For my grandson, Brandon.

Thank you to my daughter, Kim, and my son-in-law, Brian, for your love and support.
The train ride began as a family excursion to celebrate Brandon's birthday. Everyone was excited as they boarded for a sightseeing trip into the Pocono Mountains. They were looking forward to the beautiful array of colors of the fall foliage. A stop was scheduled in a village where there would be plenty of time to walk around to take pictures or shop. The actual birthday party was going to be held in the main passenger car on the return trip.

Brandon had invited the entire family and a few of his closest friends. Amongst those closest friends were Matthew and his favorite dog, Moxie. The conductor, Charlie, was helping everyone to get seated comfortably. The train’s engineer, Buck and his dog Bull, were working hard to get the old steam engine going.

There was lots of activity as everyone began to find their seats. Of course, there were a few latecomers who were running as fast as they to make sure that they didn’t miss the train ride. Adding to the mass confusion was the huge amount of gifts that were being carried on board for the birthday celebration.

Just when we thought another thing could not possibly be added, the baker showed up with a magnificent butter crème with chocolate icing cake. Brandon and Matthew were so excited to
see the cake that they almost pushed the baker over backwards. Fortunately, Matthew’s Grandfather was there to catch his fall. Even though the cake was none the worse for this little escapade, Brandon’s Mother asked everyone to please be a little more careful. After that, we all stepped aside, on top of seats or whatever to give the little baker some room to pass through to the table where the cake was to be situated in a position of honor for all to admire.

While the exact placement of the cake was being determined, Brandon and Matthew, with Moxie trailing along, decided that they wanted to see what the Engineer was doing. They sauntered forward, without anyone noticing, to visit Old Buck. Now, Old Buck was a surly type of guy and was set to retire after this trip. He wanted nothing more to do with trying to encourage the antiquated engine to start. He had had his fill of never knowing when the thing was going to sputter and stop.

In spite of Buck’s shortcomings, Brandon and Matthew worshipped him. After all, he knew how to run a train, a real train. As Brandon stepped into the engine car, Buck’s dog Bull jumped up to greet him. Bull became even more excited when he saw that Matthew was there, too. Then Bull saw Moxie right behind them. Well, Moxie and Bull never did get along very well, except when the boys were around. It was as if Matthew and Brandon were theirs to guard from any danger. And, that they did very well. So, with a snort, they greeted one another then took their respective corners to watch over their little masters.

While Matthew and Brandon were enjoying their visit with Buck, the rest of the train was still a mass of confusion. Several of Brandon’s family needed to be seated carefully and comfortably. There was no more room for the gifts. The balloons that were part of the decorations were really getting in the way. Brandon’s parents were so caught up in what needed to be done that they didn’t even realize that the guest of honor had vanished.
THE MYSTERY TRIP

All of this happy anticipation of the painstakingly planned event had everyone in great spirits. The biggest concern that anyone had was that the old steam engine might stop somewhere in the middle of the trip. However, Buck had assured Brandon’s parents that he would be able to take care of things; they were not to worry.
Chapter Two

The last minute arrivals delayed the start of the trip a little bit. During this time, the usual greetings along with the customary kisses and hugs were going on. Brandon and Matthew knew this, of course. That was perhaps another reason for visiting with Buck. Even though Buck looked like he wasn’t very pleased at the prospect of having the two boys underfoot, he really didn’t mind at all. In fact, he had looked forward to this trip for weeks and had put almost as much planning into the party as had Brandon’s parents.

There was a flurry of last minute preparations. Once everyone was settled in and the old steam engine was fired up, Brandon and Matthew’s absence was noted. Immediately, Matthew’s Grandfather went to the engine area to see if they were there. And, of course, they were. Where else would they be except with Buck? Now, Buck and Matthew’s Grandfather had known each other a long, long time. Brandon and Matthew were talking about that very fact one time and surmised that they had to have known each other for at least one hundred years.

Upon Granddad’s entrance into the cramped engine area, Buck greeted him warmly. They were obviously very happy to see one another and spoke for a short time about things that had
happened since they had last seen each other. Then, Granddad ushered Brandon and Matthew back to the passenger car where all of the guests were waiting to honor the birthday celebrant.

As they were being hurried back, Brandon began to wonder how they could escape the party scene and go back to Buck. After all, riding in the engine was the best thing that could happen to a guy on his birthday. Surely, everyone would understand that! Well, for now, he and Matthew would have to make the rounds greeting each and every grandparent, aunt, uncle, assorted cousins and family friends. Matthew must have been thinking the same thing because he whispered in Brandon’s ear that they would have to think fast to avoid the melee of hugs and kisses. In the meantime, Granddad kept a tight grip on the shoulders of both of the boys. He knew all too well what they were thinking. Actually, he wouldn’t have minded too much riding in the engine with Buck himself. However, this day was special. Everyone was gathered to celebrate Brandon’s birthday. Absolutely nothing was to go wrong. Brandon’s parents had worked very hard to make sure that everything would be perfect. Even the weather was cooperating. It was one of those beautiful, summer-like fall days when it seemed almost impossible that winter would ever arrive.

As Brandon and Matthew entered the passenger car, they were immediately smothered with kisses and hugs. While they were put through the rigors of greeting everyone, Brandon couldn’t help but notice again the enormous amount of gifts and massive cake that was for him.

He whispered to Matthew, “Hey, Matt. Maybe this won’t be so bad after all. Did you see the cake?”

Matthew answered in a muffled sound as he tried to struggle from Aunt Linda’s hug, “Yes, I even had a chance to get a taste of that chocolate icing. It is as smooth as a milk shake.”

Brandon replied quickly before he was swooped off to say
hello to yet another relative, “I haven’t had a chance to get near it. Hopefully, whoever I say hello to next will be sitting next to the cake table.”

Matthew, being the taller of the two, took a quick survey of the car and advised Brandon to try to visit with Uncle Jim. Where he was sitting would give Brandon a chance to get some of the creamy icing. After that brief exchange of information, Matthew and Brandon didn’t see each other for a while.

When they finally did reunite, they didn’t have more than a minute to talk about a possible escape plan when someone began to take pictures. Of course, they had to have their photo taken with everyone who was there. As Brandon and Matthew were guided from one group to the next for the birthday pictures, Granddad noticed that the train had begun to move. He felt the usual excitement at the first sounds of the wheels grinding to move forward on the tracks. He was able to get Brandon’s attention momentarily to call attention to the fact that the train ride had started. Brandon’s eyes lit up immediately.

He whispered into Matthew’s ear, “Hey, we’re moving.”

Matthew replied, “I wish that we were up front with Buck instead of back here with all of the cameras flashing in our faces.”

Granddad happened to overhear this and smiled. Of course, he of all people understood exactly how they were feeling. He felt the same way, too.

Just when they thought that the photo session would go on forever, it ended almost as abruptly as it had begun. During the slight lull that followed, everyone watched the passing scenery as the train moved down the track. This gave the boys their chance to escape. Or, so they thought.
Chapter Three

Brandon’s Mother was right behind the boys as they began to make their getaway. They were halted before they even got past the little bar next to the door.

Matthew said quietly, “Uh, why, hello.”

Brandon just looked at his Mother sheepishly. Both boys knew then that it would be a while before they could return to Buck. Moxie and Bull, wisely, had stayed in the engine car with him. They weren’t even available to use as a diversion so that an escape could be executed.

Since all possibilities of fleeing were obviously closed to them, Brandon and Matthew decided to enjoy the train ride by sitting in the upper deck area. The view was breathtaking. The trees and clouds seemed to fly by as the train chugged along. A few of their younger cousins decided to join them on this upper level.

Sara came by to wish Brandon a very happy birthday. Brandon replied shyly, “Thank you.” Matthew snickered, as Brandon didn’t seem to know what to say next.

She watched the two boys for a few seconds wondering if they knew how to say anything at all then decided to move on. Sara didn’t know what to do or say either. Actually, it had taken her some time to gather enough courage to walk up to Brandon. It
wouldn’t have been so bad but Patrick was sitting right behind him and, for some reason that she didn’t understand yet, being around Patrick made her nervous.

After Sara departed their little group, the boys along with Patrick and Alex returned to watching for deer and other creatures in the forest that the train was traveling through. Patrick said excitedly, “Look! Over there! There is a large herd of deer.”

Alex noticed that there were several chipmunks sitting on a huge boulder and called attention to that. Patrick had brought along a pair of binoculars and everyone took turns using them. They were able to spot a few more animals with the use of the binoculars. After a while, they tired of doing this and decided to return to the downstairs area. Hopefully, they would arrive at their first stop soon and be able to walk around to stretch their legs.
Chapter Four

Meanwhile, in the engine car, Buck had dozed off. Bull and Moxie were very alert though. They already sensed that something just wasn’t the same. They had gone with Buck on this same trip a number of times and, therefore, knew immediately when there was a change. Definitely, something was amiss.

Bull nudged Buck’s leg. He didn’t stir. So, Moxie barked with that loud, screeching bark of hers to wake him up. Buck was not at all thankful for the wake-up call. In fact, his reaction was to banish both of the dogs from the car immediately. As they were being shoved out of the door, Buck began to notice that the passing scenery did not look familiar. Not the kind of change that comes with a change of seasons but a different transformation; one that he couldn’t believe. This was something that couldn’t be described.

In that instant, he thought that perhaps they had veered onto another track while he was dozing. Immediately, he took charge of the controls. But nothing happened. It was as if the old engine had acquired a mind of its own. Moxie and Bull watched with increasing awareness that something was dreadfully wrong. Buck began to panic at the thought of ruining such a fine day. Furthermore, he was at a loss as to where they were or how they would get back onto the right track.
Then, Buck remembered his cell phone. He could call back to the station for help. Of course, he would have to think of a way to get help without calling attention to what was going on to his passengers. Thought as he might, he concluded that some kind of announcement would have to be made. After all, they were looking forward to stopping at that quaint little village at the end of the line.

First things first, he tried his cell phone repeatedly only to learn that he did not have any service in the area that they were in. Well, there was nothing unusual about that. They were chugging along at a speed that Buck had never known this old engine could do. In this case, that was a good thing. Perhaps, they would pass through an area where he would have service shortly. In the meantime, he would try repeatedly to contact someone.

They were to have arrived at the small village within a short time. Since this certainly was not going to happen, Buck would have to think of a way quickly to explain the change of plans. Then, he thought of something really terrific. Why, he could make this an adventure in honor of Brandon’s birthday. He would leave out the fact that the adventure was unplanned and that he had no idea as to what was really happening. At the very least, this would gain some time during which he was sure that he would make contact with someone or see something that looked familiar.

He practiced his announcement repeatedly before making his way back to the passenger area. After all, he didn’t want to sound like he was worried. When he felt that he was ready, he walked with as much confidence as he could muster back to the car where all of the festivities were taking place. His arrival was met with great joy. Buck was well liked by everyone. He called Brandon to his side to announce the change in plans. Brandon, of course, was immediately overjoyed. An adventure for his birthday! How terrific was that!

Brandon’s parents were a little surprised at the change;
however, they knew and trusted Buck implicitly. They felt that whatever he had in store was something that Brandon and all of his friends would enjoy. Their only concern was that they would have to celebrate with the cake and the presents a little later than anticipated. No problem though. The invitation had mentioned that the train ride was to be a full day excursion. So there really was no hurry. Anyway, Brandon’s excitement at the thought of the cake and the many presents waiting for him would increase as the day wore on. His parents wanted his birthday to be special and it seemed like Buck’s surprise was helping to do just that.
Chapter Five

After Buck successfully presented his idea for Brandon’s party, he hurried back to the engine car. He was a little concerned as to what could have possibly locked the controls in such a way that would prohibit him using them. Additionally, if they were on a different track, he wanted to make sure that everything was all right. He was so lost in thought that he did not take notice to the fact that Moxie, Bull, Brandon and Matthew had slipped out of the party with him.

When he entered the engine car, he noticed that nothing else had changed. This was evidence of the fact that someone or something had taken control of the train. Additionally, they continued to gain speed as they traveled through this unknown region.

Buck jumped when he heard the noise behind him. When he realized that it was just the boys and the dogs, he quickly regained his composure. He wanted nothing more than to make sure that no one beside himself knew what was going on. So far, no one appeared to have noticed a thing.

Brandon was asking question after question about the adventure. Matthew was all over the place trying to find out where they were headed. Both boys had spent enough time with
Buck to be able to understand a whole lot of what was going on when a train was in motion. This fact worried Buck more than a little bit. He was very concerned that the boys might guess that this was more than an adventure that he had planned for Brandon. They might also catch on to the fact that he was no longer in control of the train.

Buck tried hard to convince the boys return to the guests but they would not hear of it. After having finally made their escape, they wanted nothing to do with whatever was going on in the passenger car until it was time to open the gifts and cut that luscious cake. In the meantime, Buck’s anxiety grew.

Suddenly Matthew cried out, “Look! Over there! Do you see that?”

“What are you talking about?” asked Brandon.

Matthew looked confused. He replied, “I don’t know. I thought that I saw someone or something standing by that large boulder.”

“Well,” replied Brandon, “that’s your imagination at work again. Honestly, sometimes, I don’t know how you come up with this stuff.”

This statement caused a squabble to begin between the two boys. In the meantime, they did not notice the look of bewilderment on Buck’s face. He had seen it, too.

Bull and Moxie were beginning to behave very strangely indeed. Buck suggested, “Brandon, Matthew. How about if you two take Bull and Moxie back to the passenger area? It looks like they need a break from all of this commotion up here.”

Matthew answered thoughtfully, “Yes, I guess that they could use some water and some food. Come on, Brandon. Let’s go back.”

Fortunately, for Buck, they left quickly, giving him some time to think about what he had just seen. He tried his cell phone again;
this time, he tried every number that he could think of. He didn’t care who he called, as long as he was able to tell someone what was happening. Then it dawned on him that explaining what was happening was next to impossible. He didn’t know himself. Another confusing issue was that he didn’t have any idea as to where they were. He just knew that the train was moving faster and faster toward an unknown destination.

The boys and their families were the only family that Buck had ever had. He was beginning to become very worried about their safety. He looked around quickly to see if he could see the apparition again. Apparently, it had vanished. He thought that maybe it had been a hunter out for the sport or an animal that had moved so quickly that it looked like something else. Anyway, he was growing tired and decided to rest for a few minutes. Maybe after a short break, he would gain some perspective on what was happening. Certainly, they would have to come across an area that was familiar to him. After all, he had been running this train for most of his life. All of the tracks were recognizable to him. This must be a new track that he had not been told about. He reasoned out loud, “Why would they tell me? I am about to retire. There really isn’t any need for me to know.”
While Brandon and Matthew were finding their way back to the party, they noticed that the passing scenery was nothing like they had ever seen before.

Matthew asked, “Brandon, are you sure that you didn’t see anything back there?”

“Of course, I saw it.” Brandon replied, “Do you think that I would let Buck know that?”

Matthew laughed at this response. He should have known. Brandon was always a quick thinker. Now they had to decide what to do about it.

Brandon and Matthew agreed to stop in one of the empty cars to contemplate what they should do next. They acknowledged that they would not be able to tell anyone else what was going on.

Brandon said, “I am certain that Buck didn’t see anything. We don’t have to worry about him finding out about this.”

Matthew didn’t agree with that. He had noticed that some of the controls were not in the correct position. Also, the train was moving much faster than he ever thought possible. Both boys were beginning to get the impression that this was not the adventure that Buck had surprised them with earlier.

They thought that the best thing to do for now was to return
to the passenger car where everyone was gathered for the celebration. Maybe they could distract their attention with opening gifts or playing some games. Matthew and Brandon knew very well that they didn’t have to do much to gain their Grandparents’ interest. The diversion would give them some time to think about what they should do next.

As they joined the party again, they noticed that the conductor, Charlie, had a strange look on his face. This, of course, concerned Matthew and Brandon.

“What if he saw what we saw?” asked Matthew.

“I don’t think so,” whispered Brandon.

“Why wouldn’t he have seen it? After all, Charlie is always attentive to every detail about a trip. I would imagine that he is even being more watchful since this is your big party,” replied Matthew.

Matthew and Brandon decided that the best course of action to take was to ask Charlie what was wrong. They almost sighed audibly with relief when they learned that Great-Aunt Matilda did not look too well. Apparently, the movement from the train was beginning to nauseate her. Charlie was trying frantically to remember what to do in this type of situation.

The boys told him not to worry. They would talk to Great-Aunt Matilda. She loved their company and before long, they assured him, she would forget all about how she was feeling.

On their way to where Great-Aunt Matilda was sitting, they happened to pass nearby a window. Neither one of them could avoid the opportunity to look outside. Much to their chagrin, they noticed that the scene from this car was different from the one that was being viewed from the engine. The view from the passenger car was the old familiar one.

“No, how could that be?” asked Matthew.

One of his uncles who happened to overhear the remark asked
what he was talking about. Matthew became flustered and didn’t know what to say.

Brandon had the insight to reply, “The leaves are so much prettier here.”

“Yes, they are,” Uncle Jim replied.

After that near calamity, Matthew and Brandon hastened to get to Great-Aunt Matilda’s side. One reason was to offer her the comfort that she very apparently needed; the other was that it so happened that she was sitting next to a window. Charlie had placed her there in hopes that it would help her condition; however, the rapidly passing scenery was actually making her feel more miserable. In spite of her condition, she was elated to see Matthew and Brandon. They each gave the compulsory hug and kiss then sat next to her. The position also afforded them both the opportunity to watch for any slightest change in what they could see from the windows.

After a time, the Great-Aunt grew sleepy. They waited patiently until she nodded off. Before leaving her side, they each gave her a gentle kiss on her cheek. As they did this, she smiled happily. Then, quietly, they slipped away, out a nearby door, to return to the engine car and to Buck. Moxie and Bull followed quickly. They were so concerned about what they would find upon their return that they did not notice that the apparition had re-appeared on a nearby boulder.
Chapter Seven

On the other hand, Buck noticed immediately that their mysterious sighting had reappeared. He had the feeling that he wasn’t alone. As he looked around, that was the first thing that he gained his attention. He also couldn’t ignore the fact that they had slowed down considerably. Scratching his head, he thought, “Now what the heck is going on?”

