trembling so badly he can hardly talk, he says, "I c-c-can h-

hear you." He knows this must be an Earthling he is talking to. "Where are you?"

"I dropped my sister's radio down a hole." The voice answers, "I thought it was gone for good... Where are you?"

"I'm in my backyard... Where are you?" Vim asks again.

"I'm in my backyard too. We must live near each other, but I don't know how the radio can go down a hole and get to your yard. Where do you live?" The voice is clearly puzzled.

Vim realizes that Earth people must not know about Vortex Tunnels, and this voice sounds like a kid. This isn't scary, Vim decides, and suddenly he is bristly with excitement instead of fear. "I live in Virth." He answers, then wonders if he should have lied; after all, this is a dangerous Earth child he is talking to.

"On First?" the voice on the radio says. "I think I know where that is. But what I don't know is how Carrie's radio can drop down a hole and end up over on First... What's your name?"

"Vim," Vim says. "What's yours?"

"James. Do you live on First and Brookdale? ... 'cause that might explain it... Brookdale is down the hill from here..."

"I don't know..." Vim admits. He has no idea how to answer that question.

"Are you new too?" James asks. "I am, and I can't remember my address yet either."

"Hey Tim, let's arrange to meet. I can get Carrie's radio back... and we can be friends. You will be the first friend I have here."

"Uh... I can't" Vim says... "Sorry, but I'm... grounded."

"Oh darn! I've been grounded before," James sympathizes. "Well, we can talk like this until you're not anymore, and then we can meet... You will still be my first new friend."

"Okay, James... I want to be your friend. I have to go in now, though. If my sisters come out here, I'll be in trouble."

"I know how sisters are," James replies. "I'd trade mine for a brother any day... Talk to you later then... after dinner."

Vim sighs and answers, "I can't, James. It'll have to be in the morning... cause I'm grounded and have extra chores."

James sighs too, "I understand... and no telephone calls either, huh?"

"No. We don't have a telephone... only radios, but I'll get a hold of you in the morning."

"Sounds good. Talk to you then. Over and out, Tim."

"Goodnight, James," Vim says and turns the radio off. Vim hides the radio and hurries up the hill, pulling his craft behind him, all thought of levitation far from his mind for the moment. He cannot believe what just happened! He talked to an Earthling... and nothing terrible happened. It's like a miracle, and one he cannot talk about just yet. His mom would panic and call the First Virth Force, and they would come and destroy the tunnel.

Later that night, as Vim lies in his new craft, staring up at the ceiling, he imagines all sorts of things... Mom finds the radio and wants an explanation... The Vortex sucks him through the hole... and what if James is a destructive Earth child... would he be torn up by the boy who says he wants to be his friend? "I will only know if I wait and see!" Vim tells himself, and with a huge, troubled sigh, Vim drifts off to sleep, where his dreams are much more pleasant than his worries.

When the morning light filters through the window, and the velvet song birds sing songs of a new day, Vim wakes and sits up in his craft. Life is great, and he has a new friend. A friend from Earth, named James. A boy who is not at all scary, and who wants to be his friend forever!

The day certainly does start well. Veth Vester comes to spend the day with Villy, and Mom takes Varen shopping. The only difficulty is trying to explain why he doesn't want to go to town with them. Vim loves town. He goes every chance he gets, and turning it down brings mom's eyebrows down in a frown.

"Are you all right, Vim? Why don't you want to come with us? Are you done with your Christmas shopping?" Vecky asks her son with concern.

"I'm fine, Mom... I'm just busy today, and it's a secret. Please don't ask me what it is." Vim pleads, feeling good about telling the truth, and still keeping his secret.

"We will see you when we get home then... Have a good day, Son."

Vecky hugs Vim. Mother and daughters hurry to the mobile and go shopping.

"They'll probably stop for ice cream," Vim sighs, as he watches them leave.... but even the thought of this cannot keep his thoughts from James, his new Earth friend.

The first thing Vim did after they left was to check the cords on his harness and make sure they were strong. He planned to tie himself to something sturdy before approaching the tunnel, just in case it was to become active again. It wasn't as though he was a baby. He was being very careful, and in the end, when he tells dad, dad would be very proud of him.

Vim remembered stories told by the men in the Virth Force of how their harnesses had saved their lives many times in perilous situations. One time, his dad had been caught out in the desert on Earth, and a whirling wind that looked like a giant funnel was coming right at him. It was called a dust devil. He tied his harness to a bush and crawled as far under the bush as he could. The monster wind tore him from his hiding place, but could not loosen the cords that held him, and although he was bruised, scuffed, and a bit lopsided for a while, he lived to tell the story. Come to think of it, his dad had told him that story last year when he'd decided that a harness was for babies, and he had outgrown his.

Vim tied his craft to a tree a few feet away from the one with the tunnel, and then he tied his harness cords to his craft. If the tunnel became active, it would not be able to suck his craft in... but if he was caught in there, and held by the cords... would it rip him apart? Vim's velvet bristled at the

thought of something so horrifying, and he used extra caution as he approached the hole. He found the radio with no trouble and wiped the fluff from it.

"Hello James... are you there?" He said into the radio. "James! Can you hear me?"

Crackle, crackle went the static in the radio, but no James. Vim was just thinking that he would never talk to the Earth boy again, when a sleepy-sounding voice answered, "Tim... is that you? What time is it?"

Vim looks at his watch. "Eight o'clock, James... Did I wake you up?"

"Yes, but that's okay. I have a doctor's appointment at nine. My mom will be in to wake me up soon anyway. How early do you get up in the mornings?" James asks with a yawn.

"Oh, sometimes I sleep in, but not very often. I'm always up by at least eight thirty... Are you sick?" Vim asks.

"Oh no," James denies, "I was in a car accident five months ago, and I still have therapy and doctor appointments." James changes the subject, "I don't like to talk about that, so let's talk about other stuff, okay?"

"Sure. I feel that way about something, too. I've been wondering if I can use my own radio to talk to you, and then I can send your sister's back." Vim says.

"You mean through the mail?" James asks.

"No. Through the tu... uh... hole. You know... The same way it got here." Vim replies.

"But it can't fall back uphill, Tim. I don't understand how that would work..." James frets.

"I've been thinking about that. I have a remote-control four-wheel drive truck, and I think it might be strong enough to pull it through. Maybe we can try it anyway," Vim says excitedly. "But first, I want to see if I can reach you on my own radio..."

Vim is surprised at how fast James gets off the radio when his mom wants him... Yet when the situation is reversed, the boy won't get off the radio without several explanations of why he has to go... Vim chuckles and wonders what James would do if he did the same thing to him... Just for fun, of course.

While James is away at the doctor's, Vim makes good use of his time. He moves several rather large rocks over to the hole and places them so that once the large beach ball is strapped into place, he won't have to move it again to talk to James.

After about half an hour, Vim is satisfied with the setup and sprays the whole area with white paint to match the fluff. If the tunnel is still present in the spring, he will paint it again with green paint. How long, he wondered, could he keep the secret of James, the Earth boy? Actually, it was really Varen he had to worry about. Whenever he had any secrets, she was the one who generally discovered them. Sometimes she wouldn't tell, but he knew she would tell about this because she would be afraid of the tunnel. It would be so great if someday the tunnels could be a good thing, and the people of Virth could learn to use them safely, and not be afraid of them... but then how many Virthlings would actually want

to talk to Earthlings anyway? Only the kids, probably. Any kid would think it was fun. He wondered if this had ever happened before to someone, and they had never told anyone about it... Could he keep his secret forever?

It was odd how time and measurements could be the same in Virth as on Earth, yet everything else was different. Many people on Earth did not get along, and wars were started over almost anything, it seemed. He was truly glad he lived in Virth, even if he could not help being so curious about Earth.

About one o'clock that afternoon, Vim went back to the tree with his own radio and tried to call James. The first thing he noticed was that there was not so much static, and when James finally answered, his voice was clear and easy to understand. James noticed the difference also.

"Wow... Your radio works better than Carrie's. She was asking me about her radio again, and said she'd tell mom if I don't give it back."

"I brought my truck. I'll try to send it back now," Vim told James.

"Yes. Now is a good time for me too. My sister is making Christmas cookies, and she won't find out about you. She would ruin everything if she knew... then she would want to talk to your sisters all the time."