As he was doing his best to try to make sense of what was happening, the boys and the dogs piled into the engine area. They sensed instantly that Buck knew, too. Excitedly, they all tried to talk at once. Then, realizing that everyone was talking and no one was listening, they silenced themselves.

Matthew asked the obvious question, “What is happening?”

Buck reiterated the details to the moment regarding his loss of control over the engine and the fact that they did not appear to be on the track that they were supposed to be on.

Brandon replied, “We noticed that the panorama is very different. And, we saw something! We just don’t know what it was.”

At this Buck became angered. He asked, “Why didn’t you tell me that before?”

“Because,” replied Brandon, “we didn’t know if you saw it too.”
THE MYSTERY TRIP

Well, they concluded that each of them had better tell everything that they knew. However, they also agreed that the details of what was happening would stay right where it was, between the three of them. Bull and Moxie, of course, were not an issue. They couldn’t talk but they might be of some assistance if needed. Therefore, it was agreed that they could stay.

While discussing what they should do, they kept a wary eye on their unknown visitor. They whispered in hushed tones; rapidly going from one idea to the next discounting each one for something that they felt would not work. Ultimately their planning was put on hold; they felt that they had to return to the passenger car. They were concerned for their family and loved ones.

As they sprinted to the passenger car, they couldn’t help but be amazed at the changes that they noted in the glimpses that they caught as they passed by the windows. Their return to the party also brought a welcome return to normalcy. They were relieved to find that everything was as it should be.

Brandon’s Mother was a bit agitated. She had been looking for Brandon for some time. Since the ride to the village was taking longer than was anticipated, she thought that it might be nice for Brandon to slowly open some of his presents and to use the extra time to thank everyone for coming. Of course, this suggestion usually would have cheered Brandon. However, under the circumstances, the last thing that he wanted to do was sit and open presents.

Quick thinking by Buck saved the moment. He made another announcement about a “planned” surprise for Brandon’s birthday train ride. Buck said cheerily, “I have something that I would like to give to Brandon as a present for his special day. I would like for Brandon and Matthew to join me in the engine car as my assistants.”
Knowing how the boys loved trains, everyone cheered. Brandon’s Mother couldn’t do a thing except to go along with the idea. Of course, she was happy to see the joy in Brandon’s face. She knew how much this sort of thing would mean to him.

In the meantime though, she had to think of something to do for the other children who were attending the affair. She remembered that she had brought along numerous party games. That was it! They could play games. There were some that even the adults could participate in. Fortunately, she had asked Aunt Stephanie to help her with this part of the party. Aunt Stephanie was glad to help. Before long, everyone was engrossed in setting up and playing the games. Brandon’s Grandmother was overjoyed with the great photo opportunity. The light bulbs flashed merrily as the joyous laughter rang out. No one noticed that Buck, Matthew, Brandon, Moxie and Bull had departed once again.
Chapter Eight

While the game playing continued, some of the other guests chose to watch football. The passenger car was set up with numerous televisions so that everyone could watch the players in action. Brandon’s Dad, of course, was in charge of this part of the festivities. He was bursting with pride that his son was enjoying the day and that the entire family had gathered to help to celebrate. As the televisions blared with the play-by-play action of the football game, food and drinks were passed around.

At the other end of the car, the children cheered as they beat the adults in most of the games. Prizes were handed out for those who excelled and came in first place. Of course, at the end, everyone would have something to show for the hard work.

During all of the mayhem, Great-Aunt Matilda and a few of the other elderly guests continued to nap quietly in their own little corner. No one could understand how, in the midst of all of the noise, anyone could possibly sleep. However, they seemed contented to be part of the day and were happy to put up with some little inconveniences.

At one point, there were some questions asked as to when they would reach the village. Some of the guests wanted to do some early holiday shopping. The conductor, Charlie, was puzzled. He
did not want to admit that they should have been there by now. So, he answered without actually saying anything at all, “Soon, very soon. Would you like something more to eat or drink?” That brought about a flurry of activity of passing around more food and drinks. Everyone forgot about the extra time that it was taking to reach the village. After all, they knew that Buck was an excellent engineer and that there was no need for concern.

The football game was going into overtime and everyone stopped to watch. They were yelling and screaming as if everything hinged on their team winning. In fact, they were yelling so loud that they could be heard up front in the engine. The noise reassured Buck and the boys. They felt that as long as they could hear the party going on that, at least in the passenger car, everything was going well.

But that reassurance would not last for long. Suddenly, a quiet descended on the train. Bull and Moxie began to howl as if to warn of some impending danger. Buck commanded them to quiet down immediately. Buck and the boys were afraid to move and even more afraid to see what was outside the window. It was as if they sensed a presence.

They had to think of something. More than anything, Matthew and Brandon wanted to know that their family and friends were out of harm’s way. Their strategy was to crawl back to the passenger car. If they kept their heads well below the seats, no one would be able to see them from outside of the cars. As they made their way, they noticed that all of the lights had dimmed in the train. Buck tried to restore their confidence by mentioning that the lights had been failing on this old train for some time.

Matthew whispered, “I wish that we could move along a little faster.”

Realizing though that this might bring attention to them, Brandon replied, “Just a little more to go. Stay calm. I am sure that we will find that everything is all right.”
THE MYSTERY TRIP

Buck wasn’t so sure of that but decided to remain quiet on the subject.

Suddenly, they were startled by a very loud noise behind them. Their eyes wide and their hearts beating like never before, they slowly turned around to see what was behind them.

“Well,” asked Sara, “whatever are you doing crawling on the floor like this? Brandon, your Mother is going to be very angry at the sight of those black knees on your new outfit!”

It took a moment for Brandon to be able to breathe again so that he could even answer her. Before he could think of what to say, Matthew asked, “Sara, what are you doing here?”

Sara replied, “Brandon’s parents are looking for him. They think that it might be a good idea for him to open a few more of his presents after the football game is over.”
Chapter Nine

Once the three of them realized that Sara had no idea what was going on, they relaxed a little. Trying hard to think of something to say, Buck commented, “Why, Sara, that is the prettiest outfit that I have ever seen.”

That brought a great big smile to Sara’s face. Brandon couldn’t help but become aware of how her eyes lit up as she smiled. He wondered if Patrick had ever noticed that. Brandon was privy to the fact that Patrick had quite a crush on Sara and had become increasingly uncomfortable whenever she was around. Both Matthew and Brandon teased him about it constantly.

Buck’s remark had done the trick. Sara forgot that her mission was to return with the boys. They talked for a while about upcoming holidays and their hopes for the gifts that they were all sure would arrive. After a while, Buck asked the boys to return with him to the engine. Buck explained quickly to Sara, “We’ll see you in a little while. There is something very special that I am going to allow Brandon to do for his birthday. After that, we will return to the party.” Then, Buck whispered to Sara quietly that he was going to allow Brandon to blow the train’s whistle. Sara left happily feeling elated that she knew something that no one else knew.
THE MYSTERY TRIP

As they were returning to the engine, Matthew asked Buck, “What did you tell Sara that prompted her to leave so willingly? I thought for sure she was going to argue the point that Brandon should return with her.”

Buck replied, “I told her that I was going to allow Brandon to blow the whistle in honor of his birthday.”

“Wow!” said Brandon, “I can’t wait.”

“Brandon, Buck just said that to get rid of Sara. We can’t let you make all that noise. We don’t want whatever is out there to think that we are trying to signal for help,” replied Matthew very patiently.

“You know,” said Buck thoughtfully, “that might not be such a bad idea. We could create a huge ruckus with all of the noise that this old steam engine can make.”

Matthew suggested, “Maybe we can scare whatever it is away!”

Brandon being lost in his own thoughts for the moment wondered aloud if he would be able to toot the whistle. This made Matthew and Buck laugh. It was almost a relief to hear something that normal. It seemed like the tension had been mounting ever since they realized that something was wrong.

Now, that they had an idea that they were certain would work, they couldn’t run fast enough to get back to the engine. Before entering, Buck suggested that they make sure that there was no one or nothing waiting for them. Moxie and Bull were sent in ahead of them. Surely, they would be able to handle whatever might be waiting to confront Buck and the boys. Buck double-checked to make sure that the car was empty by sticking his head around the door. He saw nothing and signaled the boys to join him inside. Once everyone was safely inside of the car, Buck closed and locked the door behind them. Not that he believed that this would keep them safe but at least it would give them time if they needed to make an escape.
They had to plan exactly what they were going to do. Buck thought of creating huge amounts of steam. Then, they could blow the whistle and ring the bell at the same time. Matthew added, “We could also turn the lights on and off. That would be a good signal to use, too.”

Brandon asked, “What about our friends and family? Will they think that, too?”

Buck and Matthew thought for a moment. Buck suggested, “What if you and Matthew return to the passenger car to announce that we are going to celebrate your birthday in a real special way. Have Charlie help you to get everyone seated. While you are gone, I will begin to set everything in motion.”

Matthew replied, “Good idea! We’ll be back with you as soon as everyone is taken care of. Then, we can help you to blast away with as much noise as possible from this old engine.”

Matthew and Brandon left to return to the passenger car. Meanwhile, Moxie and Bull watched Buck quietly from a corner. He had told them earlier to stay out of the way. Unknown to Buck or the boys, all of their actions were being watched closely from outside the train.
Chapter Ten

When they returned to the party, the boys were immediately taken aside by Brandon’s Mother. “Where have you been?” she questioned them.

Brandon replied contritely, “I am sorry, Mom. Buck is letting us help him. A guy can’t turn down an opportunity like that.”

After finishing his little speech, he wrinkled his nose and gave his Mom a great big smile. He had been using that special smile of his ever since he was a baby to make her agree with just about anything. Or, so he thought. This time appeared to be a little different. Even Matthew noticed that. His Mother warned him not to leave the party again. “After all,” she concluded, “you are the guest of honor.”

“But, Mom,” cried Brandon. Unfortunately, she was distracted by some drinks that had spilled and didn’t have time to discuss the issue any further.

“Now what should we do?” Matthew asked.

Both boys were about to give up hope when Matthew’s Grandfather happened to come up to them and ask them what they had been up to.

“I haven’t seen you for a while,” said Granddad. As quickly as possible, Brandon explained to Matthew’s Grandfather that Buck
had something special planned for his birthday. They just had to be allowed to return to the engine. But, first, everyone had to be seated.

Well, Granddad thought for all of a second, and then realized how important this sort of thing was to Old Buck. Buck and his wife had never had a family. These boys were as close as he would ever get. Now that Rose, his wife of forty years, had died, Buck was lonely. He probably had the time to think about something really terrific for Brandon’s birthday. Granddad said, “Wait here a moment. I’ll fix this for you.”

Before they knew it, Matthew’s Granddad was standing in front of all of the guests and explaining that a very special event was about to take place. However, before that could be done, everyone had to find a seat. Brandon’s parents were surprised at the announcement. No one had mentioned anything about this. Brandon’s Mother was becoming a little agitated with the series of events that were occurring. After all, Brandon was still her baby.

Fortunately, Brandon’s Dad understood how much something like this would mean to Buck. He stood along side of Granddad and encouraged everyone to move quickly to their seats. Meanwhile, Brandon’s Mother also began to realize how important this was. Knowing Buck as she did, she was sure that whatever he planned was something special. Thinking of how happy Brandon would be; she gave in and began to help get everyone to a seat.

All of the commotion caused Great-Aunt Matilda to awaken. “What is going on?” she asked.

“Well,” replied Charlie, the conductor, “it appears that Buck has a surprise for Brandon. However, the surprise requires that we must all be seated.”

Since Rose, Buck’s wife, had been one of her dearest friends; Matilda did all that she could to encourage everyone to be seated
quickly. She could only imagine what Buck had cooked up. When she and Rose were still young, Buck was quite an instigator amongst the girls. They often laughed at some of the antics that he had pulled on them. Oh, well, she thought, this is sure to be something to remember.

When everyone was settled, Matthew and Brandon instructed Charlie not to allow anyone to stand up or move around. Doing so, they explained, might spoil the surprise. Charlie replied with dignity, “Of course, Masters Matthew and Brandon. You can rest assured that I will make sure that no one moves.”

As they were leaving to return to Buck, Brandon’s Mom hugged him tightly and told him to be careful. It was almost as if she sensed that there was something more to this. After leaving the car, Brandon said, “We’ll have to hurry. That took longer than we thought.” All the while, he was thinking about his Mom and Dad; hoping that nothing would happen to them or anyone else. Matthew was thinking the very same thing about everyone, too.

They ran hurriedly, without looking toward the outside, to the engine car where they were hoping that Buck, Moxie and Bull would be waiting for them.
Chapter Eleven

They entered the engine car carefully. The boys were astonished to find nothing had happened. Buck was working to get everything ready for the big moment. Bull and Moxie were sleeping contentedly in the corner. The scene would have been normal except for the outside view. What they saw when they looked out toward the one side of the train was unimaginable.

Buck saw the looks on their faces. To avoid having them dwell on the sight, he put them to work. Using a stern voice, which was uncharacteristic for Buck especially when talking to his boys, he said, “Matthew, Brandon. Get to work. We need to prepare this engine to make lots of noise.” Silently, they began to take care of the few things that needed to be finished. While they had been gone, Buck had taken care of almost everything.

After there was nothing left to do, Buck sat down with Brandon and Matthew to explain as gently as he could what would be expected of them. His only hope was that the engine would respond to his control. If not, he was sure that their visitors would seize the moment to do something. For now, though, he wanted the boys to think that everything would go as planned.

Squaring his shoulders, Brandon asked, “When should we begin?”
“That’s my boy,” said Buck as he hugged both boys tightly for a moment.

“Hey!” yelled Matthew, “stop that.”

When they noticed that Buck had tears in his eyes, Matthew said, “Oh, gee, I am sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

Buck smiled at them both. “No,” he laughed as he said, “my feelings aren’t hurt. I didn’t like to be hugged much at your age either.”

They stood together silently for a few moments then Buck said quietly, “Well, look’s like the time is now. Brandon, you blow that whistle as loud and as clear as it will let you. Matthew, start clanging that bell. I’ll take care of the steam.”

They moved quickly into position. As they had planned, Buck was to count to three; then they would all begin to create the melee that would hopefully scare away whatever was out there.

Buck began to count quietly, “One….Two…” Before he could get to three, a flash of light caught their attention. They froze in their positions.

“What was that?” asked Buck with a tone of fear in his voice that the boys had never heard before. The light disappeared almost as mysteriously as it had appeared. Buck began to count again, “One….Two…Three!”

The whistle was loud and clear. The clanging of the bell could be heard for miles from the train. The clouds of steam were so thick that you couldn’t see anything outside at all. They worked feverishly to create the racket for about ten minutes. Then Buck signaled to the boys to stop. An eerie quiet descended upon them immediately. They stood perfectly still for a long time waiting for something to happen. When nothing did, Brandon looked to see if anything had changed on the outside.

“Hey, guys,” said Brandon, “nothing happened.”

Matthew and Buck ran to the window to see, too. They
couldn’t believe it. They were still lost somewhere in a place that they had never seen before. While they were looking outside, the train began to slow down. They were almost afraid to turn around to look at the controls. When they finally did, they noticed that there were some definite changes. Since Buck didn’t make them, they had to wonder who did and how they did it. While they stood gazing and wondering about what to do next, they missed noticing the movement outside.
Chapter Twelve

Outside of the train, their mysterious visitors were wondering what that commotion had been all about. There were five of them, Kraz, Kuma, Marfak, Merak and Terebellum. Kraz looked perplexed as he asked, “What do you think that was all about?”

“I don’t know,” replied Kuma.

They were all beginning to wonder if they could get the help that they so desperately needed from the occupants of the curious looking object. In order to keep them in view, they had taken control of the mechanical workings of it. The uproar had begun when they had momentarily lost power over everything.

Merak commented, “We shouldn’t allow them to control this monstrosity.”

Marfak replied testily, “We need their help. How are they going to feel about us if we go about taking over everything for them?”

They were pondering over what to do next when they realized that they had lost sight of Buck, Matthew and Brandon. “Oh, no,” cried Terebellum, “now what?”

What they didn’t know was that Buck and the boys had slipped off of the train. They had jumped onto the tracks and ran to hide behind a large bush.
“Hey,” yelled Matthew, “this bush has stickers!”

“Quiet,” cautioned Buck, “they’ll hear us.”

As Matthew and Brandon were doing their best to stay away from the painful thorns, Buck moved to another tree to get a better view.

Buck was worried that he had inadvertently put the boys in danger. He was talking to himself when he muttered aloud, “Maybe they should have stayed on the train.”

Kuma was nearby and overheard the remark and responded, “I don’t think that I would feel safe on it myself.”

“What?” Buck exclaimed.

He turned around slowly, very slowly. He didn’t see anything and thought that perhaps he was hearing things. Buck looked in every direction hoping to catch a glimpse of who or what said that. After several minutes of searching the area, he gave up, deciding that he must have been dreaming. He returned to the boys, saying nothing about the incident. He didn’t want them to think that he was not handling things well.

In the meantime, Kraz was berating Kuma for saying anything. Kuma replied defensively, “If it is your opinion that we should not converse with them, then how are we going to ask them for help?”

“Good point,” replied Merak.

Kraz didn’t have an answer to that. In fact, they didn’t really have a clue as to how to approach Buck, Matthew and Brandon.

While Kraz was admonishing everyone about the possible danger, Buck was also telling the boys something similar. Matthew and Brandon were thinking the same way that Kuma had thought. If we can’t converse with them, then how will we find out what they want? But, the boys were too scared to do much without Buck’s help. So, the standoff continued, each group trying to get a glimpse of the other and wondering what type of hazards were waiting for them.
Terebellum was beginning to worry that they might never find their way back. Kuma was still wondering why there was such a problem with simply approaching them and requesting their assistance. Buck and the boys were thinking about returning to the train and; hopefully, regaining control. Surely, Buck would be able to get the train back on the right track.

Brandon had wondered away from the hiding place to take a look at a beautiful waterfall. He was watching the water cascade over the cliffs when he had the feeling that he was not alone. Suddenly, Brandon’s voice didn’t seem to work; he couldn’t even yell for help. While his mind wanted him to run away and yell for help, his body wouldn’t budge an inch.
Chapter Thirteen

Terebellum was experiencing a similar reaction. She was chastising herself for wandering away from everyone just to see what was making that beautiful sound. She had seen Brandon immediately. From their initial surveys, she was aware of the fact that he was a young male. More than that, she didn’t know. Her only hope was that he would not regard her as a foe. Perhaps, with time, they would even adjust to one another and become friends. The notion of friends that she had learned about was something that appealed to her. Of course, she had Merak and the others, but they were grouped together to get the job done, nothing more.

In the meantime, she was calling on every bit of information that they had studied about this strange place. Nothing that they had learned had prepared her for this moment. She was surprised that what had attracted both of them to this area was the tinkling sound of the waterfalls. Maybe they had more in common than was apparent.

Suddenly, Buck appeared from nowhere. He was so close to her that she could almost touch him. She tried hard not to move. A slight sound might alert him that she was here. Fortunately, he was busy trying to find Brandon. She was hoping that Buck would see him at the water’s edge. Buck was crying loudly, “Brandon!
Brandon!” Brandon turned around to see where Buck was calling from. When he did this, he came face to face with Terebellum. They froze each wondering what the other would do.

Buck continued to call for Brandon. When he didn’t get a response, he became angry and scared. In the meantime, Brandon was scared out of his wits himself and couldn’t seem to answer Buck. Finally, after what seemed like a long, long time, Buck accidentally ran right into Brandon, knocking him down into the pool of water. Buck was overwrought with the possibility that he may have hurt Brandon. Quickly, he moved to help Brandon to get back up on dry land. While all of this was going on, Terebellum quietly slipped away.

After Brandon was back up on his feet and on dry land, he looked around. Buck asked, “What is it? Did you see something?”

Brandon replied hesitantly, “I think that I did. Maybe I didn’t. I don’t know.”

Buck was so glad to have him back that he didn’t care about anything else. Quickly, he grabbed Brandon by the hand and they ran back to Matthew. When he had everyone together, he announced that they were all going to board the train and stay there until help arrived. Surely, someone would notice that they did not reach their destination on schedule.

Matthew and Brandon did nothing to talk Buck out of going back. When Brandon had Matthew alone, he told him about his encounter. Matthew agreed that not saying anything for now was for the best. They both felt that Buck had had enough surprises for now.

As they made their way back to the train, they watched carefully for any sounds or movements in the surrounding area. Buck had an eerie feeling that they were being observed but said nothing. He didn’t realize that both Brandon and Matthew not only felt the same way but that Brandon had actually seen something.
Buck was sure that he had taken the same path to return to the train; however, the old steam engine was nowhere in sight. The train must have moved or been moved while they were gone. He took the boys with him to search up and down the track. When they had traveled in both directions for quite a distance, he suggested that it might be a good idea to rest for a while.

They found a nearby pine tree and sat down underneath it. As they were mulling over what to do next, Moxie and Bull ran to them. The boys and Buck were exalted to see their dogs. They jumped around and hugged them both until they all fell down exhausted from the excitement.
Chapter Fourteen

Meanwhile, Terebellum had rejoined her group. At first, she was hesitant to mention her encounter then decided that it might be best if everyone knew what had happened. They all listened intently as she related the tale of her standoff with Brandon and the near run in with Buck. After she had told every detail about what had occurred, no one said anything more for some time.

Merak broke the silence by saying to Terebellum, “We are glad that nothing more happened.”

No one disagreed with that; however, they were still wondering how they could possibly approach Buck and the boys for help. Everyone was so fearful of what might happen.

Kuma volunteered to go to them and speak about their dilemma. “That is very brave,” commented Kraz, “but what will we do if something happens to you?”

Marfak, who had been watching Buck and the boys, added, “They appear to be remaining under some kind of shelter for now. Perhaps, while they are at rest, we can approach them. Hopefully, they will not consider us dangerous or harmful.”

Kuma, anxious to help in some way, volunteered once again to present their request.
“Well,” said Terebellum impatiently, “someone must do something or we will be stuck here forever.”

They discussed the issue for a while and finally concluded that it might be best if they all went together. “After all,” reasoned Terebellum, “Brandon appeared to be very nice. I am sure that the others are too.”

“Well,” said Merak, “we are about to find out. That’s for sure.”

They agreed to walk toward Buck and the boys from a vantage point where they would not be seen until the last possible second. Merak had suggested this to make sure that Buck and the boys would not have time to run away before they had a chance to talk to them. What Merak and the others didn’t realize that this element of surprise would not be welcome at all.

Just as Buck, Matthew and Brandon were settling down from the hello that they had received from Bull and Moxie, Brandon thought that he had seen something move behind a large shrub. He looked again and realized that it was just the shadows from the sun going down. Brandon paid no further attention, as Moxie was requiring all of his attention. She had missed him greatly.

Both Moxie and Bull knew instinctively that there was something going on. They wanted nothing more than to protect their boys and Buck. Moxie and Bull were ready to prance on whoever or whatever it was behind that large shrub. He looked again and realized that it was just the shadows from the sun going down. Brandon paid no further attention, as Moxie was requiring all of his attention. She had missed him greatly.

Both Moxie and Bull knew instinctively that there was something going on. They wanted nothing more than to protect their boys and Buck. Moxie and Bull were ready to prance on whoever or whatever it was behind that large shrub. But first, they needed to shepherd Buck and the boys into a small, tight-knit group. They managed to accomplish this without anyone noticing what was happening.

After they had Buck and the boys sitting close to one another, Moxie signaled to Bull that she was going to wander into the wooded area. When Brandon noticed that she was leaving, he attempted to go after her but Bull held him gently in place. Buck realized then that the dogs knew something.

Moxie lay close to the ground as she crawled toward the shrub.
Her ears were pinned back along her head and her nose was moving quickly, picking up any scent that might help her to find and ferret out whatever it was behind there. Suddenly, they came crashing forward, breaking right through the large shrub. Merak was at the bottom of the heap yelling loudly for everyone to get off of him. Terebellum was trying nervously to get up gracefully. She didn’t even want to imagine what Brandon might be thinking. Moxie, not sure at all of what to make of the situation, stood guard between them and the huddled group that she had left under the tree. Somehow, though, she felt that everything was all right. Her sense was that they meant no harm.

Their eyes were wide and the mouths hung open as Buck and the boys watched the activity. They had not a clue as to what to do. Even Bull did not seem to know what to do about what was happening. Merak regained his composure first and greeted Moxie from a safe distance with as much dignity as he could muster. Moxie returned the greeting with her gentle smile and wagging tale.
Chapter Fifteen

Not sure of what to expect next, Merak began to move toward Moxie slowly. When they realized that Moxie meant no harm, they called to Buck and the boys. “Please,” said Merak, “we require your assistance.”

Buck asked, “Who are you?” Terebellum answered, “We are from Marias. Somehow, we drifted from our vessel and are not sure how to locate it again.”

Brandon whispered as he nodded his head toward Terebellum, “That is the one that I saw near the waterfall.”

“What!” asked Buck.

Brandon realized then that he would have to tell Buck about his experience at the waterfall. When Buck heard all that had happened, he became agitated.

“How could you not tell me something like that?” he asked.

Brandon was immediately sorry for his actions. Matthew did his best to justify what he did by reminding Buck that no harm had actually been done.

As Buck settled down, Terebellum asked Brandon if they could possibly discuss the issue at hand. Brandon answered shyly, “I suppose so.”

Terebellum didn’t even notice anyone else as she spoke

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directly to Brandon explaining the situation that they found themselves in. After she had completed the details of the dilemma, Matthew summarized what he thought that he had heard. He couldn’t quite believe his ears. “Do you mean to say that you are from somewhere out there and that you landed here accidentally? And, then lost your way and don’t know how to return to this vessel that you traveled here in?”

“Yes,” replied Merak, “that is what happened.”

Buck and the boys stood silently for a while contemplating what they had learned. Buck asked, “How did you get lost?”

“We are not sure,” replied Kuma.

Kraz explained further saying, “We had some problems with the vessel and it veered off course. After we accidentally landed here, we decided to look around. That is how we got lost. Now we can’t find our way back to get out of here.”

“Well,” replied Buck, “that is some story. I have to admit that I told some tall tales in my day; however, this one beats anything that I ever thought of.” He laughed heartily at this for a few minutes when he realized that no one else was finding it funny.

Matthew said, “Buck, I think that they are telling us the truth.”

Buck and the boys argued for a few minutes discussing the validity of what they had said.

Terebellum interrupted pleading, “Please believe us. We need your help so desperately.” Buck decided at this point that the best approach to get to the bottom of this would be to question everyone thoroughly. Surely, that would show that they were up to some kind of antics. He also was thinking that this would have to be done quickly in order to get Brandon back to his birthday party.

As if they read his thoughts, Merak said, “Please don’t worry about your friends. They are quite safe. When you return to them, things will be as you left them. They will not even realize that you were gone.”
“Wow!” said Brandon, “kind of like suspended animation.”

“Not exactly like that,” replied Marfak, “however, I suppose that is how you would think of it.”

“As long as they are safe,” said Brandon. He, too, was concerned about their safety. He could only imagine how frantic his Mother would be to know that he was no longer on the train.

Buck asked, “Speaking of the train, assuming that you are the ones that controlled our travels, how did you do that?”

“Again,” replied Marfak, “that would be difficult to explain; however, you might think of it as kind of a remote control.”

“Umph, hogwash!” exclaimed Buck.

Matthew asked a few more questions. He and Brandon discussed the answers and decided that if they were telling the truth, the fact of the matter was that they had no idea how to help them.
Chapter Sixteen

Buck still was not convinced that this was not some kind of prank. Finally, in exasperation, Terebellum said, “We don’t know what to say or do to convince you.”

Buck replied, “Do something that proves to me that you are who you say you are.”

Merak cried, “No, don’t!”

But before he could stop her Terebellum had somehow managed to make their train appear then vanish again.

The boys were so astonished at this display of power that they were totally at a loss for words. Buck seemed to be in a state of shock. Moxie and Bull were not affected at all; at least not initially. Checking to see if they were still in one piece, Buck and the boys moved their arms and their legs carefully.

Moxie said, “Hey, do that again!”

Now everyone was truly in a state of shock, even the strange visitors, as no one expected Moxie to actually speak.

Kuma exclaimed, “Terebellum, now see what you have done. You must have changed something that caused this dog to be able to talk!”

Terebellum replied tearfully, “I am sorry. Maybe, I can reverse whatever I have done.”
Bull silenced everyone by replying, “No, don’t do that. We may be able to help you.”

Buck and the boys really didn’t know what to make of the situation at all. Their dogs were talking; they were in the presence of strangers who claimed to be from outer space; and their train had appeared then vanished again. Buck wiped his forehead with his sleeve and shut his eyes for a few minutes. This was more than he could take. The boys realized this and suggested that he rest a while.

Brandon said, “Don’t worry, Buck, we’ll take care of things for now.”

Matthew looked at Brandon when he said that, wondering what he thought that they could possibly do.

The first thing that Brandon did was to embrace Moxie and Bull. “Boy!” he said, “This is great! There were many times when I thought that I knew what you two were thinking but I could never be sure. Now, I can ask you.”

Matthew joined in the revelry. The four of them danced around for a while before they realized that their visitors appeared to be waiting for them to stop the nonsense.

Terebellum demanded, “Can you help us or not?”

Merak interjected diplomatically saying, “What she means is that we need your help as quickly as possible. The longer that we stay here, the more likely it is that our return will take a longer amount of time. We are not certain that our vessel will be able to take that.”

Marfak added, “Also, you want to get back to your friends or family, don’t you?”

Brandon and Matthew agreed to that. They were beginning to wonder if anything would ever return to normal again.

Brandon noticed that Bull and Moxie appeared to be distracted by something. Brandon was about to ask them what
was happening, when Bull said, “Quiet, I think that someone is coming.” Brandon and Matthew wondered who that could be.

Matthew inquired, “Is there anyone else who was with you?”

“No,” replied Marfak, “just us.”

Everyone was frightened; even the dogs appeared to be riled. No one had noticed that Buck had slipped away to investigate the area where the noise was apparently coming from.

As Brandon and Matthew were making plans as to what they could do, they heard Buck yell loudly. Bull and Moxie ran quickly to where he was, commanding everyone else to stay where they were. Moxie yelled, “We’ll take care of what Buck might have got himself into. We want the rest of you to stay together right where you are.”

It appeared to be an eternity before the boys heard anything else. What they heard then brought a surprise that was beyond belief. Moxie and Bull returned with a sheepish-looking Jessie and an angry-looking Buck.

“What are you doing here?” asked Brandon.

Jessie answered, “I followed you to the engine and left the train when you did.”

Both boys and Buck understood immediately that she knew everything that they knew. Buck was still wondering how she had managed to follow them without being noticed.

They realized that there was nothing that they could do. Jessie would have to join their adventure. “Hopefully,” whispered Matthew to Brandon, “she won’t get in the way or become frightened.” Luckily, Jessie did not overhear the comment.
Chapter Seventeen

When calm descended upon the group once again, Buck suggested that they all sit down and discuss possible options. They scoured around for a spot where they could rest and located one with some large boulders. Buck was still trying to understand why this area that he had known since he was a boy, looked different and yet somewhat familiar.

After everyone settled in, Buck opened the conversation by stating, “We need to understand how it is you arrived here.”

“Yes,” added Matthew, “and please tell us everything about where you have been from the time that you exited the vessel.”

Terebellum agreed to be the spokesperson for their group. She described in detail their voyage. Apparently, the trouble that they experienced with their vessel, as they called it, also caused them to veer off course. As a result, they had no idea where they had landed. The landing had been a difficult one. They tried in vain to use the equipment that they had on board to figure out where they were and to try to send a distress signal. Nothing worked at all.

Finally, Merak proposed that they leave the vessel to take a look at the surroundings. The thought was that they might be able to find something to help them fix their equipment.

After a while, they realized that they had lost sight of their
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vessel. That was when they saw the train. They had watched the boys and Buck for some time before they agreed that perhaps they would be able to help them. The rest of the story was familiar. Buck, Matthew and Brandon knew all too well the strange happenings on the train. Jessie knew, too, but chose not to say anything at the moment.

“Well,” said Buck, “that is something. I don’t know myself how we are going to return you to your vessel. The descriptions of the places that you traveled through just don’t seem right. They don’t match what we normally see on this train route.”

The boys thought to themselves that if he didn’t know, then no one would. This was very strange. Moxie had an idea. She said, “If Bull and I can catch the scent of something from the vessel, we may be able to find it.”

“Yes,” exclaimed Matthew, “that is it! Bull and Moxie will be able to help us.”

Terebellum searched through a bag that she was carrying and found some articles that she had had the forethought to bring with her. Bull and Moxie sniffed and sniffed. Bull said, “That’s funny. This scent is not something that I am familiar with.”

“Well, so what,” replied Moxie, “we can still track it. Can’t we?”

“We’ll have to try,” replied Bull thoughtfully.

Buck was wondering what else this adventure would bring. Hopefully, he thought, the dogs will be able to find this vessel readily and the boys, Jessie and he would be able to return to the train.

The dogs suggested that they go on ahead to make sure that everything was safe. They would return before nightfall. In the morning, they would all go at least as far as the dogs were able to check on this first scouting expedition. Brandon and Matthew hugged the dogs ferociously. They were frightened that they might encounter some kind of danger. Bull and Moxie did their
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best to calm their fears without divulging their own concerns.

Everyone watched silently as the dogs ran off bravely in the
direction that the visitors had come from. Moxie and Bull
stopped at the top of a large hill and jumped up and down to
signal to the group that so far everything was alright.

After they could no longer see their beloved dogs, Brandon
and Matthew sat together in a corner. Their heads were resting on
their hands and they were staring at the ground intently as if to
find some kind of answer. Jessie approached them timidly, aware
that she was not very welcome to the group. However, she had
had the opportunity to observe more than they had. She wanted
to discuss some of what she had seen with them.
Chapter Eighteen

Jessie waited patiently until the boys finally looked up. They stared at her with faces that mirrored their concern for their friends and families. Nothing that she could say to them would bring them much comfort. She spoke to them softly trying to convince them that everything would be fine. Again, she waited patiently until she noticed that the boys had begun to relax a little. She had to tell them what she knew now; she couldn’t wait any longer.

She had practiced her speech to perfection; however, she felt like her tongue was glued inside of her mouth. After several false starts, she began to tell Brandon and Matthew what she had viewed from the train. They began to realize that as they had been running back and forth from the engine to the passenger car, Jessie had been hiding below a window watching everything that was going on outside of the train. Jessie explained, “I actually saw their spaceship or whatever they call it land. After that, I noticed that the outside scenery changed dramatically. I know that it did because I have taken this trip a lot of times with Granddad and I know what everything should look like.”

Jessie continued, “While you were frantically trying to regain control of the train, I moved to the unoccupied passenger car. I
was able to get a great view from there and watched every movement of these visitors.” Then she said something that surprised them all. “You know,” Jessie added, “they had plenty of chances to destroy or hurt us. They didn’t do anything. I believe that the changes that we are seeing in the landscape and with the dogs are actually accidental. I doubt that Terebellum or any of them mean any harm.”