"That would be a disaster," Vim agreed. "Okay, I have the radio tied to the truck. The truck is a lot smaller. I hope this works..."

"Vim! Come and help carry groceries!" Varen's voice rang out, scaring Vim. He dropped his radio and had to

scramble to pick it up. "Oh no!" He said to James. "My mom and little sister just came home. I have to go help carry stuff. I'll get back as soon as I can."

James said, "I have to go shopping this afternoon, so I guess we'll have to try it tonight or in the morning."

"Tonight then... I don't want to wait until morning," Vim said, and quickly added, "over and out," cutting the conversation off before Varen could come down and get him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Vim still had to buy gifts for Villy and his mother. He had thought about it over and over, but his mind was blank. Varen had been easy. She loved dolls and hand-held electronic games. Villy had become a bit strange, though, and who knew what she would like... Mom seemed to have everything.

Suddenly, an idea came to him. He would ask Mom what Villy would like, and he'd ask Villy to give him an idea of what to get for Mom. As he worried about this dilemma, he also kept an eye on his watch and hoped that dinner would not be late. Maybe if he helped with the preparation, he could hurry it along. Vim hoped to be out at the tree by no later than seven... eight at the latest. He wasn't sure what time James had to go to bed, but he knew Mom would want him in the house by eight-thirty at least.

Vim wandered into the kitchen, as though it was normal for him to be in there at that time of the day. He sat down at the table and slumped forward. "I have a problem, Mom. I don't know what to get for Villy. She's different than she used to be..."

"I know, honey. She is beginning to grow up, and right now she doesn't even know herself what she wants. It's a difficult time for her, so I hope you can have patience with

her. One day, you will go through this also. I did, and so did Daddy."

"But what do you think she would like for Christmas?" Vim insisted.

"She would like pretty things like hair clips with flowers and butterflies, or a nice apron. She is beginning to take an interest in cooking..."

"Speaking of cooking, Mom... can I help with dinner tonight?" Vim remembers to ask.

Vecky laughs. "Does this mean you have an interest in cooking? Or that you are hungry?"

"I'm starved, Mom. Can we have tater tots and hamburgers?" Vim asks. "Can I cook the hamburgers?"

"Do you want to try the new indoor grill, or cook outside?" His mom asked, one eyebrow raised as she wondered what he was really up to.

Vim sees the eyebrow, and he tries to think of something that will sound normal. Instead, he just says, "Well, I thought if I offered to cook, we could eat earlier... Varen gets to help. I want to cook too. I'm never getting married, so I have to learn, don't I?"

"Go wash up then... and go to the fridge and get a bag of tots, and a package of hamburger. Oh yes, and the buns are in the pantry."

"I want to try the indoor grill," Vim says, as he floats up to the kitchen sink and pours dish soap in his hand. Of course, it's too much, and bubbles bounce everywhere as he scrubs his hands. Varen and Villy come into the kitchen as

Vim closes the lid on the grill. He grins at them. "Name your poison, cowboys, and line up at the bar," he drawls.

"Who do you think you are? John Wayne?" Villy asks.

"No. He's trying to copy the cowboy in that cartoon video Dad got on his birthday last year... remember?" Varen says. "The one with the space man in it."

"Oh. I didn't pay much attention to that one. I liked the one about the bride who always ran away. Now that was a cute movie." Villy chuckles as they both pay Vim no further attention. Vim begins to bristle from their calculated abuse, and then he remembers why he's cooking in the first place. He will soon be outside talking to James, and Villy and Varen will never know about it... which means, no matter how smart they are, he will always know more than they do!

So, Vim just grins at them and pours the tots onto a cookie sheet, ready to slide them into the oven when Mom says it's time.

Villy stares at Vim with narrowed eyes and says, "What are you up to, Vim? You have been a little odd the last few days.... Don't you think so, Varen?... Maybe Vim has a girlfriend."

"Nope," Varen says firmly. "Girls don't like Vim."

Vecky comes back into the kitchen in time to hear this. "Now that is a mean thing to say, Varen!" she scolds. "You must apologize to your brother."

"It's okay, Mom. I don't like girls either, so it's even." Vim wrinkles his nose at Varen, and puffs his cheeks out at her... a face guaranteed to infuriate her.

Varen stares back and crosses her eyes, and mouths, "Vim, Vim, Vim."

Villy decides to put a stop to this behavior before Mom gets mad at everyone... after all, Dad did ask her to help Mom with the two brats. "Come on, Varen, let's go through my closet. I have some things you might like to have. I'm going to give most of my toys away this year at the town tree." "Can I have your Sally doll?" Varen asks, all of her attention now on Villy. "Please, please. I've always wanted her."

"I'll think about it," Villy promises. "Come on, let's hurry. We wouldn't want to miss dinner tonight!"

"Vim will probably burn everything," Varen grumbles as they float away up the stairs.

Vim's meal was just right, and he could not help but feel just a little proud as he watched his family eat. Mom's chocolate pudding cake was a big hit also... especially with Vim, as it was his favorite.

"Can I cook tomorrow?" Varen asked. "Can I please?"

"Of course, dear." Mother agreed. "If this works out just right, I might not have to cook anymore, at all."

"That's right, Mom. We'll cook, and you can do the dishes." Vim grinned.

"Maybe, I'd better reconsider this," Vecky muttered, but secretly she was pleased with her children and had enjoyed the evening.

Not long after the evening chores were done, the doorbell rang, and Vim opened the door to see the Vesters. Mrs. Vester, Veth, and the baby, Vonda. This worked out

perfectly for Vim. Now he knew he could go out to the tree and not have to worry about being followed. Veth and Villy would be upstairs playing music, and Varen would take on the job of babysitter while Mrs. Vester and Mom were visiting. James was waiting and answered right away. He sounded a little odd, and his voice was sort of trembling. "Hey, Tim, what took you so long?" He asked Vim.

"Well, I cooked dinner, so I could get out of here sooner, but then we had company, and I had to be polite for a while. I got here as soon as I could," Vim apologized.

"That's okay. It's just so dark out here. I feel better now that I can talk to you," James admitted.

"Do you have a flashlight?" Vim asked.

"Yes... But that just makes spooky shadows. I guess you think I'm a baby now, don't you, Tim?"

"No, I don't like the dark sometimes either, but if it helps any, my dad says there's nothing in the dark that isn't there in the daytime."

"My dad is in the military. He's over there where all the bombing is... I worry about him a lot. He's probably on guard duty right now... and it's probably dark there too."

"Pretend he's on guard right there beside you, James. That's what I do when my dad's gone on a mission."

"A mission? He's in the service too, like my dad? Does he write to you?"

"He only takes short missions. He'll be back in a few days. He's on a rescue team, and they've gone to bring home some of our people. You see, here in Virth."

"Did you say Virth?" James asks... "That's a good name for a planet. I know... I will be Captain James from Virth, and you will be Captain Tim from Earth, okay?"

"Sure... But James, my name is Vim... with a V. I guess if we're going to be friends, we'd better be honest about stuff."

"Okay... You're right. I have something I should tell you, too, Vim.

So, you won't be shocked when we meet." James says seriously. "I-uh... can't walk. I'm in a wheelchair. I have been since the car accident....and it's ... I hate it."

James sounds so sad about it. Vim hurries to reassure him that it makes no difference in their friendship. "I can't walk either, James. I've never walked, but I get around just fine, and you will too." Vim tells him.

"You can't walk either, Vim? What happened to you?" James gasps.

"I was born like this. I don't have feet... and I never needed them to get around."

"What? Don't you have feet? But Vim..." James is too upset to finish.

"Don't feel sorry for me, James. I can do a lot of other things, and I tell you, no one really needs feet. I would like to have a chair like yours, though. I bet it's fun. Do you ever race people?"

"Yes. I did today when I went to the doctor's office. There was this other kid there in a wheelchair, and he said, 'Bet I can beat you to the end of the hall,' and guess what,

Vim! He did too... and my chair has a motor, and his doesn't. That made me feel stupid."

Vim laughed. He couldn't help it. He could just picture the whole thing. "Don't feel bad, James. He's probably had more practice. So, see, that's what you have to do, get out and practice until no one can beat you. Maybe I'll get a chair, and you and I can race someday."