With all that being said, the boys were still confused as to what they could possibly do to help. Additionally, they were concerned as to how everything could possibly be returned to the way that it was prior to the intervention of these strangers. Buck had listened to her story, too. He thought to himself that it was high time for him to stop being scared and begin to help formulate a plan. What that plan would be or what it would include was beyond him at the moment. However, he felt that he had to do something. Sitting here feeling sorry for himself and the boys was not helping.

He approached Jessie and the boys, walking stiffly after sitting for such a long time. Brandon and Matthew were glad to see that their old friend had begun to look like himself again. Jessie had always adored Buck and was delighted that he was joining the conversation.

After exchanging greetings, Buck launched his part of the plan. “I think that we need to wait until the dogs return. If they can find this spaceship or vessel or whatever it is, then we will help these folks return to it. If not, we will board the train and wait for help to arrive. After all, someone will notice that we are missing and come to look for us.”

While Matthew and Brandon had their doubts about help arriving, they agreed with Buck for the time being. Brandon said, “Of course, that is a good idea. We can’t possibly do more than that.”

Meanwhile, Merak had been listening to everything that was
being said. He was becoming concerned that they would not ever find their vessel. There was also a question as to how long they could possibly survive in this foreign location. Marfak had done all that he could do for them so that they would not perish. However, time was beginning to grow short. Even their return journey would be affected if they waited too much longer. Now, they also had a bigger problem. So much of their being rescued depended on these strangers.

Merak conferred with the rest of his group. It was decided that they would approach Matthew, Brandon, Jessie and Buck one more time. Their plea for assistance would have to be a good one. It would have to convince them all to venture into something that no one could understand nor predict and that they truly meant to bring no harm to anyone.
Chapter Nineteen

The boys, Jessie and Buck were deep in a discussion about what to do if Moxie and Bull’s attempts to locate the missing vessel were not successful. At first, no one noticed that Merak, Marfak and the others had joined them. Brandon looked up when he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. Once again, he found himself locked in a gaze with Terebellum.

Matthew was saying something to Brandon when he realized that Brandon was not paying any attention at all. “Hey, Brandon,” said Matthew.

Brandon replied seriously, “Our visitors have joined us.”

Buck, Jessie and Matthew turned around. Buck said, “We were just talking about you.”

Merak replied politely, “And, we were just discussing you.”

Everyone stared in silence. No one moved. Terebellum finally said loudly, “This is getting us no where. We are all behaving foolishly. Isn’t it apparent to you that we are not going to hurt you?”

A heated reply came from Buck. “What do you call taking over my train and changing everything so that we don’t even know where we are?”

Kraz pleaded, “Trust us. If we wanted to hurt you, we would
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have done it a long time ago. We need you to help us get out of here.”

Buck was still not fully convinced that no harm would come to Jessie and the boys. Even though Jessie and the boys kind of believed these strangers, they really would have preferred to be enjoying Brandon’s party.

While everyone was dickering over who to trust and what to do, they did not notice that Moxie and Bull were on their way back. Had anyone bothered to look up, they would have seen the dogs playfully scampering back down the large hill. Moxie, wanting to let Brandon know that she was returning, howled loudly.

“What ever is that noise?” asked Terebellum.

Brandon and Matthew just laughed. They were used to Moxie’s loud barking. The dogs ran into the clearing, clamoring for attention.

“Moxie, Bull, down!” commanded Buck. As usual, both dogs sat down quickly. They couldn’t sit still though; there was so much to tell.

“Well, what happened?” asked Brandon anxiously. Moxie and Bull both tried talking at the same time.

“Hold it!” cried Brandon, “It is hard enough to get used to the fact that you two can talk. Listening to you both talk at the same time is impossible. Moxie, please tell us what happened.”

Moxie smirked at Bull as she began to tell about their adventure. They had not located the vessel; however, they were certain that they had come very close.

Brandon asked, “How do you know this?”

“Well,” replied Moxie, “the scent was getting much stronger.” She went on to tell about all of the areas that they had traveled through. At times, they had to stay well hidden to make sure that no one saw them. When they knew that they were close to what
they were looking for, they decided to come back.

Moxie continued saying, “It is quite a distance. I am afraid that it will take at least a few days for you to travel there.”

As Brandon, Matthew, Jessie and Buck began to discuss what they might have to do, Marfak volunteered, “I can get us to the location very quickly.”

“How can you do that?” asked Jessie.

Marfak replied, “I need to touch Moxie. I will be able to transport us without all of this need to plod our way there.”

“Well,” replied Jessie, “I would like to see how this is done.”

When Marfak approached Moxie, she flinched. Marfak spoke gently to the dog, quieting her down. When Marfak touched Moxie’s head, a light sparked from the touch then quickly disappeared. After that Marfak moved to one side and appeared to go into a trance.

Jessie asked, “What is wrong?”

Terebellum replied a bit sarcastically, “Don’t worry. He does this all of the time.”

Marfak reacted to the remark by announcing triumphantly that he had all of the information that he needed.
Chapter Twenty

Marfak asked everyone to gather together. Noticing that Buck, Jessie and the boys were very nervous, Marfak explained that they would not be aware of being transported at all. In fact, the whole thing would go so fast, that they wouldn’t even know it happened. As he spoke, he turned around one time and then said quietly, “Look at where we are.”

“Wow!” said Moxie, “This is exactly where we wanted to bring you.”

Not moving their positions, everyone moved their heads from side to side to look around cautiously. “Don’t worry,” said Marfak, “you can move or do whatever you want. This is as far as Moxie and Bull traveled.”

Moxie concurred saying, “Yes, this is it! The scent is very strong here. Hey, wait a minute. The scent is gone.” Bull was just as confused. They were definitely in the right place but the trail had gone cold.

Terebellum and Marfak exchanged concerned looks. Terebellum asked, “Are you sure of this? Is it the right place?”

“Yes,” replied Marfak, “it is.”

Moxie and Bull agreed that this certainly was it. “Well,” asked Brandon, “now what?” No one knew what to say. They had been
so sure that the dogs would be able to find the missing vessel.

Buck had been looking around during this time and realized that he was in very familiar surroundings. He returned to the group excited about the prospect that he might know something. “Hey,” called Buck, “come here.” They all ran to where Buck was. The boys had not seen him this happy in a long time. They were anxious to hear what he had to say.

Buck looked as if he was remembering something from a long time ago. He said, “This is exactly where my Grandfather used to bring me for our fishing trips. Curiously, it looks exactly like it did then. All of the changes are gone. The area is back to the way that it used to be a long time ago.” Now, that was something thought Brandon. No wonder I haven’t recognized much of the scenery on this trip. Matthew was thinking the same thing.

Kuma took Marfak aside to discuss the obvious. They realized that somehow they had placed everyone in the past. How that was, they did not know. More importantly, they wanted to know if returning to the present would play a part in their being able to locate their vessel. Terebellum joined them asking what they thought. Kuma answered, “I think that we have to find out more about what happened. Kraz has the data from our trip. Let’s ask him what he thinks.”

They found Kraz going through all of the information. He looked up when they approached. They could tell that he had little or no idea how all of this had happened. Kraz answered before they could ask, “I will continue to study everything; for the time being, I don’t know any more than you do.” Terebellum, Kuma and Marfak agreed that it might be best not to mention this to Buck, Jessie and the boys.

Just as they were finishing their discussion with Kraz, Terebellum noticed that Brandon was coming toward them. Terebellum whispered quietly that she would take care of
whatever it was that he wanted. Brandon approached the group. Apparently his motive was to find out what was going on. Terebellum spoke quickly saying, “Don’t worry. This is all normal stuff for us. We always do this kind of thing.”

Brandon, having seen what Marfak was able to do, believed what she said. “Gee, I am impressed. What else can you do?” he asked.

She led him to believe that there was a whole lot more to their talents. Terebellum continued the charade for as long as she could. Just when she thought that she couldn’t take any more, Brandon left feeling happy to report that there was nothing to worry about. Once Matthew realized that everything was all right, he was excited to look around and asked Buck to show him the places where he and his Grandfather used to fish. While Buck was not as convinced as the boys were that this was nothing more than a temporary change, he felt that there would be no harm in showing Matthew and Brandon some of his memories. Bull and Moxie went along with them to the old watering hole.
Chapter Twenty-One

Buck and the boys, along with the dogs, rambled slowly toward the lake. Buck talked and talked about the days that he spent here with his Grandfather. “Yep,” said Buck, “there wasn’t anything here then; just some trees and fields and this great big lake. I had forgotten how much I enjoyed spending my time here.” Brandon and Matthew looked at the area in awe. They were both amazed at the splendor of the tall trees and the fields of wild flowers and grass. There wasn’t a building in sight. In fact, there was nothing. It was just quiet and peaceful; the type of peace that comes when you are relaxed with nothing to do and nowhere to go. Brandon thought, I wouldn’t mind spending some time here either.

They sat down near the lake. After Buck ran out of things to tell them about, he and the boys gazed out over the lake each lost in their own dreams. Brandon was wondering about his family and friends. Matthew was thinking the same thing. They were also worried about returning to the train. Ironically, Buck wasn’t thinking along those lines at all. In fact, he was imagining staying right where he was. If the boys had known that, they would have been concerned for sure. They would have wondered if he had lost his senses in light of all that had happened.

In the meantime, Bull and Moxie had roamed from the area
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trying to recapture that lost trail that they had found. After a while, they found themselves in a remote field that they had not seen before. It was eerie and darker than the place where they had left Buck and the boys. They couldn’t imagine why this would be so different.

The dogs jumped when they heard a noise. They turned quickly only to find that Jessie had somehow wandered into the same field. “Gee,” she said, “this is scary.” The dogs agreed. They also concurred without saying anything that they had to get Jessie back to Buck and the boys.

After a few minutes of trying to persuade Jessie to follow them back to Buck, the dogs decided to force the issue. Bull and Moxie each grabbed one of Jessie’s hands gently but firmly in their large, strong mouths. They pulled her back along the way that they had just come. Jessie was yelling loudly the whole way; however, that did not stop the dogs from doing what they thought was best. Buck heard the melee and stood up to see what was going on.

Buck and the boys noticed the bushes moving on one side of the clearing and ran to see what was happening. Much to their surprise, they saw Jessie in the firm grip of Bull and Moxie. No one had ever seen the dogs so much as take a nip at a person; therefore, everyone was shocked at the dogs’ behavior. Buck commanded them instantly to release her. They did so immediately and then just as quickly began an explanation as to the reason for their actions. When Buck heard what the dogs had to say, he agreed that they did the best thing possible. Jessie was given strict orders to stay with the group and not to wander away again.

When Bull, Moxie and Jessie described the place that they had just come from, Buck began to question where or what it was. It certainly did not match anything from his memory, present or past. He was concerned about what else might be out there. He
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decided that once he had the boys and Jessie settled for the evening that he would take a walk. If there were something out there, he would want to know what it was. Of course, he knew that he probably wouldn’t be able to do much about it.

In the meantime, he decided that it might be best if they all regrouped with their visitors. Perhaps, they would have by now located their vessel by themselves. Hopefully, they would also have figured out how to return them to their own time and train. Now, Buck thought, that really is wishful thinking.
Chapter Twenty-Two

When they reached the place where they had last seen their visitors, there was no one in sight. There wasn’t even anything that might have indicated where they had gone. Buck told the dogs to stay with the children. He wanted to check the entire area first to make sure that nothing else was waiting for them.

As he made his way carefully around the perimeter of the clearing, he noticed some marks in the grass that he had not seen before. He whistled softly for Bull and Moxie to come to him. He pointed to the strange markings. The dogs crawled along the ground to where they were. They sniffed and sniffed for a long time. Then they returned to Buck to report that the scent was the same one that they had followed and then lost.

Now, this was really strange. Buck called to Jessie and the boys to join him. He explained what the dogs had told him. Matthew thought aloud saying, “I wonder if their vessel found them. Maybe they have left already.”

Brandon said, “Now what? If they left, how are we going to return to our own time?”

Buck was already thinking the same thing. If they could find the train, it was on a track in a location that he had never seen before. Furthermore, Marfak had placed everyone in some kind
of suspended animation. He wondered if he remembered to remove that before he left to return to wherever it was that he came from.

Buck decided that the best thing to do was to spend the night where they were. The large pine trees would shelter them. He could build a large fire to keep them warm with all of the wood from the fallen branches. It had been some time since they had eaten anything; however, they didn’t seem to be hungry. Perhaps that was another one of Marfak’s miracles. In fact, they hadn’t even really been uncomfortable at all. Well, if Marfak removed any of his magic, hopefully, it wouldn’t actually take affect until daybreak. In the meantime, Buck would do everything that he could to make sure that his brood was comfortable and safe.

After he had everyone settled in for the night, Buck sat alone with his back against an old broken tree trunk. He was scared; more scared than he would allow anyone to see. How he would get everyone back to the train and return things to normal was beyond him. Old Buck was beginning to feel sorry that he had ever allowed the train ride for Brandon’s birthday. He thought sadly, What a birthday present for the young fella! I have spoiled everything.

With those thoughts, Buck dozed off into a deep sleep. While everyone slept, Bull and Moxie stayed alert. They were sure that they had sensed something. They felt certain that they weren’t alone. Bull told Moxie, “Take the first shift. I’ll awake in a couple of hours to give you a chance to rest. We won’t do anyone any good if we are too tired to function.” Moxie agreed and positioned herself where she could watch over everyone. She too was sad about the way that things had turned out for Brandon’s special day. Hopefully, they would return in time to be able to salvage some of his birthday party.

Although her size and looks indicated otherwise, Moxie was a kind, gentle dog. She was sensitive to a lot of things. As she
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watched over everyone, she thought about Terebellum, Kraz, Kuma, Marfak and Merak. She hoped that they had been able to find their way home and that no harm had come to them. Why did she feel that this was not so? There was an anxious thought tugging at her saying something different. She felt that this adventure was not over yet. It would be a while before everyone would see family and friends again. At least there was some comfort in knowing that Marfak had taken care of everyone left on the train. He had assured her that no one would be none the worse for the experience. When all of this was over, they wouldn’t remember anything at all.

Moxie spent the next couple of hours thinking of ways to get everyone back to where they were supposed to be. Before she knew it, Bull had awoken and had come to relieve her. He said, “Go ahead now. Get some rest. My feeling is that we are going to need it come morning.” Moxie found a warm spot to lie down in and fell fast asleep immediately. Bull yawned as he assumed the lookout position that Moxie had vacated. He felt like it was going to be a long time until daybreak and that he might as well make himself comfortable.
Daybreak dawned quietly and gently. For all intents and purposes, it would have seemed like a normal day. The only thing that Bull or Moxie had noticed during the night was some small creature scampering from one habitat to another. Other than that, the night had been quiet, almost too quiet.

The boys and Jessie woke up at the first light. Buck had been up before them. Luckily, he had located nearby raspberry and blueberry bushes. Along with that, he remembered an old farm that was around the bend in his Grandfather’s day. If everything was in the past, perhaps the farm was still there. In the present, it had been replaced by a large development.

As he rounded the bend, he was greeted by the image of the farm that he remembered as a boy. Fortunately, he was able to find his way into the hen house and borrow some eggs. He left some money behind to pay for them and hoped that the folks who lived there wouldn’t mind too much.

He made his way back without any incident to where he had left the children and the dogs. Buck was delighted that Jessie and the boys were awake. First, he would show them how to make breakfast over a campfire without any utensils. Then, they would plan what they would do next. Perhaps, returning to the train was
the best idea. Even if it wasn’t where it was supposed to be, they had what they needed on the train. They could even live on it for a while. Well, first things first, he called the boys and Jessie over to the campfire and began to explain how the old cowhands used to live on the trail.

They had a great time making breakfast. While they were doing this, the dogs scouted the area to make sure that no one had joined them. They found that things were pretty much the way that they had left them last night. Bull and Moxie returned to report that everything appeared to be safe. They helped themselves to some water and a few scrambled eggs. After cleaning up, everyone sat around what was left of the campfire to talk about the next step.

Buck wanted everyone to return to the train. He explained that the food and facilities on board would sustain them for a while. That would give them time to think of a way to get themselves out of this mess. Brandon, Matthew and Jessie agreed. They were tired and needed to return to something that was familiar, even if the train was in the wrong time. Bull and Moxie agreed to go ahead once again to make sure that there weren’t any dangers. Buck, the boys and Jessie were to follow approximately a quarter mile behind them. They had all agreed that if the dogs would find anything that Moxie would let out one of her infamous howls.

As they began to get up and gather themselves to begin their long walk back to the train, they couldn’t help but wish that Marfak were back with them for just a little while. He would be able to transport them without all of this effort. However, it seemed like their visitors were gone for good.

The dogs ran ahead as planned. Buck led the way with the boys and Jessie right behind him. Because of the heavy wooded area that they were traveling through, they lost sight of the dogs. They would have felt better if they could have seen them; however,
they realized that the quarter of a mile separating them in a heavily wooded area meant that would be impossible.

Buck entertained the boys and Jessie with telling them more of his childhood stories. As Brandon, Matthew and Jessie listened, the time passed swiftly. Before they realized it, they were near to where they had left the train. Moxie had not made a sound. That was good as it indicated that all was well. Soon, they would all be together again. Certainly, they would come up with a solution for dealing with this time factor thing.
Chapter Twenty-Four

They yelled for joy when they caught the first sight of the train. “There she is!” yelled Buck. With their tales wagging, the dogs were scampering back and forth between the train and Buck and the children. Jessie, Brandon and Matthew ran toward the train as fast as they could. They were so involved in their revelry that they did not even notice that they were not alone.

Just as they were ready to board the train, it disappeared. Then, it reappeared. Then, it disappeared again. Brandon turned his head to one side and said, “She is here. Terebellum is here somewhere.” Before he could call her name, he saw her. Terebellum motioned that they should be very quiet.

Buck, Jessie, the boys and the dogs made their way to where Terebellum was standing. Marfak, Merak, Kraz and Kuma were with her. “What happened?” asked Buck.