"You know how to make me feel better, Vim. I'm glad you're my friend." James laughed just as loud as Vim had.

"Maybe since I don't have any feet, I should be the alien, James."

"Oh no, you don't. You said feet don't matter... and I called dibs on it first. But you can be the alien next time." James was back in good spirits now, and had even forgotten for a while that it was dark, and he was afraid of the dark.

"How old are you, James?" Vim asked after they stopped laughing.

"I'm ten. I turned ten last month." James answered.

"I'll be ten on the twenty-ninth of this month," Vim said. "We'll be ten together for almost a year."

"Boy, you could have had a problem... You were almost born on Christmas, dude! Your Christmas presents would have been your birthday presents too."

"I know, I've thought about that... but hey. We'd better send this radio back if we're going to do it tonight. I already have the truck tied to the radio. It's smaller than the radio, but really strong. I think it can make it. Only it might get stuck in between, and never get there." Vim warned, wanting to prepare James for the worst. Well, the worst that James

could know about anyway. The truth was that the worst that could really happen was if he got sucked in along with the truck and radio. Wouldn't that surprise James? Yeah, but he had to make sure that did not happen.

"Vim, if we lose it, I'll just buy a new set of radios for Carrie. We're doing our best, and no one will blame you." James hurried to assure Vim. "So, let's do it, Buddy, before my mom finds out I'm not in my room reading."

"What do you like to read?" Vim asked, curious.

"I read Star Trek stuff and space books. I have a telescope, and I study the planets... and I always think I see spaceships... But I probably don't. Do you ever do that?" James asked softly.

"Yes. I always look at the stars and wonder about what's up there. I want to fly missions someday as my dad does. Now let's get this show on the road, dude. We could talk all night if we aren't careful.... okay! I just put the truck and radio in the hole. Listen for them... maybe you will hear them pretty soon." Vim said as he moved the ball back into place, and concentrated as hard as he could on moving the truck. The remote control just did not seem to be going fast enough, and mind power made a difference. In a while, Vim could no longer hear the slight rumble of the truck as it made its way through the dark, inactive tunnel. All was very quiet. Far away in the night, someone's dog barked, and once Vim heard a mobile out on the air path, but other than that, there was not a sound.

The lengthy silence was suddenly broken as James came on the radio.

"I think I hear it, Vim, but it isn't moving very fast. It sounds like the battery in the truck might be almost dead. I wonder just how far it is from your house to mine."

"Maybe someday we'll know, James. I hope the truck makes it. It better be soon... I just looked at my watch. We can't stay out much longer without being discovered. The only reason I've been lucky this long is that our company is still here."

"It's here, Vim. It worked. I don't know how, though. I've never seen a smaller truck. Don't you have any bigger ones?" James asked.

"Not that would fit in that hole," Vim answered.

"Oh yeah. That's true. Well, I'd better go in... and Vim, I want to thank you for being my friend. You made me feel a lot better tonight, about a lot of things. I'll pray for your dad when I say my prayers for my dad."

"Thank you, James. I will pray for your dad too... over and out."

"Yeah. Over and out." James echoed.

Right at that moment, Vim would not have traded this time tonight talking to James for anything in Virth... or out of it. He could not imagine knowing a nicer person than James, and Vim made up his mind right then and there that he would go to Earth and meet James someday. They would never lose touch, and they would always be friends. Something good would come of this. It was almost as if they had been destined to meet and to become friends.

Vim sneaks into the house undetected and goes up to his room. Just as quietly, he gets ready for bed. If his light is off,

maybe he won't have to talk to anyone. They'll think he's already asleep. He just wants to think about James tonight and the things he has learned. "I'll never know enough about Earth." He whispers into the darkness. "Someday I will go there. And I'm not going to wait until I'm nineteen!"

That night, Vim dreams about getting sucked into a Vortex tunnel and being twisted, pulled, and battered as he goes through the tunnel. He does not end up even close to James and the Earth children; he does see that all have big, sharp teeth, and they run after him trying to eat him. He wakes up yelling, as his mom is just turning on the light in his room.

"Vim! What's wrong? Are you having a nightmare?"

"Yes, but I'm alright now... Mom, has Mrs. Vester heard from her husband... have you heard from Dad?"

"No, not exactly, but I called the base, and they have talked to them. They will be coming home soon."

"What about Von? Did they find him?" Vim asks hopefully.

"You know I couldn't ask that. We will know when Dad comes home. Until then, we have to wait and pray."

"I know, Mom, but waiting is hard." Vim sighs.

His mother brushes his hair back and kisses his forehead, "You need to have faith in your father's team, Vim. They are very good at what they do, and I am so proud of them."

"I am. I want to go with him... and it's hard to wait."

"Being able to wait is a sign of maturity. We must all learn to let events move at their own pace. Sometimes when

you rush into things, everything goes wrong. Have you noticed that? It's much better to go slower and get it right."

"I guess the rescue team has to do that too, or they would not find as many people... Like they'd get there too soon or leave about five minutes before they saw the person, they were searching for... like that, you mean?" Vim asks.

Vecky laughs, "Yes, like that... Now lay back and close your eyes. Think about Dad coming home on Christmas Eve. Think about every good thing you can think of, and you won't have any more nightmares..."

The next morning, as soon as Vim heard Villy moving around in her room, he crossed the hall and knocked on her door. "Can I borrow a book, Villy?" He asked. "I'd like to read about Earth."

Villy opened her door and stared at him in wonder for a moment. "Of course, you can. Come in and choose the one you want."

Later, as Vim read about the different countries and saw the maps of cities, he began to think that maybe Earth was not a place he would like to be without his parents. It would be very easy to get lost forever. Maybe that was why the age for passports was nineteen. In ten years, he'd be a lot smarter, and nothing would scare him then...

Perhaps he could eventually talk his dad into letting him go on a mission before his nineteenth birthday. Rules could change... and maybe if he studied hard, he could figure out a safer plan for tunnel use, and the return to Virth. The Virth Force would consider the possibility of allowing tunnel use. Maybe if the tunnels were able to be used for a good purpose,

they would no longer be the scary image used to frighten children. After all, hadn't he successfully used a tunnel without coming to harm? Surely something could be learned from that.

CHAPTER FIVE

Vim talked to James again the next morning. He and his family were leaving to spend four days at an aunt's house. That way, James explained, both families could talk to his dad when he called on Christmas Day. James was very excited about talking to his dad, and Vim calmed him down by asking him what he hoped to get for Christmas.

"I'd like a go-kart, Vim," James said. "Then I wouldn't be stuck in this chair all the time... And I'd like the new Star Trek game, and a bigger telescope... what do you want?"

Vim could get into this subject. "I want a spacecraft, so I can come and visit you someday, and I want a dog. I've always wanted to have a dog of my own... do you have a dog?"

"Oh yeah," James answered. "I got him for Christmas five years ago. Now it seems like we've had him forever. His name is Brutus. He's huge, bigger than me. He's a Saint Bernard, and once he swallowed a whole tennis ball, but it didn't hurt him."

Vim's eyes had grown big as he listened to this. Once his dad had brought them a tennis ball from Earth, and the ball had been bigger than he was... of course, that had been several years ago, and he was bigger now. But probably not enough.

"If I get a dog, it won't be that big," Vim said firmly. The two talked for about fifteen minutes, and then Vim heard James being called to come into the house.

"Well, bye for a while, Captain Vim, have a good Christmas, and I'll talk to you again as soon as I can."

"The same from me, Captain James. May all your voyages be good ones, over and out," Vim said sadly.

"Over and out," James repeated, and his radio went dead.

Vim truly felt as though he'd lost his best friend. With a huge sigh, he turned and floated up the hill to the house.

Vecky watched Vim come up the hill and could see that he was not feeling himself at all. Nor would she ask him what was bothering him, because that would probably make him feel worse. Instead, as he came into the kitchen, she gave him a great big smile and said, "I'm glad you came in. I'm going to town, and I could really use your help finding one more present for Daddy. I also thought you might want to get the gifts we were talking about for Villy and Varen."

Vim shrugged. "Sure, but I don't know what Dad would want unless, well... I wanted to get him a new toolbox, but I didn't have enough money."

"Of course! His is a bit beat up, isn't it? That's a great idea, Vim. You can show me the one you thought he would like." Vecky beamed. In reality, she had plenty of presents for all of her family, but she would get the toolbox for Vim to give to his father. That should take his mind off his problems!

"Let's hurry and go, so we can get back in time for Dad's call tonight. I'll just let the girls know we're leaving." Vecky said, rushing from the kitchen.

As they zoom along in the mobile, Vim cannot help but start a conversation about Earth. It's all that's on his mind. "Where exactly is Dad on Earth? I've been reading a book Villy loaned me, and it has maps, but Earth is so huge... It seems like it would be easy to get lost."

"He is in a place called Oregon. Oregon and California seem to be the areas where most poor little Virthlings end up. Actually, Oregon is much safer than California, as that place has earthquakes quite often. The ground breaks open, and the surface shifts. I really believe that might be what causes the tunnels to reach Virth."

"I would not like to be in a tunnel when an earthquake happened!" Vim said in alarm.

"You better not be in a tunnel at all, young man!" Vecky said sternly. "You know more about tunnels than most children, and you know how dangerous they are."

"Well, of course, and I try to be careful, but sometimes it just happens, doesn't it?" Vim asks, "I mean, most Virthlings don't want to go... It's an accident."

"One that can be avoided if you are very careful, Son. That is my biggest fear... One of my children will be sucked into a vortex tunnel, and I'll never see my baby again. Enough talk of tunnels. Let's talk about Christmas instead. Shopping will be fun today. Just the two of us, and then we will take pizza home for dinner, and no one will have to cook."

"Sounds good to me, Mom," Vim agrees, somewhat subdued.

Vim finds Villy a very nice desk calendar with a picture of her favorite singing group on each page. He bought clips for her hair and a really pretty apron that would look nice with pink velvet. He bounced with joy when his mom said he could give the toolbox to his dad, but not once did he have a chance to slip away and buy something for his mom and Varen. He wondered how he would manage that. Maybe Villy would be able to think of something. It would have to be quick. Christmas was very near!

Upon returning home, Vim sped upstairs to hide the presents until he had time to wrap them. The wrapping could wait... the pizza could not.

When dad calls, all of them take a turn talking to him, but no one asks anything about the mission. They learned not to do that when they were young. Nobody on a mission can discuss it until it is over. The airwaves are not safe when it comes to revealing secret activities. Vim has often wondered if the men have ever been picked up on the radios by someone from another place. Now, because of James, he knows just how easy that would be. Soon, after Dad gets back, he will have to tell him about James... but fear of being forbidden to ever speak to James again causes him a great deal of anguish. Before he says anything, he will have to make a plan. One that will hopefully have Dad understand his point of view.

Many things have caused Vim to rethink his idea of using a tunnel to go see James. He now knows that all kinds of

things could go wrong. An earthquake could happen while he was in the tunnel, and he could be torn apart or crushed, or he might come out in the ocean, and a big fish could eat him. Heck! The fish wouldn't even have to be very big. If he did get there, Brutus might eat him. He was beginning to think his best chance for going and surviving would be to talk his dad into understanding his side of the situation. So, for now, he decided he would enjoy the rest of the holiday and put the problem of James aside until later.

Vim can feel Christmas all through him. It feels good to relax and enjoy it. The whole house, inside and out, is beautiful. He still has to buy presents for Mom and Varen, but he has a few days left, and he feels sure that Villy will help him.

While Vim is in his room later that evening, wrapping presents, Villy is standing in the living room staring up at the angel on the top of the tree. Her mother comes in and slides an arm around her oldest daughter. "The angel is very beautiful, isn't she. I used to wish I could look just like that. Either an angel or a movie star. The movie stars on earth always look so great."

"Yes." Villy agrees, "They have feet and little waists, and they aren't all one color."

"I see you've thought about this a lot, Villy... as I did when I was your age".

"Why are we so ugly, Mom?... Why can't we look like that?" Villy moans.

"How can you say we are ugly? We are not ugly at all! When you were born, you were the most beautiful baby I'd

ever seen. All soft pink velvet and big blue eyes." "That's what Daddy said too, and Von even told me I'm the most beautiful girl he's ever seen, but he's gone, and I'll never see him again."

"You don't know that, Villy. I have faith in your father, and he said they would find Von. You must have faith also, and don't stop praying for his safety. I am quite sure that you will see Von again. Pray for Vim, too, while you are at it. He is just way too curious about Earth. I feel like he thinks of it as a wondrous place full of beauty and nice people."

"I always pray for Vim, Mom. He does not seem able to stand it unless he is in trouble or causing it." Villy frowns.

"He will outgrow that, dear. I remember when all you, Veth, and Von could talk about was Earth. I bet the Earth children who have seen Virthlings talked about us, only they were probably scolded and told to stop making up stories." Vecky pats Villy's arm and then leads her off to the kitchen to help plan Christmas Day dinner.

"And remember, sweetheart, not everyone needs to look like a movie star or an angel. The poor children on earth who aren't just perfect often have a sad life, if they let it bother them. At least here we are all just as we are supposed to be, and no one is ridiculed for their looks."

Suddenly, Villy smiles. A wide, beaming smile. "You are right, Mom. I would never want to live on Earth, so why do I want to look like an Earthling, right? And of course, they would not like to look like us."

"Right!... Now, do you want to make the yams and the yeast rolls? You do that so well. Varen has called dibs on mashing the potatoes, although she doesn't want to peel or

cook them, and Vim likes to make the gravy! I don't know how women without children ever put a meal together."

"I'm going to miss you, Mom, when I grow up and have to leave," Villy says with a sigh.

"You don't ever have to leave. That will be your choice, and if that time comes when you want to go, you had better come to visit often!"

"Or you'll ground me?" Villy says, and they both laugh at the thought... They are still laughing when Varen comes into the kitchen.

"What's so funny?" She demands. Sitting at the table, she looks suspiciously from her mother to Villy.

"We are just very happy, sweetie. Soon, Daddy will be home with us, and we will all be singing Christmas carols and exchanging presents... are you excited too?"

And so, the conversation goes, with talk of holiday fun and things to come.

Vim has finished wrapping all of his presents and is staring out the window at the new fluff drifting down. He suddenly decides to go out and make a huge fluff man, and put a First Virth Force hat on it. He'll try to make it look like Dad. Maybe the girls will want to help.

The yard around the Vanson house soon looks very inhabited with all sorts of extra fluff, people, and pets. Of course, the children can only work together just so long before the idea of heaving fluff balls at each other takes over. From then until bedtime, it is an attack in full force on everything that moves, including mom, who gets into the

game and proves that age has not taken her edge. She cheerfully holds her own.

The next morning, Vim woke up early, thinking that he had to go out and talk to James before the girls came out to find him, but then he remembered that James was gone. Still, he found himself putting on his harness and sliding down the hill to the tree.

Immediately, he saw that something was not right... Horrified, Vim saw the red ball jumping and bouncing on the cords that tied it above the now active vortex tunnel.

Vim panics. He must save Varen's red beach ball! It looked like a living thing trying to get away. If it got sucked down the hole, it would end up in James' backyard.

Can he save it? He has to try. Vim is afraid, but he is not a coward, so he ties his harness cords to a tree and carefully creeps towards the swirling, bouncing ball. As he grabs a cord, the ball jerks him around right off the ground. He screams, terrified now and does not care who hears him.

A loud popping sound, and the ball is punctured, allowing it to be sucked into the tunnel, taking Vim with it.

Noise as loud as thunder roars coming from all directions and when the buckles on his harness strike rocks, sparks fly.

As he crashes through the dimensional barrier, far from Virth, closer to Earth, the centrifugal force causes Vim to lose consciousness.

A feeling of peace settles around him and he moans softly. He tries to move and he can't. Is he dead? There is a light at the end of the tunnel just like he saw once in an Earth

movie. Soon he would go towards the light and he would be in heaven...

He feels like he is being tugged towards the light. Not heaven then. It is growling and it must be a bear... or a wolf. No a dog yes. James' dog Brutus. The dog that can swallow tennis balls whole. Vim begins to struggle and manages to free his arm from the tangled cords.