Terebellum responded sadly, “We had to leave. We had inadvertently placed you in danger.”

“What does that mean?” asked Matthew.

Marfak replied, “It seems like someone followed us here.”

Brandon asked the obvious, “Why didn’t you know that before?”

“We just didn’t know,” answered Marfak.
“Don’t be angry with us,” pleaded Terebellum.

Kraz added, “We really mean you no harm. We truly have lost our way and simply want to return to where we belong.”

Matthew replied, “We know the feeling of wanting to return to where one belongs. That’s where we were before you all showed up.”

“Now, Matthew,” admonished Jessie, “it isn’t like they did all of this on purpose.”

Buck interjected, “Are we safe now? Where are these aliens?”

Marfak replied, “If by aliens you are referring to them, then yes we are safe for now. However, they are looking for us. I have placed some shields around us so that they can not detect our location.”

Brandon cried with fear, “What about our friends and family on the train? What about them?”

“They are fine. In fact, they are safer than we are right now,” replied Marfak as convincingly as he could. He was beginning to be unsure himself as he was not certain how strong his powers were or how long they would hold up.

“All right,” said Buck, “what do you want us to do?”

“We don’t know for sure,” answered Terebellum. Then she added, “We had to return to you to keep you out of harm’s way.”

Well, this is some fix thought Buck. We seem to be right back where we started. Moxie and Bull were looking around. “Funny thing,” said Moxie, “with your shield in place, I can’t smell a thing.”

After everyone had a good laugh at Moxie’s concern for her lack of ability to smell, they returned to the subject at hand. “What are we going to do?” asked Jessie.

“For starters, we are going to find that vessel and get these folks out of here,” said Buck.

He felt that was the only way that they would rid themselves of
this whole dilemma. Terebellum was relieved. She had anxiously awaited his comment fearing that they would no longer want to help.

Brandon said, “Let’s get started. Marfak, please lower the shield or whatever it is so that these dogs can begin to find some kind of scent again.”

Marfak was not too happy to comply with that request as that might bring them some unwanted attention. However, he was also concerned that Brandon and his friends might begin to panic. Following their request was the best thing that he could think of for now. As the shield was lowered, the dogs held their heads high to try to find that unknown scent that they had mysteriously lost. Suddenly, Moxie crouched to the ground and asked everyone else to do so, too. She had heard something but couldn’t see what it was. She motioned to Bull to follow her.
Chapter Twenty-Five

Moxie and Bull crept toward the sound that she had heard. They hid behind a large shrub hoping to catch a glimpse of whatever it was. Suddenly, there was a loud, rushing noise and they found themselves face to face with someone. As the dogs froze and eyed the stranger curiously, Buck and the others were watching everything that was happening from their hiding place. “Why,” Buck whispered, “that is the old farmer from down the road. I recognize him from when I was a child.”

Buck stood up and called to the farmer. “Hey, Joe!” yelled Buck.

“Hey, Jim! Are these your dogs?” asked Joe, the farmer.

Buck realized then that Joe mistook him to be his Granddad Jim. Well, we would have to let that be. Any other explanation would be impossible.

Buck, for now thought of as Jim, stepped forward. “Yep, they are mine,” he said.

“Well,” answered farmer Joe, “you shouldn’t let them roam around like that. They could get hurt out here.”

Buck answered laughingly, “What could there be out here? This place is as safe as it gets.”

“You never know,” answered farmer Joe.
That’s for sure, thought Buck. After exchanging a few more civilities, Joe left to tend to his farm. As he was leaving, he made a curious remark to Buck. “You know,” Joe said, “I saw a strange light around these parts a few nights ago. Ever since then, mysterious things seem to be happening. You know that track that you always run on? Well, a train seems to appear then disappear.”

Buck laughed like he remembered his Granddad used to and said, “You must be seeing things. There is a full moon and that tends to cast some funny shadows.”

“Yes, you are probably right,” answered farmer Joe. Then, he continued on his way, giving a final wave as he rounded the bend in the road.

“Gosh, it was good to see him again,” said Buck reminiscing about his past.

“I don’t think so,” said Brandon bringing him back to the present state of affairs, “that was too close.”

Terebellum and Marfak definitely looked apprehensive. The encounter had rattled everyone, including the dogs.

“I think that we should all stay together,” recommended Jessie.

“Yes,” said Buck, “we need each other to get through this.”

He thought, I definitely am sounding surer of this than what I am feeling.

After a short discussion, they all agreed to allow Bull and Moxie to go ahead. This time, though, they would run just a short distance ahead of the group.

They fell in step in small groups. Terebellum found herself walking next to Brandon. She looked at him, wondering what he was like. He turned and found her staring at him and became uncomfortable. He wasn’t sure of what to make of her behavior. Terebellum asked shyly, “What is it like here?”

“That is a large question to answer,” replied Brandon, “What
exactly do you want to know?” She didn’t know where to begin, there was so much that she wanted to understand.

She decided to begin with Buck, Jessie and Matthew. “Who are they to you?” Terebellum asked Brandon. She didn’t really comprehend the notion of family or friends but wanted to try.

Brandon replied, “Matthew and Jessie are my cousins, in a way. Buck is an old family friend.”

Of course, Terebellum had no idea what a cousin was so it didn’t matter that Jessie and Matthew weren’t actually related to Brandon at all. They walked along for a while when she saw a beautiful flower. “What is that?” she asked Brandon.

Brandon, not being sure at all of flowers, replied, “I think that it is some kind of rose or daisy.”

“Oh, it is so beautiful,” answered Terebellum. He realized that she had never seen a flower before and couldn’t imagine what her world must be like. He felt that it was best not to ask.

They had walked for a while when Buck said, “Let’s all rest. We don’t want to do too much.”

A very tired Jessie asked Marfak, “Why can’t you just transport us like you did before?”

He answered, “Because we don’t have a destination. I don’t know where to transport you. Do you?”

“No,” replied Jessie.

They settled in by some large bushes for comfort as well as safety. No one would be able to detect them hidden by the high grass and over-hanging branches of the bush.
Chapter Twenty-Six

Jessie and Marfak were talking about his skills when she noticed that there was a shadow cast upon a nearby boulder. The shadow was definitely caused by a large man, a very large man. She was relieved to see that the dogs had already sensed that there was someone hidden from their view. Apparently, whoever it was, was watching them closely. Moxie indicated to Buck that they had a visitor. Oh, no, thought Buck, just when things were beginning to quiet down.

Moxie and Bull went around the other way to get behind the visitor, staying close to the overgrown weeds for cover. Buck was watching everything closely, waiting for the right moment to confront whoever this was. Merak was also aware that something or someone was present but had absolutely no idea what to do. The rest of the group was so involved in their own conversations that they were entirely unaware of the impending danger. Buck thought that it was best to not alert them. Letting everyone in on what was going on might cause more confusion. He had motioned to Jessie, Marfak and Merak to not say anything.

As the dogs crept closer to the intruder, Buck began to make his move. At just the right time, he tackled the unwelcome visitor knocking him down to the ground. Not bad for an old guy, thought
Buck. He had to smile at his agility and success at knocking this creep down. Buck grabbed the intruder by the shirt collar demanding, “Who are you? What do you want?”

It was a few minutes before a reply was given. “I am not here to hurt you. I am simply curious as to what you are doing and who you are. Please forgive me for trespassing on your privacy. My name is Scott.” All of this was said as if it was one word and with one breathe. Buck realized that Scott was scared out of his wits and lessened his grip a little. Apparently, he was very young, not much more than about Brandon’s age.

“What are you doing out here by yourself?” asked Buck.

Scott replied, “I walk here all of the time. Normally, I am all alone except for an old guy and his grandson who usually fish down by the lake.”

Buck took a very deep breath. Something was oddly familiar about this guy. Then, he realized that this was Scott, the one that he had known a long time ago. Gently, Buck loosened his grip on Scott’s shirt and helped him to get up.

“Thank you,” said Scott in reply to the surprising display of kindness.

Everyone else who was watching could not understand at all what was taking place. Brandon whispered to Matthew, “I think that Buck has lost it. He just let that guy go.”

Matthew answered, “Let’s move in. Together, we’ll be able to handle him.”

Buck noticed what Brandon and Matthew were up to and stopped them explaining briefly that there was no cause for alarm. Even though the boys wondered how or why Buck would have arrived at this conclusion they did as he said.

While Buck was wondering how to explain exactly who Scott was, Terebellum was questioning how he had appeared. She was well aware of who he was and how he figured into Buck’s life.
“Marfak!” she exploded. Marfak was doing his best to avoid Terebellum. He, too, did not understand why there was such a mixed state of affairs.

In the meantime, Scott was looking pensive about what he was seeing. He thought, *That one group looks a little strange to me. I wonder who they are. And, that old guy who tackled me seems somehow familiar. What a mess I have myself in.* Just as he was beginning to feel sorry for himself, Jessie approached him. She spoke to him kindly, offering him a seat next to her. Jessie said, “Try not to be afraid. No one will harm you.”

Scott answered, “That is nice to know. But I am more concerned as to who those characters are over there. Are you sure that they won’t do anything strange?”

Jessie smiled to herself and answered, “They won’t do anything strange on purpose. Most of what they cause is quite by accident.”

Marfak and Merak overheard what she said. Merak commented, “She is too kind.”

Marfak agreed adding, “We will have to be more careful with our powers. What we do appears to cause strange things to happen.”
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Buck decided that it was best not to divulge any exact details about Scott for the time being. He simply told everyone that the group was increased by one. Scott thought that it was very nice for Buck to invite him to tag along on the hike. Of course, Scott was not told much more than that and Buck had made sure that everyone else knew not to say anything. Buck wanted nothing more than to insure Scott’s safety. By having him along, he could at least keep an eye on him.

Now they just had to decide which direction to go. The dogs were busy trying to pick up the scent once again. After a few disappointing attempts, Moxie motioned that she had succeeded. While the others walked along behind them, Bull and Moxie traveled ahead of the group. Moxie had a concern that the direction that they were going in this time was slightly more to the west than the one that they had previously followed. She mentioned that to Bull and they decided that, even if they were slightly off course, they were going in the same general direction. Once they got closer to the destination, they would split up to find the lost ship.

Behind them, the rest of the group was beginning to really enjoy getting to know one another. This experience was new to
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Terebellum. She had never encountered a relationship such as the one that Buck, Jessie and the boys were able to enjoy. Now, it seemed like she was going to be given the chance to join them. Marfak and Merak noticed that she was getting too involved and cautioned her that doing so might cause some negative consequences. Kraz and Kuma thought the same thing. Except for Terebellum, they all felt that this kinship that Brandon and everyone seemed to have was specific to this location. It was not something that was part of their experience. Encouraging such behavior might not be the best thing. In fact, they did not really understand why it was important. However, Terebellum was so impressed by what she saw, that she decided privately to follow her own choices. Marfak, Merak, Kraz and Kuma simply wanted to focus on getting out of here.

The dogs returned to them after a while advising them that it might be wise to rest. Moxie explained, “There is a steep hill just over beyond the wooded area. It isn’t too bad. You should be able to climb it without too much of a problem. However, before we start, Bull and I thought that it might be a good idea to take a break.”

Brandon said, “I could use a rest.”

Matthew agreed saying, “This is a good location. There is enough undergrowth here to hide us and we are very near a stream. We should be able to drink the water and find some wild berries to munch on.”

Scott thought that this was a good idea. He was also thinking, unknown to everyone else, that this would also give him a chance to try to get away and use his cell phone. He didn’t quite trust this situation and wanted more than anything to call for help. Scott waited until everyone was settled down. While he thought that no one was watching, he slipped away quietly to a nearby clearing that he had noticed. He hoped that his cell phone would work there.

Buck had noticed that Scott had left the group. In case Scott
was going to do something that the others might not approve of, Buck did not tell anyone else. He wanted to follow Scott himself and try to stop him from doing anything. Buck had no idea what he might be up to but he was sure that it was something. He hid behind a large rock where he could observe Scott without being detected. When Buck saw Scott pull a cell phone out of his pocket, he panicked. Surely, Scott would realize then that something was not quite right. Buck had tried every phone and cell phone on the train, only to find that none of them worked.

Buck was holding his breath as Scott dialed and re-dialed several times. After several minutes of trying, he overheard Scott say something about cell phones never working when you needed them the most. That brought a sense of relief to Buck. Scott didn’t think anything at all. His only concern was that his cell phone didn’t work. Scott made a few more attempts then gave up and returned to the rest of the group. Buck followed shortly. The remaining time passed without incident. Everyone rested quietly as Moxie and Bull had suggested that they do.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Buck said, “I think that we should move on. We don’t want to be traveling in the dark.” As they moved out onto the path that they would take, Moxie and Bull went ahead to make sure that everything was all right. They stayed within a short distance of Buck and everybody. The two dogs wanted more than anything to lead everyone safely to the lost vessel.

At one point, Moxie turned and advised everyone to watch out for the slippery rocks that they had to climb over. Jessie laughed saying, “I still can’t get used to Moxie being able to talk.”

Terebellum answered, “She has always been able to talk. You just weren’t listening to her.”

Merak overheard the conversation and quickly intervened to quiet Terebellum. He said, “Stop telling them stuff. You don’t know what will happen after we leave here!”

Terebellum replied in a huff, “I was just being nice to her.”

Merak said sternly, “That is not being nice to her. That is setting her up for something that may do her some harm. Can you imagine if she chats with someone about her dog being able to talk after we leave here?”

Terebellum sighed sadly. She knew all too well that Merak was right.
They came to a part of the hill that was particularly steep to climb. Once again, the question was asked as to why Marfak couldn’t just use some of his skills to get them over the hill. Marfak replied to everyone’s relief, “Actually, I think that I can do that. I don’t see any reason for us to go through all of this just to get to the other side.”

Terebellum and Jessie cheered. Brandon and Matthew, of course, were looking forward to it. Buck was the only one who appeared to have some concerns about the whole thing. Brandon tried to calm his fears saying, “Buck, it will be better than doing all of this climbing. Remember the last time, we didn’t feel anything. Scott won’t know what happened!”

As they had done before, they gathered together. Buck made sure that no one was left out. They didn’t even realize that Marfak had already taken care of the matter. He laughed at their expressions when he told them to look around. “Why,” said Moxie, “this is it. You did it again!” The boys and Jessie were in awe of such skill. Little did they know that Marfak was not at all as skilled as some of his counterparts. To them he was really something.

Terebellum was a little bored with all of the attention that Marfak was getting. She decided to see if she could find more of the flowers that she had seen when she and Brandon were walking together. No one had noticed that Terebellum had left the group. In the meantime, Buck and Marfak agreed that they should all stay where they were for the night. They could get an early start in the morning. The dogs said that the scent was very, very strong indicating that the vessel would not be far from here.

As they were bedding down for the night, Kraz realized that Terebellum was nowhere to be found. He did not want to tell anyone as such an announcement could cause a delay in their getting to the vessel and leaving this place. He decided to look for
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her by himself. He felt that she couldn’t have gone very far. When no one was looking, he left. As he walked down a path that he thought that she might have traveled, he was grumbling to himself about what he would do when he found her. Unfortunately, with all of his grumbling, he forgot to take notice of the direction that he was traveling in.

After looking for Terebellum for a long time, Kraz came to the conclusion that he would have to return and announce that she was no where to be found. His only hope was that it would not interfere with their leaving here. As he turned around to return to the place that he left everyone, he realized that he was faced with several paths. He panicked when he became aware that he had no idea which one to take. He began to hurry down one, then turned back to try another. Nothing looked familiar to him. He grew angry with himself now for not marking the path in some way. He was also embarrassed at the thought that, if he was ever found, he would have to admit to everyone that he had lost his way.

Kraz tired of running from one path to another in his attempt to find his way back and decided to rest for a while. He thought, I hope that they have noticed that we are missing and that they have begun to search for us. Being left behind in this strange place is not something that I want.
Chapter Twenty-Nine

Meanwhile, everyone else was getting comfortable for the long night ahead. Merak grumbled something about wishing that they were back in the comforts of their vessel; however, other than that, the group was very quiet. Each seemed to be thinking about where they wished they could have been at that moment. Of course, Brandon craved to be back at his party opening his many presents. Marfak was wondering how long his skills would last and what might happen once they were gone. Mostly though, they were all wishing that the adventure would soon be over.

Suddenly, Brandon realized that Terebellum was missing. He didn’t want to cause any alarm by announcing that fact so he quietly slipped away to try to find Terebellum by himself. He wouldn’t soon realize that was a mistake. He hadn’t gone too far into the wooded area when he stumbled across Kraz. They tangled with each other for a short time before realizing whom it was they were tangling with. Kraz shouted with glee, “Brandon! What are you doing here? Can you help me find my way back?” Brandon didn’t want to admit that he was more than a little lost when he bravely offered to help Kraz to return.

Brandon and Kraz both kept to themselves the fact that looking for Terebellum was the actual reason why they were both
wandering around. Finally, Kraz asked if everyone was all right. Brandon replied, “Yes, of course. Why wouldn’t they be?” Kraz just shook his head in agreement thinking to himself that it was possible that Terebellum had already returned. But then, he thought, what was Brandon doing out here on his own?

Kraz mustered enough courage to ask Brandon exactly that question. Brandon hesitated just long enough in his response for Kraz to realize that he was holding back on something. Finally, Brandon admitted to Kraz that he was looking for Terebellum. Brandon explained further, “I slipped away quietly. I don’t think that anyone realizes that I am gone.”

Kraz asked the obvious, “You do know where we are though, don’t you?”

Brandon replied sheepishly, “I think so. I have traveled through these parts with Buck enough times to be able to find my way around.”

Kraz wasn’t so sure of that; however, he had no other choice but to let Brandon lead the way.

They had gone quite a distance when Brandon said happily, “Here we are!” They were back at the location where everyone had bedded down for the night.