Scrambling away from danger, he tries to think. He can't die now. Not here in this tunnel, never to see his family again.

Determination, mind power, and prayer will save him! He must calm down. Remember the deep breathing and concentration exercises his Mom taught him.

Vim begins to feel better and he levitates until he comes to a place that is too narrow. Then he remembers Varen jumping on him to help him get out of the toy tunnel. Yes! He can push his body into a slimmer shape and work his way up while using mind power to keep him from sliding back down.

Vim lost track of time. He knew it would probably be dark when he made it back home and he would for sure be in trouble.

When he heard a very welcome voice, he realized he was finally home. Varen's voice, "Vim! You better answer me. You are in SO much trouble. People are looking for you and I know you are hiding out here. This is not funny!"

Vim felt like laughing with joy. He had to figure out what he could say besides.

"Guess what ... I almost made it to Earth."

Finally, he had to do the right thing and make sure the tunnel wasn't dangerous anymore. But what about James? He should at least talk to him one more time.

The next morning, he decided to put the old motor over the tunnel. Vim had thought he was being safe, and the tunnel could not hurt anyone. He had been so wrong! A force that strong could pull him right out of his harness... How stupid could he have been? What if Varen had come down to the tree? She would not have known, and it would have been his fault...

Now it's time for him to finally do the right thing. He should tell his Mom and let the tunnel be destroyed... Surely, he should be able to figure out a way. 'Think Vim! Think!' He mutters, still in shock. And then he has it. The old mobile motor dad keeps in the back room of the garage should effectively block any vacuum. It's heavy. Very heavy, and yet has small spaces in it that will allow him to talk to James.

Getting it down there would be another problem. Two or three people together could think it down the hill, but he had no one to help him. Not his sisters... They would tell on him, and say it was for his own good. He would just have to do it by himself.

Vim found a heavy old tarp to put in his craft, and covered the whole bottom, for the motor was prone to leak oil, and that's why it had been replaced. With the help of a hoist, he managed to lift it and swing it into the craft. In fact, it went so smoothly that Vim once again felt that he was in control of the situation. He almost got smug about it, but before it turned to full-fledged smugness, Varen floated up behind him and grabbed his arm... with a gasp, Vim flipped

upside down from being startled, and then glared up at her as he righted himself. "Why do you do that, Varen? Stop sneaking up on people!"

"Why are you messing with that old motor? Dad said we should stay away from it."

Vim had to think of something quick. "I-uh-I'm going to fix it and surprise Dad. I think I'll become a Mobile Mechanic. Yeah... That's what I'm going to be someday."

Varen snickered. "Oh, you are not. You want to join the Virth Force, and you know it. You're just going to get black stuff all over you and make Mom mad."

"Don't tell on me, Varen. It's going to be a surprise for Dad. Come on, help me fix it. We shouldn't get too much oil on us if we're careful."

"No! How disgusting... You will so get black, and you'll be all messed up for Christmas... Come on, Vim... let's play something else." Varen pleads. "Please?"

Vim almost wishes everything was normal, so he could play with Varen. He realizes that he misses their time together. But for now, he must stick with his plan and block the tunnel before someone gets hurt or lost.

"Let me play with this for a while, okay? And then I'll come and find you, and we'll play anything you want."

"Even house?" Varen asks slyly. "You can be the mean uncle."

"The uncle isn't mean, Varen... He just likes to tease." Vim says sticking up for his inventive character. "And yes, I'll even play house with you. Only we have to play it outside in a fluff fort."

"That's not playing house! That's playing fort! How stupid do you think I am?" Varen demands. "But if you don't hurry up, I won't play with you at all."

"I promise, I'll hurry," Vim assures her. "I'll just take it apart, and I won't start fixing it until tomorrow."

"Well, hurry up then. If you get black on you, you'll spend all day getting it off... Mom will be mad, and Dad will be mad... You're going to get in so much trouble!"

At the top of the hill, Vim positioned the craft just right in case it took off, and he had no control over it. At least this way, it would end up almost exactly where it was supposed to be. It did exactly, not almost, what it was meant to do. It landed against the tree with a thump that shook fluff from the branches, and after that, he only had to move it about a foot over to cover the hole. Once positioned correctly, he covered it with branches and fluff to hide the motor...

Now, if the vortex vacuum sucked the motor into that little hole, he would gladly see it destroyed by the Virth Force, and he would grow up to be a tunnel hunter, and he'd track them all down and destroy every one of them until tunnels did not even exist.

Vim went to find Varen and follow through with his promise, but by the time he found her, things had changed. Now Varen was going to watch baby Vonda for Mrs. Vester while Villy went to town with the Vesters. Vim knew he had to go too. It might be the last chance he had to shop for Mom and Varen. Quietly, he told Varen of his dilemma, and she agreed that he should go.

Vim almost felt like giving her a kiss on the cheek, but not quite. Villy asked Mrs. Vester if Vim could go to town

with them, and she was more than happy to have him along. In town, Vim hurried with his shopping so he would have time to go to the arcade and play video games. He hoped he would see some of his friends from school, but knew that most of them were away for the holidays. He had bought Varen's two puzzles and a girl movie. For Mom, he got a pair of matching gloves, a hat, a scarf, and a painting of baby Jesus in the manger, which was painted by a local artist. As he was passing a store window, he happened to glance over and see a beautiful shawl, like the one in pictures of Mary. It was gold, pink, and silver, made of soft, glorious material. It would look so good on Mom! He was dismayed when he saw the price tag. It was twenty dollars more than he had. He didn't know if Villy would even have the extra money to loan him. He gave a deep sigh and was talking himself into forgetting all about it when he noticed that a girl inside the shop was about to drop a huge stack of boxes she was carrying. Vim hurried indoors to help her. He made it just in time to fling himself forward and catch the boxes.

A woman rushed towards them, her silver velvet glowing with aggravation. She scolded, "Vada, for heaven's sake, what were you thinking? Trying to carry all those boxes at once! You could have broken our antique cups... My, my... You are very lucky this nice boy happened along when he did.

Whatever were you thinking?"

"I'm sorry, Gramma... I wanted to finish this so I wouldn't be late for the movies." The mint green girl explained that her velvet is now a pale green.

"You wouldn't be going anywhere, at least for a month, if you had broken these cups, young lady!" The older woman declared. "Thanks to this nice boy, you have been saved. What is your name, boy?" She demanded of Vim.

"Vim Vanson." He told her shyly.

"I am Vaple Versalle', and this is my granddaughter, Vada. We are indebted to you, sir. Do you come here to shop for presents? You must pick out something nice for a lady in your family, and we will wrap it for you. Do you see something you like?"

"Well, I do like that shawl in the window, but I'm a little short on the price..."

"Nonsense... Vada, you wrap the shawl for Mr. Vanson, and I will take these boxes to the store room myself."

"But I don't have the money, Miss Vaple..." Vim tried to explain.

"You have saved us considerably more than the cost of the shawl, and we are much in your debt."

"My sister is green," Vim said to Vada, just for something to say, as he tried not to feel so odd about what had just happened.

"I wish I had a sister... or a brother. I'm an only child, and when my parents disappeared, I came to live with my Gramma." Vada sighed. "They got sucked into a tunnel, and they have been gone for over a year. I still pray they will come home."

"Has the First Virth Force looked for them?" Vim asked, dismayed at the thought of losing parents.

"Yes... But the tunnel they went through closed in right behind them, and we have no way of knowing if... if..." Vada could not continue. She brushes away a tear and finishes wrapping the package. "I hate Earth." She says calmly, in a matter-of-fact tone.

Vim did not know what to say to that. He supposed if he'd lost family members, he would feel the same way. To change the subject, he asked, "What movie are you going to watch?"

"One about fluff dogs. They pull a sled and do all kinds of funny things... Would you like to go with us? Four of my friends are going, and you would make an even six."

"Well... it sounds great. But I came to town with our neighbors, and I have to go back with them. Maybe another time, though." Vim says.

"Sure. Let me give you my radio number. You can call me." Vada looked down shyly, and he couldn't help but notice how long her eyelashes were. They were dark like her hair. Almost black. Her eyes were a golden brown. Vim thought he had never seen a prettier girl, and that, of course, made him turn a shade brighter. Vada handed him the package, which was wrapped in red and gold paper and had a metallic gold bow. He just knew it would be the prettiest package under the tree, and he wondered if Vada was flirting with him, and if she was, what should he do? He didn't know how to flirt back, and wouldn't even if he did, but she was pretty.

"Here's my number, Vim. Call me some time," she said with a smile.

"I will." He mumbled and thanked her for wrapping the present before he floated out of the shop, at least a foot further from the ground than normal, or so it seemed to him.

CHAPTER SIX

The morning before Christmas, Vim, Varen, and Villy rushed about helping with morning chores, so they could finish sooner. All of the children in Virth were no doubt doing the same thing. At noon, they would have a neighborhood bonfire and roast marshmallows and hot dogs, and then take a sleigh ride all over the place, and even into town. That lasted for at least four hours, and just before it began to get dark, everyone got together to stand around the town tree, which was always the tallest tree around. There, they gave away presents to all of the town children, and the mayor told stories about Santa and all the great Christmas holidays of years before. He especially liked to bring up the adventures of people who were now adults, but had been very exuberant as youngsters, and caused no end of excitement. That was always Vim's favorite part of the evening. He had learned of a few incidents his dad had not mentioned to them.

The children bundled up, just so they could pretend the fluff was real snow, and waited outside for mom to join them before racing ahead to reach the bonfire, which was already lit and in use. Everyone went to find their willow sticks for roasting and had them ready when Mom finally arrived. She, of course, had been waylaid by all of the other ladies along the way.

Pleasantries took a long time on holiday occasions.

Vim looked across the blazing fire and saw Mark Miller, a Mirthling, a friend he'd met the year before. "Mark!" He yelled, "Over here!"

Mark floated over and was all grins and greetings. "I haven't seen you for months, Vim. You don't get to town very often, do you?"

"Not lately." Vim said, "I've been pretty busy. Are you just here for the evening?"

"Yes. My sister is visiting friends, and she let me come along. Our dad said we have to be home for Christmas Day."

"Get a stick. You can share our food." Vim told him, and soon both boys were bouncing around with blazing marshmallows, chasing the girls and shrieking with laughter.

Vecky watched Vim and smiled. She was glad to see that he was back to his normal behavior. She did wish there were more boys in their neighborhood. Vim needed boys to play with, to keep his mind busy, and prevent him from aggravating the girls.

Soon, everyone was stuffed and ready to go when the sleigh pulled by two huge velvet horses came to a stop at the edge of the crowd. The children all piled on and away they went, while the mothers and fathers stood waving them on. Vecky went back home to wait for the return of her children and actually found extra work, which would keep her busy and take her mind off Verry. She could hardly wait for him to call and say he was back.

By the time the sleigh reached town, there were over twenty kids already on it, but it was a long sleigh, able to

carry many more. Children raced alongside until the driver made a stop, and then floated up, finding a place to sit. Vim was trying to make Varen think he would throw her off when a voice at the end of the sleigh called his name. "Vim! Hey, Vim... I thought that was you. Come and meet my friends," Vada Versalle called.

Vim spotted her through the crowd, but wondered for a moment if he could get away with pretending he hadn't heard her.

"Vim!" Villy said, nudging him. "Some girl is calling your name... Ha! I knew you had a girlfriend."

"Vim has a girlfriend! Vim has a girlfriend!" Varen chanted gleefully.

"Shut up! No, I don't." Vim said through gritted teeth.

"Hey, Vim Vanson, come over here," Vada called again.

Mark began to laugh until he nearly rolled off the sleigh. Vim tackled him, and they both went off together. As they sat in the fluff watching the sleigh pull away, Mark said, "Well, that's one way to get out of it."

"What do you mean? I'm not trying to get out of anything!" Vim said.

"Oh yes, you are. You didn't want to talk to that girl in front of your sisters, did you?" Mark laughed and bounced up, brushing the fluff off himself. "Come on. Let's catch up to the sleigh and get back on."

Vim actually zoomed for the first time in his life. "Yes!" He laughed as he reached the sleigh ahead of his friend. "Come on, Mark, and I'll introduce you to those girls."

"I didn't say I wanted to talk to them," Mark replies as he catches up, "I said you were trying to avoid it."

"So now I'm not, and you are?" Vim asked. "There's a really pretty girl with Vada who had an eye on you, dude."

"Dude? What kind of thing is that to call someone?" Mark asked, adding, "And I don't want to meet any girls. That seems to be your department."

The problem is solved; when the sleigh stops, Vada and her friends drop off to join Vim and Mark. There are six girls and three boys. Vada introduces everyone, and then they float along behind the sleigh for a while before getting back on. Vim thinks Vada the prettiest of all the girls, but tries very hard not to stare at her. Mark has his own problem. One of the girls is a Mirthling Mark knows. She decides it is meant to be, so they should hang out together! After all, since they met so conveniently, it has to be fate. Mark looks at Vim and rolls his eyes as the girl actually loops her arm through his. Vim takes pity on his friend and runs interference. "Sorry, but Mark and I have to run an errand for my mom, but we'll see you again at the town tree." With that, Vim pulls Mark away with him, and both boys head towards the corner store.

"I would thank you for that, Vim, but you are the one who caused it in the first place."

"Yeah, but I saved you in the end, and that's what counts." Vim grinned. "I'll buy you a hot chocolate, and then we'll walk over to the tree."

"I wonder how old we'll be when we start to like girls." Mark mused.

"Not for a long time. We don't need to worry about that for a while."

Vim assures him, and they went into the warm store that smells of green apples and cinnamon.

Later, when they reach the tree, they all stand together, and Vim introduces Villy and Varen to Vada and her friends. Eventually, Mark walks over to stand by his sister and her boyfriend, and Vim just tries to pay attention to what the mayor is saying. Vada ends up standing close to him, almost like they are a couple, and Vim spends the rest of the evening in a darker blue.

Just before the sky darkens, Vecky finds her children and asks if they are ready to go home and meet up with their neighbors for the rounds of Christmas carols. The children are indeed ready to go. Vim is hungry again and knows Mom has probably been home baking all sorts of goodies, just to keep busy.

Vim went up to his room to bring all his presents down and arrange them under the tree when he suddenly heard static on his radio. His first thought is that James is trying to reach him, and he feels a flood of happiness. Grabbing up the radio, he races down the stairs and out the door, so he can be by the tunnel for better reception.

Vim is out of breath, mostly with excitement, by the time he reaches the tree. "Captain James? Is that you?" he says into the radio. There is a hesitation, and then a voice says, "Captain James?... This is your father, Vim. Who is Captain James?"

Vim is speechless. After a few seconds, he manages to squeak out, "Hi Dad... Where are you?"

"Almost home. Mom's radio must be shut off. I've been trying to reach her... so, I decided to call you. Who is Captain James?"

Vim is caught! He can't lie to his Dad... Dad always knows. But maybe he can put it off, just for a little while. "Can I tell you later, Dad? I'm just in the middle of something, so I'll go tell mom to put her radio on... okay?" Vim adds hopefully.

"Yes, Son. We will talk later. Get your mother for me." Dad says, and the weight lifts off Vim's shoulders for now. "Mom! Mom!" He yells as he hurries back to the house. "Dads on the radio, Mom. Turn on your radio!"

Vecky is all smiles as she turns her radio on to talk to Verry. Vim, feeling as limp as Varen's last year's rag doll, bobs up the stairs to get his packages. "Oh man, that was close. What if I'd said Earth to Virth?"

"What are you muttering about, Earth?" Villy asks from her bedroom doorway across the hall.

"Nothing," Vim said. "Dad just called. He's back."

"Did he say anything about... did he..." Villy couldn't go on.

"He didn't say anything about the mission, just that he would be home soon," Vim says.

"Oh... well, I guess we'll know soon enough." Villy returns with a heavy sigh and closes her door. Clutching all of his wrapped packages, except for the toolbox, which is too big, Vim goes downstairs. As he arranges them under the

tree along with everyone else's, he notices presents that have his name on the tags. Normally, he would have picked them up and shaken all of them at least once. This year, he has more than presents on his mind. He is wondering how much trouble he is going to be in for not telling Mom about the tunnel. Vim listens to the one-sided conversation Mom has with Dad, and is relieved when it appears as though his father did not mention 'Captain James'. As Vim is on his way back up the stairs to get the toolbox, Vecky calls, "Hurry, kids. Dad has paperwork to do yet, and then he will meet us out in the neighborhood as we are caroling. Put on your brightest hats and scarves, and let's go have fun... Where's Varen?"