“Now,” Kraz said just barely above a whisper, “we have to sneak back in unnoticed plus figure out if Terebellum has returned.”

After they had successfully rejoined the group, they began to look around for Terebellum. They couldn’t believe it! She was nowhere to be found and no one had noticed that she was missing. This was just too much. Brandon told Kraz to quiet down. “After all,” he said, “we may cause everyone to panic and there may not be a need to do that.”

“How can you say that?” asked a very concerned Kraz. They were both worried what would happen if they didn’t find
Terebellum before morning when the group would leave to take the last part of the journey. It was assumed that when the vessel was found, Kraz and everyone would get on board and leave immediately. Terebellum would have to be left behind. The results of such circumstances could only be imagined. Kraz especially was concerned how long she would survive here.

Sadness overwhelmed both Brandon and Kraz when they realized the potential fate of Terebellum if they did not do all that they could do to locate her. After a few more moments of conferring what they should do next, they agreed to try to locate her while everyone was resting. No matter what dangers they might encounter, they had to at least try. Furthermore, they agreed that they would leave instructions for everyone else to go ahead without them in the morning should they not return before then. They made it sound as if Terebellum, Brandon and Kraz had purposely left and would join everyone at the assumed location of the vessel. They were not to try to follow them for any reason. There would be no reason for concern.
Chapter Thirty

After Brandon and Kraz managed to get away, they stopped briefly to decide which direction to go in. Brandon remembered that Terebellum had been delighted with some flowers that they had seen earlier. Brandon felt certain that she might try to locate the flowers again. Both Brandon and Kraz agreed that it might be worth it to go back to that area.

Kraz asked, “Brandon, are you sure this time that you know where you are going?”

Brandon replied honestly, “Yes. Buck and I used to pick flowers there all of the time for me to give to my mom.”

After that admission, Kraz noticed that Brandon looked very, very sad. Kraz was sorry that he had said anything. Both were quiet for the remainder of the journey.

Brandon was sure that this was the exact area that they had been in earlier. He was certain that Terebellum was somewhere nearby. He had a feeling about that. Kraz and Brandon decided to split up to search the surrounding fields. As it was the depth of the night, the only light they had were the stars overhead. Brandon moved carefully through some brush when he saw something out of the corner of his eye. Alas, it was too late though. He was hit from behind and fell unconscious to the ground. There had been no time to warn Kraz.
Kraz had searched his entire area and returned to the rock where he and Brandon were supposed to meet when they were done. He couldn’t understand what was taking Brandon so long. The areas that each one searched were approximately the same size. After a while he began to become concerned about what might have happened. He didn’t know what to do. They had not discussed what they would do if one of them didn’t return.

He was deep in thought as to what he should do next when he heard a noise behind him. Kraz turned around quickly. He found himself surrounded by something very strange. Kraz couldn’t believe that they had followed them here. How could this happen, he wondered. They had not noticed that they had been followed. His first concern was for the safety of everyone; including Brandon, Buck, Jessie and Matthew. His next concern was for the vessel. Had that already been destroyed?

Kraz waited for Albali to communicate. The tension between Kraz and Albali was very apparent. Finally, Izar interjected with, “Gee, somebody say something, why don’t you?”

“What are you doing here?” shouted Kraz.

Izar replied, “Hey that is no way to treat a fellow traveler!”

Kraz replied saying, “I don’t consider the three of you to be my fellow travelers; here or anywhere!”

Albali thought to herself that this wasn’t going very well. She was more concerned with what she saw happen to the other one who had been with Kraz. Albali quieted everyone gently and then explained what had happened. “Oh, no,” cried Kraz, “I do hope that Brandon is not too hurt.”

Kraz then explained that he and Brandon had been trying to locate Terebellum. After his brief explanation of everything that had happened thus far, he said, “Please help me to get to Brandon. We must save him. He and his friends have aided us greatly. Without them, I don’t know what we would have done.”
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Albali, Izar and Mira did all that they could to assure Kraz that they would go to Brandon immediately. As for Terebellum, they all agreed that they would join forces to locate her after getting Brandon safely back to Buck.

Izar decided that he knew best where they saw Brandon last. He led the way carefully trying not to draw any attention to their group. No one had any idea who or what was out there. In the meantime, Brandon was beginning to wake up. His head was pounding and he had no idea why. Moving slowly, he began to get up and look around. He just couldn’t imagine what had happened.
Chapter Thirty-One

While Brandon was doing his best to remain calm, Kraz and his group were coming to rescue him as quickly as possible. More than once Izar had to remind Kraz to slow down and move quietly. Izar exclaimed, “There is no need to invite any unwanted guests to this adventure!”

Kraz replied testily, “As if you are an invited guest!”

“Hey,” cried Albali, “enough already. I don’t want to hear another word.”

Brandon heard all of the commotion. He had heard Kraz complaining about something; however, what he couldn’t understand was who else was making all that noise. It certainly didn’t sound like Buck or any of the others. Brandon groaned inwardly. He couldn’t imagine what was going on now.

Kraz and his group were close enough now so that Brandon could reach out and touch one of them. He hesitated doing so though. The likes of Albali, Izar and Mira had him wondering if it was safe to do so. Before he had too much time to think about it, Kraz spotted him amongst the bushes where he was sitting trying not to be noticed.

Kraz shouted in happiness, “Here he is!” Brandon had no choice but to crawl out from beneath the bush. He gave Kraz a
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look that said, “What the heck is going on now?” Kraz realized immediately that Brandon was somewhat taken aback by the addition to the group. He laughed out loud at the look on Brandon’s face as he glanced over Albali, Izar and Mira. Becoming somewhat embarrassed at being the only one who appeared not to know what was going on, Brandon asked irritably, “Who are they?”

Kraz replied, “This vagabond group is what you might refer to here as friends of mind. However, I must warn you that they are somewhat unconventional at times. No, make that all of the time. You can never know what to expect from them. Not at all.”

Albali greeted Brandon warmly saying, “Don’t listen to Kraz. He tends to blow a little smoke now and then.” When Brandon heard this, he smiled. Izar and Mira acknowledged Brandon with a similar response. When he realized that they truly meant no harm, he began to relax.

His thoughts then turned to Terebellum. As if Kraz read his mind, he told Brandon that they had not seen Terebellum. Their main concern had been for Brandon’s safety. Albali quickly explained what they had witnessed happening to Brandon. When Brandon heard what had happened, he realized the reason for the headache that he had.

Izar suggested that they might all return to Buck and the rest of the group. He reasoned that Terebellum might have already returned. That, thought Brandon, would be a miracle. Kraz agreed that returning to Buck was the best thing for the time being. “After all,” he said, “we have a certain degree of safety when we are with Buck.” Brandon couldn’t deny this. He knew that Buck would do anything to protect everyone.

They gave no thought at all as to who or what may have injured Brandon. Their focus was on finding their way back to where they last saw Buck and everyone else. Brandon smiled to himself when
he wondered what Jessie, Matthew and Buck would think of Izar, Mira and Albali. _Another surprise in this already surprising birthday_, he thought. Well, at least, it will be one that I will never forget!

Slowly, they made their way back to the area that they had last seen their friends. They watched carefully for whatever it was that harmed Brandon; however, their walk was uneventful. In fact, it was one of those beautiful Fall days when everything seemed to be warmed and brightened by the gold colors on the leaves. Brandon remembered thinking happily that nothing more could possibly happen.

As they neared the area where they had left everyone else, Brandon began to wonder why it was so quiet. His concern was justified. Kraz had ventured ahead and returned to tell them sadly that Buck and everyone were nowhere to be seen. In fact, the entire area was deserted.
Chapter Thirty-Two

While Kraz and Brandon were looking for Terebellum, Buck found their note instructing everyone to continue to travel toward the vessel. Buck assumed that Kraz and Brandon had gone ahead to make sure that the route was safe. While this caused old Buck some concern for Brandon’s safety, he was nonetheless proud that Brandon would do such a brave thing. Besides, Buck thought, Kraz is with him. Together they would be just fine. Anyway, he hoped, this whole thing would be over soon.

As they were packing up, Kuma realized that Terebellum was missing, too. He didn’t want to say anything. He knew all too well how angry Marfak and Merak would be if they found out. Kuma decided that it was best to tell Buck. Kuma asked Buck to walk with him to a nearby area. Buck didn’t think anything of the request. He had grown quite found of Kuma and the others. Why, if there was anything that he could do for them while they were here, he would. He figured that Kuma had something to ask him.

Kuma and Buck sauntered away unnoticed by the others. When they reached a spot where Kuma was certain that no one would overhear what was being said, he told Buck that Terebellum was not to be found. At first, Buck was surprised that she would leave without saying anything. Then, he laughed to
himself as he realized what probably happened. Kuma was somewhat taken aback by his outburst of laughter. He wasn’t finding this to be funny at all.

Buck explained quickly that he had noticed that Terebellum and Brandon were very interested in one another. He winked as he explained that. Kuma understood quickly. “That explains her disappearance,” commented Buck. He continued saying that she probably begged Kraz and Brandon to allow her to go along. And, knowing Brandon, he would have said yes.

“This probably all happened after they wrote their note and they forgot to add her name,” finished Kuma.

“Yes, of course,” agreed Buck.

After Buck and Kuma agreed not to make a big deal of the fact that several of their group had ventured ahead, they returned to where everyone was waiting. Marfak was just beginning to comment on Terebellum’s disappearance when Buck and Kuma entered the area. Buck quickly quieted any cause for concern by explaining what he and Kuma had surmised had happened. While Marfak clearly was not pleased with what was going on, he did not comment any further. He and the others began to prepare for the last part of their journey. Buck did his best to keep everyone’s spirits up. They all had their own concerns for Brandon, Kraz and Terebellum. Furthermore, they were beginning to realize that they would be saying good-bye very soon.

As these various thoughts weighed heavily on everyone’s mind, no one noticed a sound from nearby. Fortunately, Moxie and Bull’s keen sense of hearing was not impaired by any of what was happening. They knew immediately that something or someone was out there. Moxie mentally alerted Bull that she would be going to find out what it was. Bull nodded in agreement. He would stay with the group and guard them, if need be.

Moxie moved stealthily toward the area where the noise had
come from. When she realized that it sounded like a cry, a human cry, Moxie moved much faster toward the sound. As the sound grew louder, Moxie became certain that it was someone crying. She couldn’t imagine who would be out here. However, she also knew that with the strange change in their surroundings and other things, that nothing was impossible at this point.

She stayed close to the ground, crawling as quickly as she could without disturbing the undergrowth. The last thing that she wanted to do was to be detected. Moxie stopped for a few seconds to sniff the air. She knew that scent! What was it, she thought. She just couldn’t quite remember what it was. But it was very familiar and it was something from the recent events.
Chapter Thirty-Three

Moxie knew that she was very close now. She jumped up quickly to create an element of surprise. Much to her surprise, she saw Terebellum. Moxie ran as quickly as she could to Terebellum’s aid, not noticing that they had company and that Terebellum was trying desperately to tell Moxie not to come toward her.

As Moxie neared Terebellum, she realized immediately the mistake that she had made. They were surrounded by a bunch of obviously very angry people. The spokesperson, Bruce, commanded Moxie to hold still. She followed his command hoping that by doing so would give her a minute to assess the situation. What she saw did not make her happy at all. Moxie became aware that they were in very grave danger. She had no way of letting Bull know that they needed his help.

Fortunately, Bull sensed that something had happened. What he had to do next was to figure out if he could leave the group without putting them in danger, too. He sat still and watched and waited. Suddenly, it came to him that the danger was with Moxie and Terebellum. He knew that he had to tell Buck. Only Buck would be able to make sure that everyone was all right while Bull did what he had to do.
Bull drew Buck aside to explain as much as he could of what was happening. Buck couldn’t believe it. He had been so sure that Terebellum was with Kraz and Brandon. He also realized that there wasn’t a whole lot of time to waste. He agreed to stay and guard everyone else.

Quietly, as Bull slipped away, Buck wished silently that nothing more would happen. Getting everyone to the vessel safely was all that they had to do now. Hopefully, that would put everything back to normal again. If not, well, he didn’t even want to think about that.

Bull stayed hidden behind a large rock to observe what was going on. After all, any sudden movements on his part might cause an even greater problem. As he watched the group, he noted that there was a clearing nearby where he could possibly go to create a diversion. Maybe, he thought, it would be enough for Terebellum and Moxie to make their getaway. As for himself, he would have to make sure to run faster than everyone who would be chasing him. He smiled at that thought. He knew that was something that he could do.

Moxie sensed what Bull had been thinking and began to prepare herself for a quick escape. Terebellum appeared to be unharmed. She would be able to do whatever was necessary to get out of here. Terebellum also sensed what was happening but did her best not to let that fact be known. They waited as patiently as they could while Bull made his way to the clearing.

Once Bull was in position, he signaled Moxie that he was ready. Moxie moved closer to Terebellum. They would escape together, with Moxie giving Terebellum as much protection as possible. Moxie looked at her good friend Bull for a moment, hoping that all would go well for him.

Then Bull began his antics. Gosh, Moxie thought, he is making himself sound like a wild animal. That was a talent that she didn’t
know about! While the angry crowd was distracted, Moxie and Terebellum were able to get away. In the meantime, Bull also began to run at a fast gallop to get away, too. There was bedlam as everyone ran in different directions. Bruce was shouting orders to try to recapture Moxie and Terebellum. He wasn’t interested, he said, in whatever wild animal was out there. Little did he know, that Bull would have also been quite a catch.

Fortunately, Moxie read Bull’s thoughts. They caught up with each other near an old abandoned shed. By that time, Terebellum was tired. She just couldn’t go any further. Bull suggested that she and Moxie wait there while he returned to Buck and the others. After all, he reasoned, they would be passing this way anyway to go to the vessel.
Chapter Thirty-Four

While Bull made his way back to Buck, Terebellum used the time to take a much needed rest. Moxie maintained a diligent guard over her. All was quiet and peaceful near the abandoned shed and Moxie was determined to keep it that way. Bruce and his group of vigilantes had not been seen or heard from. Moxie figured that they had lost their way.

Bull was nearing the site where he had left Buck. He approached carefully so as not to create any noise. He didn’t want to draw attention to the location. Bull had been certain that he hadn’t been followed; however, he also felt that taking extra precautions was not a problem either.

Buck was ecstatic to see Bull again; that is, until he noticed that Moxie and Terebellum weren’t with him. Bull quieted Buck quickly explaining that Terebellum and Moxie were safe and they were waiting near the old abandoned shed. Buck knew of this shed from his youth. He hadn’t seen it in years; however, he knew that the surroundings provided a great hiding place. He and Scott had played there frequently.

Before Marfak and Merak could say anything, Buck herded everyone together. Quickly, he had everyone believing that everything was all right and that this would be the final leg of the
journey to reach the vessel, as planned. When Marfak questioned
the whereabouts of Kraz, Brandon, Moxie and Terebellum, Buck
sidestepped the remark by answering with an assuring voice that
Kraz and Brandon had left much earlier to make sure that the
path was safe. Moxie and Terebellum were waiting for them just
ahead by an old abandoned shed.

Marfak was not sure that he believed that Buck was telling
them everything that he knew; however, he had grown fond of
the old guy and didn’t want to cause any problems for him. He
seemed to be trying so hard to keep everyone together. For the
time being, both Marfak and Merak agreed to go along with what
Buck wanted them to do. In the meantime, they would watch and
listen for anything at all that would change their minds.

Buck breathed a sigh of relief when he realized that everyone
was going along with his explanation. The group began to walk to
where the old shed was. Scott knew immediately where they were
heading but chose not to say anything. He felt, too, that Buck
knew more than what he was telling everyone else.

As they neared the shed, Bull asked everyone else to wait in a
secluded area while he went ahead to make sure that there were
no more surprises. Not that they should expect any, he added
swiftly. Bull moved toward the shed silently. He hoped that
Moxie and Terebellum would be exactly where he had left them.
As he carefully rounded the corner of the shed, he was greeted by
a very exuberant Moxie.

She was glad that he had returned. Moxie had been aware that
everyone was coming their way for quite some time and had been
anxiously awaiting their arrival. Terebellum was in great spirits,
too, having had a good rest. They were ready and raring to go. Bull
signaled to Buck to come on ahead with everyone else.

A joyous reunion followed. Everyone was happy to see
Terebellum again. No one brought up the subject of the
whereabouts of Brandon and Kraz. It seemed as if everyone wanted to believe Buck’s explanation.

Well, before anyone had a chance to think too long and too hard, Buck began to lead everyone toward the location of the vessel. He hoped that somewhere along the way that they would find Brandon and Kraz. He couldn’t believe anything else. He knew that he had to keep his wits about him. Losing his calm now would only create a disaster. Getting to the vessel had to be a priority. Getting back to the train and back to the present was another issue; one that he hoped would resolve itself once they located the vessel. Marfak and Merak had consoled him repeatedly, telling him that no one on the train was in danger. As a matter of fact, with the way things were going, Buck and everyone else’s safety was more of a problem.
Chapter Thirty-Five

In the meantime, Brandon and Kraz were doing their best to try to find their way back. The new additions to the party were not much help. They had been lost from the time that they landed. Nevertheless, Brandon was actually enjoying the time that he spent with Albali, Izar and Mira.

Albali was doing her best to keep the disagreements between Kraz, Izar and Mira to a minimum. *Not an easy job*, thought Brandon. After several moments of wandering down one path, they all decided to turn back and go in the opposite direction. Brandon was certain that the path that they were on was one that he had never seen before. He was doing his best to identify landmarks or vegetation. Unfortunately, what he was familiar with was now replaced with what once was. *Buck would know*, he thought.

In his own way, Kraz was also wondering how he could help. Foremost in his thoughts was the wish that he had the talents of Marfak. However, that was not so. His talents were very respectable though. He tried his best to think of something that could be applied to this current situation. He thought and thought about it then suddenly yelled, “That’s it! I can help!” Brandon cautioned him to be quiet. Kraz could hardly hold still long
enough to explain to Brandon what it was that he could do.