"Varen is still wrapping. She's almost finished." Villy yells to her mother, "Come on, Varen. Hurry." She urges her little sister. "Dad's back. He's meeting us during the caroling."

The Vanson family is halfway around the neighborhood, singing songs and shouting, "Merry Christmas!" to friends, when Verry floats up to join them. The children rush to hug their father, even Vim is not too old for that this time, and Mother gets her fair share of hugs too. A minute later, a blood-curdling shriek startles everyone, and Vera Vester is saying, "Von! Oh, my baby, you are back!" She sobs as she hugs him, and everyone else has tears in their eyes, too. They are all happy for the Vester family... Villy is standing as though in shock. Afraid to believe she is really seeing Von, and then he turns and holds his arm out to Villy, and she goes to him. His family and Villy all stand close in a giant hug, and everyone else begins to cheer and clap their hands.

Vim stares with round eyes at his sister and Von. He has to wonder if they are boyfriend and girlfriend... Villy has never said anything, but then it can't be very serious, because Villy is only thirteen. Dad would never let her really have a boyfriend yet.... so, it must just be on account of they are all best friends. He wonders if he will be best friends with a girl before he starts dating someday... maybe with Vada.

Villy stayed extra pink for the rest of the evening, and Von's purple is a few shades darker as well... Vecky and Verry are not worried about it. They know that absence has a way of making hearts grow fonder, and soon all will be back to normal. Vim is thinking that he can hardly wait to talk to Von about his time on Earth. Everyone begins to sing again, and Vim listens to his dad's deep voice mingling with the others, and he wonders how old he'll be when his own voice gets deeper.

It is ten o'clock when the Vansons arrive back home, and as they sit around the tree, with all the brightly shining lights, Vim's dad tells his family about the mission, and how they almost didn't find Von. They had just about given up the search when Von found them. The tunnel he was sucked through came out very close to a car garage, and about the worst thing that had happened to him was breathing fumes from the Earth cars. He had stayed close to a big crack in the wall so he could breathe fresh air. The air was very cold but better than the fumes, which made him lightheaded. A little Earth girl had a playhouse set up in the garage, and often left parts of sandwiches and cookies on her table. Von had to use levitation to bring them down to him, as he was too afraid to risk being caught up on the table. A small water leak in a pipe gave him plenty to drink, so living wasn't a problem...

but the waiting was terrible. He had to hide from the little girl's kitten, and once a bird hopped into the garage looking for food and stared him right in the eyes... he tossed it a cookie crumb, and made a dash back to his hiding spot.

It seemed as though the new Virth crafts were so well camouflaged that Von did not see them. If he hadn't heard his dad's voice, as they set out to take a final look around the backyard, Von would have missed them completely.

"All's well that ends well," Verry says with a sigh. "I was most happy to come back home to my own family, and ever so grateful that none of my children are missing."

"Dad." Vim said, "Do you ever find people when they have been missing for a year?"

"Yes, that has happened before... Why do you ask?"

"Well," Vim says, "It's because a friend of mine lost her parents a year ago, and she is afraid she'll never see them again."

"Unfortunately, that is sometimes true, Vim," Verry answers with a sigh. "We can't seem to find everyone. What is the name of this mom and dad?"

"I think it's Versalle' anyway, that's Vada's Grandmothers name."

"Yes! I do remember them." Verry says. "It was a difficult rescue to attempt, because the tunnel closed in and the one next to it came out in California, right on the beach. There were so many Earthlings in that spot at the time that we couldn't do a proper search. We did try each month again after that, but if they lived through the ordeal of the Vortex suction, and the destruction of the tunnel, they did not stay

near the tunnel... the good thing is, if they are still alive, they are together... and if they are alive, there is always hope." Verry says softly.

"Will you try again?" Vim asks, hoping the Force had not given up on the Versalle's.

"We never give up, Son. Each mission we go out on is conducted as thoroughly as possible with the idea in mind of finding as many Virthlings as we can. Two missions ago, we found an old man who had been lost since he was in his thirties, and he was living like a hermit in a cow pasture. He learned to find food, and he had built a house that was hidden in a dirt bank. He had to learn to toss snakes with his mind power and to stay on constant alert for danger. He was so happy to see us that he fainted. For a while, it seemed as though he had lost his memory because he couldn't tell us his address or the names of his family members. He hardly talked the whole trip back, and then when we arrived at the base, he finally said... 'My name is Vred Veely, and my wife is Vessy. My son works for the electric company... my grandchildren ... are grown by now. And he burst out crying. After that, he was alright, and we could hardly get him to stop talking. We learned a lot about the Earth from that man. He has a few ideas for finding Virthlings that make a lot of sense, and he is writing a handbook on it."

"I'd like to read that, Dad," Vim said. "When he is through with it."

"Vim has been reading my books about Earth," Villy said. "I think he's been worried about you, Daddy."

"I knew Dad would be alright." Vim said, "But I am worried about Vada's parents."

"Let's change the subject for a while, darlings," Vecky said, "and talk of happier things. This is Christmas Eve, and it is almost time for you to be tucked up in your beds so Santa can pop in. First, however, I have some news for all of you."

Everyone turns to look at Mom, wondering what she could have to tell them.

"We will be a family of six in about seven months," Vecky announced with a blush of happiness.

"A Baby?" Villy gasps in wonder.

"A Baby?" Verry says with a great big grin, as he pulls his wife into his arms for a huge hug.

Varen says, "I won't be the baby anymore."

"No. You'll finally find out what it's like to be a big sister." Villy points out

"It better be a boy!" Vim growls.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Early Christmas morning, the children are awake before their parents and can hardly wait to open presents. Finally, Varen says, "I'm going to wake them up."

"Yes!" Villy agrees. "You are still the baby, and you can get away with it. Hurry!"

Vim is staring at the tree and wondering if James got all the things he wanted for Christmas. He does hope he can talk to James just one more time. He knows he will have to tell his secret today. He'll be in even more trouble if he tries to hide it from his dad. It's better to confess and get it over with.

Varen comes back with the parents, and Verry says brightly, "You be Santa this year, Vim, and give us our presents."

Vim floats over to the tree and sorts out a package for each person, including himself, and then he passes them out. He makes sure to give his mom the shawl for her first present, but he saves his dad's toolbox for last.

"Vim!" His Mom gasps in pleasure, "This is the most beautiful shawl I have ever seen. Thank you!"

Vim beams with pleasure as he opens one of his own gifts. Maybe he could just enjoy this time, before the worries take over again. Vim gets a book about Earth from Villy and a computer game from Varen. An electric guitar from his Mom and Dad, and a giant Erector Set from Santa. He is

already thinking about all the things he can make. He's wanted one forever!

His Dad opens the toolbox finally, and just when Vim thinks all the presents are handed out, his dad says, "Now, you little Virthlings... come over and sit on the couch. Mom and I are not finished yet."

"Put your hands over your eyes too." Vecky says, and then to Vim, "Flat side Vim! Stop peeking through your loops!"

When all three of the children have complied, Vecky and Verry bring out the last of the gifts. They set a large object covered by a bright cloth down in front of Villy, and Vecky says, "You can all open your eyes now, but stay on the couch."

"That is for you, Villy, and you may look at it now," Vecky says, laughing.

Villy pulls the cloth off and sees a colorful, yellow, green, and blue velvet parakeet hopping about in a silver cage.

"I've always wanted a bird, Mom! Dad! Oh, thank you!" She gasps with delight.

"Her name is Missy. We got her on Mirth for you... and she talks too." Vecky says.

"Oh, yes... and this one has quite a vocabulary." Verry adds.

"Hello." The bird says... "Hello... Merry Christmas, Piggy."

"Piggy?" Villy gasps. "Piggy?"

"Yes, Piggy is her sister. She will miss her for a while, but you will soon bond with her and take her mind off Piggy." Vecky assures Villy.