The skill was an ancient one. That was why Kraz didn’t think of it immediately. As he began to explain to Brandon what would happen, Albali was able to provide the details as to how this was done. Izar and Mira smirked at the idea. Izar said, “Why use such an old tactic? There has to be something a little more up to date than that old idea.”

Mira agreed adding, “It has been too long. We don’t even know if it will work.”

Brandon sided with Kraz replying, “We won’t know if we don’t try. At least, let’s give Kraz’s suggestion a chance.”

After continuing the conversation in a similar tone for a while, everyone agreed that they couldn’t come up with a better idea. In fact, Izar and Mira had to admit that they didn’t even have another idea at all.

Kraz touched Brandon’s forehead gently saying, “Think of Moxie. We’ll be able to get a message to her.” Brandon thought as hard as he could, but to no avail. Kraz just couldn’t get in touch with Moxie. Albali impatiently pushed Kraz aside and tried. But try as she might, she had no success either.

Izar said, “I told you so. I told you that this wouldn’t work. It has been too long since we have used that skill. It is no longer with us.”

Brandon became annoyed with his attitude and said, “Well, since you can’t come up with anything better, why don’t you try?”

Mira smiled at this knowing full well that Izar had put himself in a precarious position.

Izar looked like he was about to walk away from the whole idea, when suddenly, he stepped toward Brandon and touched his forehead gently as Kraz and Albali had done. There was an immediate spark. Something had happened! Izar was taken aback somewhat then regained his composure and commanded
Brandon, “Think! Think hard about Moxie!” Izar knew. He knew that he had broken through. He did his very best to explain to Moxie who he was and what had happened.

Moxie replied immediately with great concern for Brandon’s and Kraz’s safety. Izar assured her that Brandon and Kraz were fine. He explained that he, too, was friendly and she was not to fear him or the others that were with him. Moxie replied, “What others? There are more!”

“Yes,” replied Izar, “they are Albali and Mira. Please do not fear us.”

Brandon was becoming tired and disoriented. Izar knew that he would have to end the conversation quickly. Albali was becoming concerned that Brandon might suffer some type of injury as a result of what they were doing.

Izar repeated all instructions to Moxie again. Moxie replied that they were to stay where they were. She would come to them. She knew exactly where they were.
Chapter Thirty-Six

What Moxie hadn’t mentioned was that they were in the exact vicinity where they had the run-in with Bruce and his friends. She also knew instinctively that Brandon, Izar, Albali and Mira would not stand a chance against such hoodlums.

First, she had to tell Bull what was happening. Miraculously, while Izar had been communicating with her, the same information had been given to Bull. That saved a lot of precious time; time that would be needed for her to get to Brandon. Bull volunteered to explain to Buck what was going on. He left out the part as to how they received the information and Buck didn’t think to ask.

After a brief conversation between Buck, Bull and Moxie, it was decided that Moxie and Bull would go to Brandon. Buck would stay with everyone else. They would not move from the current location, unless there would be a need to do so. In that event, Buck would travel toward the location of the vessel.

Buck wished them to hurry along their way. He wanted Brandon and Kraz back safe and sound. Bull and Moxie wisely had not mentioned Mira, Izar and Albali. There was no need to concern Buck more. As Moxie and Bull raced to the location, they devised a plan. Once nearer to the mark, they would hide in some
nearby shrubs. That would give them time to sense if there was any danger present. If that would be the case, they had agreed to take care of Bruce and his friends once and for all.

They did just that. As they waited in the nearby shrubs, they could see Brandon, Kraz and the others that they had been told of. Bull said, “I don’t see or sense anything. Do you?”

Moxie replied, “Not yet. I want to wait a bit longer though just to make sure.”

Bull agreed. After all, they could watch Brandon and everyone from where they were. If anything happened, they could come to their aide without delay.

Just when they thought that they could make their move, there was a noise behind a large boulder. Moxie inhaled deeply, afraid to make a move or another sound. Bull could not see what was there. He whispered, “That’s strange! I can’t see or sense a thing!” It was rather humiliating. After all, that was what they were supposed to be good at.

Bull motioned that he was going to circle around to the other side. Moxie would remain in the position that she was in. As Bull moved closer to his target, there was another sound, similar to the first. He thought, I can’t imagine what that is. He became even more frightened for the safety of Brandon and his friends.

Just then he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. His body tensed, ready for action. After what seemed to be an eternity, he decided to edge a little closer. He hoped to see what or who was there. As he crawled slowly to a better position, another sound was heard. Again, just like the others. He thought, This is ridiculous. We’ll never get anything done this way. Bravely, he charged the area only to be confronted with a great big nothing. As it turned out, the sound that he and Moxie had heard was a branch from a tall evergreen brushing along side the boulder as the winds swept through its limbs.
Bull almost laughed out loud with relief but quickly realized that was not a great idea. He signaled to Moxie that all was well and that he would explain later. She could tell by the much-relieved look on his face, that everything was just fine.

Together, they moved toward Brandon, Kraz and their new friends. Kraz caught sight of Bull and Moxie first. He jumped with glee that they had been rescued. As introductions were being made all around, they all agreed that they wanted to return to Buck and the rest of the group. No explanation had been given for Izar, Mira and Albali’s arrival and none had been asked for. Everyone was feeling good about the fact that after rejoining the rest of the group, their next accomplishment would be to locate the vessel and make their long-awaited return journey.
Chapter Thirty-Seven

Albali and Jessie bonded immediately. It was as if they had known each other forever. Even Buck, who was normally very happy with whatever his charges did, became a bit annoyed with their non-stop chatter. Eventually, in order to gain some peace, everyone else moved on ahead of Albali and Jessie. Moxie brought up the rear to make sure that the two of them were all right. Bull led the way toward their final stop, the vessel.

Brandon and Terebellum were deep in conversation. Unknown even to Brandon was that Terebellum was considering staying. She did not want to leave. Not only because of Brandon but also there was so much here. So much that she wanted to see and do. If she returned, she would be locked into what was expected of her. She had never revealed to anyone that she was unhappy. The expectations were so great from everyone. She did not want to cause any disappointments. Well, then, she thought, wouldn’t this decision cause disappointment? She didn’t want to answer that. She just knew that she wanted to stay.

Marfak and Merak were concerned about what would happen when they reached the vessel. Bull and Moxie seemed very sure of the fact that they were heading in the right direction. Marfak and Merak could only hope that they were right. Another worry was
what would happen to Brandon, Matthew, Buck, Jessie and Scott. Hopefully, all would return to some semblance of normal. They had no idea what would happen, not really.

Kraz was hoping that this whole episode would be over soon. After his last escapade, he promised himself that he would never, ever do any such thing again. He would stick to the plans that he had made a long time ago. He was looking forward to the return of what he was comfortable with.

Kuma, Izar and Mira had joined ranks. They were surprised at how much they had in common. Izar and Mira would never have contacted Kuma. If they had, they would have suffered dire consequences. For now though, they were enjoying each other’s company.

Matthew was walking alone. He was thinking about everyone on the train. He hoped that their friends and relatives were not harmed. He had noticed that Brandon and Terebellum were very attracted to one another. Matthew hoped that his friend would not try anything foolish like talking her into staying here.

Scott was walking along with Buck. Scott kept thinking that he knew Buck from somewhere. There was something so familiar about him. Buck was sad at the thought that he could not reveal who he was. What caused him even greater sadness was the realization that he had never contacted Scott again after those idyllic summers of childhood were spent. Buck wondered what would happen when they reached the vessel. Would everything return to the way things were? Would he remember how much he had missed this dear friend of his and get in touch with him somehow?

Up ahead of them, Bull kept his nose in the air constantly. He didn’t want to lose the scent or be caught unaware of any dangers. At the rear, Moxie was doing the same. She noticed that some of the group was beginning to get tired. She signaled Bull mentally
and he replied. He hadn’t been aware of that; however, he would look for a sheltered area where they could rest for a while.

They walked along for quite a while before Bull could find something. He saw a group of tall pines gathered together, forming a small tight-knit circle. Within the grasp of these majestic trees, surely everyone would be safe. Not only from anyone or anything wanting to bring them harm but also from the elements. It appeared that some storm clouds were gathering up ahead. He wasn’t sure how their friends would be affected. Furthermore, he didn’t want Brandon, Jessie, Matthew, Buck or Scott to get cold or wet.
Chapter Thirty-Eight

The storm was everything that the clouds had promised it would be. Terebellum huddled close to Brandon. She had never experienced anything like a storm before. Marfak and Merak were fine. They had a similar experience in their travels elsewhere. Kuma, Kraz, Scott, Buck, Bull and Moxie worked together to build a rustic shelter with the fallen branches of the surrounding trees. Everyone else did what could be done to help. The little hut provided enough comfort so that everyone began to relax and enjoy being nestled safely together.

Buck thought to himself that it was amazing how much they had bonded as a group. He wondered how much more there was to learn from such faraway places. While he was delighted that everyone had become friends, he was also concerned about Terebellum and Brandon. Surely, he would have to talk to Brandon soon about recognizing the fact that Terebellum would soon be gone. He would be sure to emphasize that the joy of returning to his family would wipe out any sadness in leaving his friend. Their acquaintance would be a nice memory. *Maybe not,* thought Buck, *maybe this whole adventure will somehow be erased from our memories. Wouldn’t that be something?*

After a while, quiet ascended on the group. They were
comfortable enough with one another so that the silence was a welcome feeling. Of course, their minds were not silent. Everyone’s thoughts were speeding ahead to what would happen when they arrived at the vessel. Would everything go back to the way that it was for Buck and his group? Bull and Moxie were enjoying their ability to communicate. Would this be lost again? Would they ever remember that they could for a brief time actually tell their friends what they were thinking? The reality was that it would be best for everything to return to the way it was; the sadness was that they would miss so much of what they had now.

Buck noticed that Scott had turned away and had taken his cell phone out of his pocket again. Scott looked at it for a moment, as if he wanted to make that one call, then put it away. At that moment, his eyes had a far, far away look in them. It was as if he was remembering something from a long time ago but couldn’t quite put it together. Buck turned away. The pain that he felt was too great. He and Scott had been so close at one time. All that had been lost. Now, more than ever, he appreciated the importance of such a friendship. He didn’t know if he would be able to find him again when all of this was over or even remember to do so, but he promised himself to try.

Jessie and Albali were having some difficulty in accepting that they would be saying farewell very soon. They knew that the possibility of seeing one another ever again was negligible. For the time being though, they were talking about everything. Albali was very interested in Jessie’s relationships with her family and friends. She was perplexed with the idea of boyfriends and how that evolved to marriage and family. Albali would never understand those joys. But, then, she thought sadly, Jessie would never know some of what Albali was so looking forward to.

The storm continued to lash its fury all around them. Deep inside that little hut though was warmth and calm that was the
antipathy of such fury. There were moments of deep silence followed by outburst of conversation. No one wanted to talk about the inevitable though. The farewell was sure to be poignant. The future for them all was uncertain. For now though, they had each other. With Marfak and Merak’s assurance that all was well and safe on the train, they continued to enjoy this respite while the storm continued around them.

It was a long time before the winds and rain abated. Bull and Moxie ventured outside of the small hut first. They wanted to make sure that everything was all right. Slowly, almost unwillingly, everyone else joined the two dogs. They looked around them at the damage that the storm had wrought. Buck had the dogs run ahead to make sure that the path that they would take was passable. Bull and Moxie returned to say that everything was clear. There was no reason left to delay this final part of the journey.
Chapter Thirty-Nine

The feeling of anticipation was strong as they realized that very soon they would be at the long awaited site of the vessel. Marfak and Merak were hopeful that it would not have come to any harm. Izar, Mira and Albali had had the foresight to hide their mode of transportation. They also had the ability to monitor it. While they had landed a short distance from the other vessel, they were going to allow Marfak to transport them using his uncanny abilities. After all, it wouldn’t matter at that point if something like that were noticed. They would be on their way and out of here.

Everyone was feeling a strange awareness that something was not quite right. Bull and Moxie sensed that, too. However, what was confusing them was the fact that the scent that was so obviously the vessel was still there. What could it be that they felt wasn’t right? Well, they would soon find out.

“Just over the next hill,” called Bull to the group tagging along behind him. Moxie’s ears stood straight up in excitement. She, too, felt that the scent was stronger. No one was worried at all about Bruce or any other threats at this point. Soon, everyone would be safely on the way. The return to the train would also be taken care of by Marfak. Everyone would simultaneously be placed where they belonged. Well, that would be a relief. It seems
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like being where they belonged was something that was a distant memory.

As Bull arrived atop the crest of the hill, he saw a vacant spot. It appeared that was where the vessel had landed. He wasn’t sure though. The scent was so strong. He figured that he just couldn’t see it yet. When Marfak hurried to join him, his reaction was similar. “I thought that we left it right over there. I can recall that tall tree growing off of the side of the hill,” he said.

“I don’t know,” answered Bull. There had to be an explanation. They both sensed that the vessel was nearby.

As everyone else joined them, they too were surprised at the vacant spot. Kuma ran to the empty field to check for any indication that the vessel had once been there. He was happy but confused to report that they were at the right location. “Look,” he exclaimed, “you can see the markings that we made with the landing.”

Now, Buck was really alarmed. So much hinged on their finding this vessel. He looked at Brandon, Matthew, Jessie and Scott. What would happen to them now? he asked himself. How would Marfak and everyone else not being able to leave affect the planned return to the train?

Albali was the first to regain her senses. “Look,” she said, “if this is where you left it, then it must be nearby! Somehow, it must have drifted away.”

“Yes,” cried Kuma, “that’s it. Of course, in this strange environment, something like that could very well have happened.”

Now, with an explanation like that, everyone began to relax a little. They just had to scour the surrounding area of the missing vessel. Hopefully, it didn’t drift too far. There was some talk of using Marfak’s abilities or the vessel that Albali, Izar and Mira had arrived in; however, the consensus was that they had to be careful
that whatever they did was not noticed. They needed to leave but they needed to remain safe during the time that they had left here. They all hoped silently that the time would be short.

On a more self-indulgent note, Terebellum was glad in the delay. She was hoping that it would give her time to develop her plan to stay here with a little more detail. She knew that the opposition would be fierce. Her opponents would not only be Marfak and Merak but also Buck. She felt that Buck was not very happy that Brandon was spending so much time with her. They didn’t mean for it to happen, neither one of them wanted to hurt Buck. All they had to do was convince him that everything would be all right. Brandon wasn’t all too sure though that she should stay. His concern was not only for her safety. That was something that he felt that he could take care of. He was also fearful that she would suffer in other ways.
Chapter Forty

As they began to think of what to do next, Bull and Moxie began a search of the nearby area. The scent was so strong, so very strong. “Could it have been that we have been following the wrong scent all of this time?” asked Moxie.

“No,” replied Bull, “don’t you recall that they said the markings in the field matched the markings made by one of their vessels?”

“Oh, yes,” answered Moxie. That still didn’t answer why they couldn’t seem to find it then.

They returned to Buck and the rest of the group to report that they had not seen anything. Marfak and some of the others were getting a bit anxious. They were concerned that someone like Bruce may have found it. Buck tried his best to calm their fears by saying that he was sure nothing was wrong. The vessel had to be around here somewhere.

Jessie asked if there was a possibility if Marfak and his group could return with Izar, Mira and Albali. Albali responded kindly, “No. That is not an option. Not that we wouldn’t permit it, it just would not work. Their needs are much different than ours.”

That caused Brandon to think more of Terebellum and how she would survive if she actually did decide not to leave. Marfak
added, “We have been fortunate thus far. However, I do feel the need to return soon.” Izar agreed.

With the issue of their wellbeing foremost in everyone’s minds, the search for the vessel began in full earnest. The group split in teams of three. They were not to stay out longer than a specified time and to report back to Buck at the end of each search. Buck’s concern was that soon daylight would be gone. Then, they would be forced to postpone their long-awaited return to the train. He was more anxious than ever to get Brandon, Jessie, Matthew, Bull and Moxie back to where they belonged.

Jessie, Albali and Matthew were grouped as a team. Jessie and Albali were glad to have Matthew with them. He was such a good sport about putting up with their constant talking. No one else did, that was for sure. As they ventured into the outlying area that was assigned to them, Albali and Jessie discussed the prospect of their staying in touch with one another after all of this was over. Albali didn’t want to tell Jessie that the option was virtually impossible. Instead, she chose to tell Jessie that they would contemplate that likelihood after the vessel was found. “One dilemma at a time is enough,” she said.

This gave Matthew reason to think about Brandon and Terebellum. He was more than aware of what they might be thinking. He hoped that no one would get hurt through all of this. Certainly, saying good-bye would be difficult. But, it was something that would have to be done. He had already talked to Marfak and learned a lot. There was no way possible for Terebellum to remain here. Additionally, the fact of the matter was that even communication would be impossible. Matthew was thoughtful enough not to verbalize any of this though.

As they were rounding a bend in the road, he saw a reflection of light. It was so quick that, at first, he thought that he had imagined it. He said to Jessie and Albali, “Stay here. I just want to
check something that I thought that I saw over there.” Jessie and Albali agreed to wait while he did so.

While Matthew was gone, Jessie and Albali watched and listened carefully. There didn’t seem to be anything happening at all. They thought that Matthew had just imagined something. Suddenly, Matthew came running back shouting, “I think that I found it!”

Jessie insisted that the three of them take a look at whatever it was that Matthew found. “After all,” admonished Jessie, “you have never seen one of these things before. Maybe you are mistaken.”

Matthew argued with her saying, “It matches exactly what Kuma told me it would look like.”

Albali intervened with, “She is right. Let’s all take a look at it. Then, if it is the vessel, we will return to Buck and bring everyone else with us. That was the plan. No one was supposed to try to be a hero and approach this alone. None of us really knows what to expect.”
Chapter Forty-One

Well, they certainly didn’t expect this. Jessie and Matthew quickly explained to Albali what was happening. As near as they could determine, a group of young children had taken over the vessel! Much to their own delight, they were having a great time playing with it, too. Albali was beside herself with worry about what might happen.