Vim knows he's next, because no matter which way they go, he's always in the middle. He stares at his dad intently, as he can tell he is holding something behind his back. Vim is pretty sure he knows what it is, and his heart beats faster as he waits in eager anticipation...

From behind his back, Verry takes out a small white and black velvet puppy. It is wiggling all over the place, whining and growling at the same time, wanting to be set down so he can run about and inspect everything he sees.

"A puppy of my own?" Vim asks, all choked up. He can hardly speak as he takes the puppy from his dad's arms. It's little pink tongue laps over Vim's face, and Varen laughs.

"He thinks you need a bath, Vim. And so do I!"

"Yes... You do need a bath, Varen." Vim agrees.

"No, that's not what I meant. You..." Varen stops, as from behind her back Vecky takes out a small fuzzy calico colored kitten.

"A kitten for me?" She squeals, bouncing forward to take it in her arms.

"The kitten's name is Nosey, because she always has her nose in everything." Vecky explains, "But if you want to, you can name her something else."

"I will think about it," Varen says, rubbing her face on the kitten's soft velvet. The kitten begins to purr and bats Varen's cheek with a pudgy paw. Everyone laughs, and then, Vecky floats into the kitchen to start breakfast.

Villy says, "Thank you for the apron, Vim... Look, Mom, now I have a waist!" and she follows Vecky into the kitchen to help cook.

Varen races upstairs, almost zooming, as she wants to be alone with her kitten and show it where it will sleep.

Vim is left alone in the living room with his dad.

"I don't want to be a wet blanket, Vim, but there are a few things you must be prepared for with your pup. He cannot be left unattended in the house, because you must first train him not to puddle on the floor... and he cannot chew on anything that I will have to repair or replace. Puppies can be a real job. Are you ready for that responsibility?"

"Sure, I am. I've thought about having a dog for a long time... I can do this, Dad."

"And he can't chase my kitty either!" Varen yells from the top of the stairs.

"I think you should take him outside for a while, Vim. He's been in for a while... and until he's trained, he will have to sleep in the garage. Later, after breakfast, I'll help you build a bed for him in the back room where that old motor is." Verry says.

"Yeah... well, Dad. I really need to talk to you, and it's really important. Right after breakfast, please."

Verry frowns thoughtfully, "Sure, Son. I want you to remember that you can always talk to me about anything. We will meet in the garage right after we eat."

The fluff is higher than the puppy, and Vim is soon down, rolling around, playing with the small dog. He makes

sure he keeps the puppy from going down the hill. He is very glad that he is safe in Virth and got to spend Christmas with his family.

He takes a moment to wonder how Vada is doing and hopes this is a happy day for her. Maybe her parents will be found yet. After all, Vred Veely was found. That made anything seem possible. As soon as he could, he would call Vada and tell her about Vred. It would give her hope, and that would make her happy.

Mom called, and he went into the garage, where he set his small dog, who was now named Pepper, in the bottom part of his craft. A pup couldn't get out of that. He gave him a bowl of water and said, "I'll be back to feed you as soon as I find out where they put the dog food, Pepper."

Breakfast was a merry meal, with everyone still talking about their gifts, and Vim was the only one who was mostly quiet. Vecky had discussed Vim's apparent sadness with Verry already, and Verry, for some reason, did not really understand but felt a strong urge to protect Vim. His concern showed each time he glanced Vim's way, but he would wait until they were alone to question him, and he would let Vim take the lead. It seemed that Vim was anxious to discuss his problem and would be forthcoming about it.

Although it was Varen's and Vim's turn for kitchen clean-up, Vecky said she would take care of it alone today, while the children made their new pets feel at home. She gave Varen a bag of kitten chow and handed Vim a bigger bag of puppy chow.

Vim leaves straight away to feed his puppy, and that is where Dad finds him about fifteen minutes later.

They watch the pup eat, and then flop down for a nap. With a sigh, the puppy closes his eyes, and with a sigh, Vim says, "I have a problem, Dad, and I'm not sure what I should do about it... Maybe I'm going to be in trouble... but I hope you'll try to understand how I feel about it."

"Let's go brush the fluff off the picnic table and sit out there, Son. We won't be interrupted out there."

The picnic table was on the hill right above the tree, where the tunnel was. For a minute, Vim wonders if his dad already knows about it.

"You know," His Dad said, "When you share a problem, it's never as bad as it seems before, when you were worrying about it all alone."

"This is different, though, Dad. I knew I should have told Mom, and I knew it was a dangerous situation, but I just couldn't... tell." Vim confesses, slumping forward, and keeping his eyes on the table.

"Did anyone get hurt?" Verry asks, somewhat alarmed by now.

"No. But they could have." Vim took a deep breath and said, "I found a tunnel, and I thought I could make it safe so no one would get hurt, and nobody did, but it could have happened, because it was more powerful than I thought..."

"Where is the tunnel, Vim?" His dad asked softly.

"It's down the hill... There, in the roots of the big tree." Vim said sadly, "And I don't want you to destroy it yet, Dad, because I have unfinished business first... I have to talk to my friend James one last time, so he won't worry about me... See, James is an Earth boy, but he's in a wheelchair because

of a car wreck, and he just moved to his neighborhood, and he doesn't have any friends yet, only me."

"I think maybe you had better explain from the beginning, Vim... I need to know exactly how this all came about."

So, Vim told the story from the very beginning, and Verry was patient, only asking a few questions along the way.

"Well, now, Vim. Yes, it was wrong not to tell your mother, but on the other hand, you would have frightened her badly... and although we didn't know it, she's pregnant, and that would not have been a good thing. I am glad you were wise enough not to tell James about Virth."

"He would have thought it was part of our game anyway, Dad." Vim laughed, relaxing for the first time since beginning his tale. "He wanted to be the alien, and I was supposed to be Captain Vim from Earth."

"I can see how that would appeal to you, Son, and I can understand why you like James, but you must realize that we can't have a dangerous tunnel in our own backyard."

"Now you can take it away, but you can't stop it from coming again, or more of them all over the place. I think I was only safe because you've told us so much about them. I knew what it was right away, so I was careful. I think we are going to have to live with these tunnels forever, and we should learn more about them. Everyone should know more about them, even kids. If Vada's dad had been in the First Virth Force, do you think he would have gotten sucked into a tunnel?"

"Probably not. And I do see what you're getting at, but let me tell you about a problem we had several months ago." Verry said. "An Earthling that knows about us sent a small robotic creature down a tunnel, and it was full of cameras and listening devices. He was trying to prove that we exist, and wants to catch some of us for testing... Now what do you think about that?"

"That would be worse than the tunnels!" Vim said in alarm. "How will you stop that?"

"We immobilized it and took it apart, then we sent only the images we wanted him to see back up. If he shows it to anyone, they will only see insects and earthworms, and those he shows will laugh at him, but this will continue. As long as Virthlings get sucked through to Earth, and Earthlings see us, they will keep trying to find out more about us, and that is the danger to Virth. As they increase their efforts, we will have to become better at discovering and disabling all of their devices. Now listen to me, Vim. I know that eventually we will find a better way to protect Virth, and that we will have to educate our people, so they can protect their families, but if every Virthling thought they could trust every Earthling, soon, I'm afraid, Virth would be destroyed. Your friend James would not hurt you on purpose, but if he told his parents, they would think him delusional, and if he told other kids, eventually someone would hear about it, and that person would try to find out more. Do you see the danger in that?"

"Yes. I will tell James goodbye. I will tell him we are moving. He will forget about me... and... even though I know it has to be this way, Dad - it hurts. I like James. I feel

like he really is my best friend. He'll be back home tomorrow, and I'll tell him goodbye."

"I'm sorry, Vim. Maybe someday we will all be able to live our lives without hurting others, and all worlds will be a better place."

Vim feels slightly cheered by this thought. "And I want to help make that come true, Dad. I'd like to be in on helping us to find a way to keep our land safe. I want to find better ways to rescue people. I'm going to read everything I can about other lands, and not just because I'd like to see them someday, but so we can understand the people there, and know if they are a threat."

"If you read all these books, Son, you'll be way too busy to get into any more trouble," Verry said, ruffling Vim's hair.

"Dad." Vim said, "Thanks for not yelling at me... and thanks for the puppy. His name is Pepper."