She whispered to Jessie and Matthew, “If they touch the correct sequence of switches, the vessel could launch itself.” Jessie and Matthew didn’t ask where it would go; just the possibility of it getting launched was enough. They decided that Matthew would remain in position to keep an eye on things. Jessie and Albali would return to Buck to report what they found. Before parting, they convinced each other that everything would be all right.

Jessie and Albali rushed as fast as they could to return to Buck. Neither one of them noticed that they were being followed. As they hurried over the hill to Buck’s location, they yelled, “Buck! Buck! We found it! We found the vessel!” In their excitement they had completely forgotten themselves. Yelling like that could draw crowds; yelling information like that could cause some serious things to happen.
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Buck quieted them as quickly as he could but not fast enough. Their shouting had drawn the attention of those who had been following them. Bruce had a look of triumph on his face. He was very determined to find out what this was all about. The information that he had just heard was enough to send him back in the opposite direction, back to Matthew.

In the meantime, Jessie and Albali gave every detail of what they had seen. They also related the fact that they had left Matthew in position to keep a watchful eye on things. That gave Marfak some cause for concern. If these children did manage to launch the vessel, Matthew did not know enough to stop it. Marfak realized that he had to do something.

He took Buck aside and told him of his plan. Marfak would use skills that would certainly bring notice to their group; however, the alternative was very dangerous. If the children were to manage to cause a launch, they would be put in great danger. He didn’t know if the systems on board would sustain their lives.

Buck agreed that Marfak had to do whatever was necessary, even if it meant bringing jeopardizing their position. They were in a much better situation to survive any unwanted intruders than the children would be if they were to find themselves hurled into space.

Terebellum watched and listened to every detail. She knew that Marfak would use his abilities to transport himself to the interior of the vessel. After that, she didn’t know what his plans would be. After all, they would not want to hurt the children. *Maybe*, she thought, *he could just scare them away*. Her other hope was that Matthew would not be harmed. She knew all too well how Brandon felt about him.

Marfak moved quickly. With lightning speed, he was gone. Marfak decided not to transport himself to the interior of the vessel. Instead he chose a location right near Matthew. He
thought that observing what was going on first might be of some help. Additionally, he wanted an update from Matthew regarding anything that he might have seen since Jessie and Alba left.

It was fortunate indeed that he chose a location near Matthew. From where he was he could see Matthew and the vessel. The children were still having a great time with it. They were playing outside of the vessel and were reasonably safe for now. However, what he didn’t like was the group that had surrounded Matthew. The look on Matthew’s face told him that something was drastically wrong.
Chapter Forty-Two

Matthew was scared. Bruce and his group had surrounded him completely. He had no way of warning the others. He also had no way of protecting the children. He feared that Buck and everyone would come quickly after hearing what Jessie and Albali said.

While Matthew was thinking of ways to warn them not to come, he heard a strange sound. He realized at once that Marfak was trying to tell him something. Remembering how they had used Brandon to communicate to Moxie, he relaxed and let Marfak speak to him. While Matthew felt a bit weird going about it this way, he also sent thoughts back to Marfak. When Matthew realized that Marfak was very near, he relaxed. Marfak told him not to worry, he would warn the others.

All that they had to do was figure out how to scare off Bruce and the boys without bringing any harm to the children. Fortunately, Marfak had some special skills that were not supposed to be used. But, he thought, extreme circumstances certainly allow for what he was thinking. He smiled to himself knowing that Bruce and his group would soon be heading for the nearby hills. After this, he had serious doubts that they would try to return again.

He did not send this information to Matthew. First of all, he
would find it difficult to understand. Marfak also decided to initiate the plan right away. There was no reason to wait for Buck and the rest of them to catch up with him. The longer they delayed getting the children away from the vessel, the more likely it was that they might harm themselves.

Bruce and his gang were standing over Matthew. They were doing their best with various threats to get him to tell them what exactly was going on. Matthew was getting more worried by the minute that Marfak would not be able to think of anything to scare them away. He was about to do something himself when he noticed a strange apparition behind Bruce. Some of Bruce’s boys noticed it too and began to scream in fear.

Bruce turned around to look at what was causing all of the commotion. He couldn’t believe his eyes. Before him was a large monster, the likes of which he never saw before.

Bruce commanded several of the boys to attack. “Attack it!” he shouted. As he turned to shout the orders again, the monster flared up as if it was on fire. With this display of power, Bruce and the boys took off rapidly, screaming for their very lives.

Matthew didn’t know what to think. He was frozen in fear himself. Suddenly, he heard Marfak’s laughter. “Marfak? Is that you,” he asked. Marfak transformed himself to the image that Matthew was used to seeing. “Whew,” said Matthew with a sigh of relief, “I thought that you would never get here. How did you do that?”

“Do what?” asked Marfak.

“That monster thing,” replied Matthew.

“Oh, that’s just one of my many talents,” he replied with a smile.

“Are you all right, Matthew?”

“Yes, I think so,” replied an amazed Matthew. He was increasing astounded at the array of talent that Marfak possessed.
Just then, Buck and everyone else came running up to them. “Wow! That was great,” said Jessie. Merak looked at Marfak as if to say, “Was that necessary?” Fortunately for Marfak, all thoughts and attention turned quickly to the children. They had figured out how to get inside of the vessel. That was where the real danger was.

Merak and some of the others knew all too well that they had to act quickly. Using some of Marfak’s talents might work but then again they might also scare the children into doing something that might put everyone in danger. The final decision was to allow Marfak to transport himself inside the ship. While there, he would not be visible to the children. At the very least, he would be able to make sure that no harm came to them while everyone else tried to think of a way to get the children to leave. They would need to do that soon. The longer the children hung around, the more likely it was that someone would come looking for them. That would create an even more complex situation.
Chapter Forty-Three

Marfak’s entry into the vessel was less than glamorous. He had accidentally landed in an area crowded with equipment. “Ouch!” he yelled upon entry. He quieted himself quickly. He was not sure if the children could hear him. He also did not admit to everyone else that he wasn’t sure if he would really be invisible. Marfak had learned that his skills here did not really work the same way. In fact, he had had a few surprises. He hoped that he would not encounter any more while inside the vessel.

Although he was very uncomfortable in the position that he was in, he could see the children. He also had a great vantage point in that he could view the entire inside area of the vessel. That, he thought, was important. He was beginning to realize that children did not stay in one place for very long. So, Marfak settled in while he waited for a signal from Merak that they were ready to deploy whatever they decided upon to do to get the children to leave the vessel.

Marfak noted that there were four of them. He wondered who they were and what they were like. Watching them gave him great pleasure. There were no children in his existence. He almost laughed out loud when the smallest one touched something that set off a spectacular display of lights. The children were definitely
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delighted with their new toy. *Little did they know,* Marfak thought, *that this toy had the potential to be very hazardous.* With this in mind, he took great care not to lose site of any of them.

The time passed pleasantly. Marfak was amazed at the agility and inquisitive nature of these young ones. He was entertained by their antics and babble. The smallest one, he learned, was named Nicky. Nicky was definitely the leader. The other three appeared to be slightly taller, not by much though. The tallest of the three was named Jose. He was busy making sure that no harm came to Nicky as she scampered about the area.

Just then Jose yelled, “Nicky! Watch out!” Before he could do anything, Nicky came crashing down. Everyone ran to her aid. Marfak could hardly move with the fear that he felt for her. “How could he have left this happen,” he muttered to himself. Miraculously, she was unhurt. In fact, within a matter of seconds, she was up and about, laughing at what had happened. Marfak was astonished at her ability to rebound so quickly.

The children played for a while longer then appeared to tire of the whole thing. They found some comfortable positions and began to talk quietly amongst themselves. Marfak was so involved in listening to them that he did not notice that Nicky had moved to a particularly dangerous area. The area that she was in would normally be used by Marfak to control the entire vessel. That included the launch phase.

Marfak acted quickly. Almost intuitively, he created a small amount of noise. The children ran to where they thought the noise was coming from. The anxious look on their faces betrayed their outward display of bravery. They were definitely overwhelmed by what they had heard. Marfak didn’t mean to cause them to worry. He felt terrible that the sound had frightened them. At first, he had been pleased with himself that he had reacted with such instincts. Now, he felt awful.
Marfak was deep in thought as to how he could make things better when he noticed that Nicky was staring in his direction. At first he thought that it was just a coincidence. There had to be something near him that caught her attention. After all, he was invisible or rather he hoped that he was. Nicky continued to gaze in his direction when one of the other children called to her. They had found something new to try.

The something new was a lot less dangerous. Marfak was able to relax. He was beginning to wonder why Merak had not sent any signals. Certainly, they had thought of something by now. While they did not have any experience with children, Buck appeared to know what he was doing. If they put their ideas together, they should be able to come to some kind of plan of action, he reasoned.

In the meantime, Marfak was completely unaware that Nicky was gazing his way again. This time, some of the other children noticed what she was staring at.
Chapter Forty-Four

Nicky exclaimed, “Look!”
“Look at what,” asked Jose.
Nicky became impatient with him immediately. She ran over to where Marfak was standing and pointed directly at him. “Tell me that you can’t see this,” she replied haughtily.
“No, I can’t,” answered Jose. No one else seemed to know what she was talking about either.
Nicky looked again, thinking that maybe her mind or her eyes were playing tricks on her. But, no, there it was. She had to turn her head a certain way to see it but it, whatever it was, was there. That was it, she thought. Everyone. Turn your heads slightly down toward your left shoulder,” Nicky explained. “No, that isn’t your left shoulder, that is your right,” she cried indignantly.
“Well, we were just watching what you were doing. Since you are facing us, we became a little confused,” explained Tommy.
They complied with her wishes. Much to their surprise, they saw something. The children were frozen with fear. Once again, Marfak felt sadness at causing the children to become alarmed. Very, very slowly, he moved to another position. Their eyes followed him. Yes, he thought, they definitely see me. Well, so much for my invisibility.
He had to think of something fast. He did not want the children to run for help. That would definitely not make the situation any better. He remembered how Buck had talked to Brandon, Jessie and Matthew to calm their fears. Marfak hoped that he could do the same. Gently, almost in a whisper, he told the children not to worry. He was not going to harm them.

The children didn’t move at all. Just when Marfak was about to give up trying to console them, Nicky asked, “Who are you? And, what are you doing on our ship?”

A surprised Marfak responded, “Your what? This is my vessel!”

Jose pulled Nicky back. “Nicky, be quiet,” warned Jose.

Marfak was unsure of what to do next. He was afraid to move for fear that they might do something that would accidentally set the vessel in motion. He also feared that they might run for help. Marfak wished more than ever that Buck were here. Buck would know what to do. Marfak realized that he had to get a hold of himself. Taking care of this was a challenge but he had to figure something out. At least, he had to maintain calm until Merak’s signal.

Nicky stepped forward again. Jose tried desperately to grab her to prevent her from doing this. He and Tommy yelled, “Stop! Stop, Nicky! Stop now!”

But she didn’t stop. She walked straight to Marfak and, with her hands on her hips and her head held high, she asked, “Who are you?”

Marfak replied, “My name is Marfak. I know that you are called Nicky. It is my pleasure to meet you.”

Jose, Tommy and Miguel were standing back, watching all of this. Miguel motioned to Tommy and Jose that he was going to try to escape. Tommy and Jose agreed. Someone had to go for help. Marfak noticed what they were going to do. He said, “Please
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don’t. We don’t want to harm you. My friends and I need this vessel for our return trip.”

That comment really stopped the children in their tracks. More, they thought. Why this thing must be surrounded. Jose began to whimper. “Shush, Jose,” commanded Nicky. Nicky looked again at Marfak and said, “I believe you. I don’t think that you want to harm us. But I would like to know what you are doing here in our neighborhood!”

Marfak explained as best that he could. He did manage to leave out the part that their arrival seemed to have made some changes; changes that he hoped would revert themselves once they left.
Chapter Forty-Five

The children were still hesitant about accepting what Marfak had told them. They demanded to see everyone immediately. Marfak explained that he was waiting for a signal. In the meantime, Marfak was not to leave his position.

Marfak thought, *I definitely do not want to display the skill that I used to enter the vessel. That will most likely cause the children to become fearful of me; that is except for Nicky. She doesn’t appear to be afraid at all. He didn’t have any other way to get back to Buck though. So, he decided that it would be best for them all to wait.*

After a while the novelty of Marfak’s appearance wore off and the children were looking around for something to do. Marfak thought that they might like to see some of what he had traveled through to get here. He didn’t exactly mention that they were lost. After all, he did have his pride.

As he brought the image up on a large blank area in the vessel, the children exclaimed, “Wow! Look at all of the stars!” *Stars, thought Marfak, oh, that must be what they call them.* Well, whatever they use to describe it is all right with him. For now, the children were too excited at watching the vast images to worry too much about Marfak or anything else.

During this time, Jose wandered toward Marfak. Marfak was
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busily checking the vessel to make sure that no harm had been
done. Jose coughed to get Marfak’s attention. Marfak complied
asking, “Yes, Jose. Is there something that you need?” Jose didn’t
know where to begin. He was too shy to admit that his dream was
to become an astronaut someday. Marfak waited patiently for Jose
to say something. While doing so, he continued his work. Jose was
clearly impressed by what was going on. Marfak had to smile to
himself. He, too, was impressed with the children.

The moment was interrupted by a loud noise from outside. It
felt as if something had hit the vessel. Marfak’s first concern was for
the children inside with him. His next thoughts were with Buck and
everybody else outside.

Marfak had the skill to be able to see what was going on outside.
That is, he could do this without actually leaving and going outside.
He didn’t want to frighten the children anymore than what they
already were. Quickly, he explained that he was going to do
something very special. He didn’t show this to everyone. But, since
they were his friends, he would show them.

The children were tense not knowing what to expect next. It
took Marfak a few moments to focus but when he did, the
children’s eyes widened into full moon circles. What they saw was
unbelievable. It was as if the walls of the vessel were not even there.
Yet, they were still inside. How could this happen?

Immediately though, their astonishment was replaced with an
even greater fear. Outside were Bruce and his friends, angrily
throwing things at the vessel. One of the boys was attempting to
climb onto the vessel. Another was trying to light a fire beneath it.

Marfak quieted everyone’s fears by explaining that the vessel
was one of the newest ones. Surely, it was built to withstand many
different types of attacks. What he didn’t say was that he didn’t
know how it would survive whatever happened here. Obviously,
no one had known about all of this.
Marfak realized that the children had seen enough. He closed the image and focused their attention elsewhere. One thing that he had learned about in listening to Brandon, Jessie and Matthew was their love of ice cream. He wasn’t sure exactly what it was but hoped that he could somehow create it. Fortunately, he had listened closely to their description of their favorite item. This would make it easier for him.
Chapter Forty-Six

The children were delighted and clapped their hands when Marfak magically produced the ice cream. He even remembered to have the whipped cream, walnuts and cherries ready for the children to decorate with. They had a wonderful time making faces and designs. Marfak was contentedly watching them at play when he remembered that he had to make sure that Bruce and the boys were not successful in harming the vessel.

While the children were engaged in eating their ice cream creations, Marfak stepped aside to open the image again. What he saw confused him even more. It looked as if Scott was talking to Bruce. He remembered that Buck had acted initially as if he knew Scott then changed his mind. That was one of the strange things that had happened here. Marfak was confused by Scott and Buck’s relationship, if there was any at all.

Anyway, his first concern was that Scott was talking to Bruce. That was not a good sign, not at all. Scott should be well hidden with Buck. Marfak listened in to enough of the conversation to understand that Scott was telling Bruce everything, including Buck’s current location. He couldn’t believe it. Why would Scott do such a thing?

As he listened more, Marfak realized that Scott was asking
Bruce for help. No one realized that Scott had been frightened of his encounter with Buck and everyone. He had been looking to somehow escape. He went on to explain that he had even tried his cell phone. Now, it was Bruce’s turn to be surprised. He asked, “What? What kind of phone?”

Marfak was aware that there had been some changes as a result of their arrival. This had to be one of them. Apparently, this cell phone was not from Bruce’s time. Marfak had to think fast. Scott was also aware that something was terribly wrong. He suddenly wished that he had never left Buck. There had been something oddly familiar and safe about the old guy. Well, he thought, it is too late now. I’ll have to think of something to divert their attention. Marfak was thinking the same thing. What could be done to turn Bruce’s attention away from Scott?

The only thing that he could think of was to create some kind of distraction with the vessel. He just had to think of what would be the most effective and yet safe enough so as not to endanger the children. First, though, he warned the children that they were about to see and hear some strange things. By now, they were relaxed being on board with Marfak and told him not to worry. They would be just fine. He thought, These children are so amazing. Now, they are comforting me!

Well, Marfak pushed and pulled a few objects and before you knew it, all kinds of things were happening. It did the trick. Bruce and the boys left hurriedly. Scott did exactly what Marfak hoped he would do. He ran back to where he last saw Buck. Marfak hoped that Merak would realize that he did what he had to do. Hopefully, it would not put too much of a damper on Merak’s plans.

As everything was beginning to settle down again, the children mentioned that they were thirsty. Oh, no, thought Marfak, what do I do now? Nicky being the most intuitive realized immediately that
Marfak didn’t have a clue about what they were asking for. So she became the spokesperson of the group and described exactly what they wanted. Unfortunately, she was smart enough to realize that since Marfak didn’t understand a whole lot, she could ask for just about anything that she wanted.

Of course, Nicky’s request included lots of soda and more ice cream, a whole lot more ice cream. Marfak was only too glad to supply the requested items. He wanted the children to be safe and happy until Merak came up with some kind of brilliant plan. He just hoped that it would be soon. He did not know what the children would ask for next. Marfak didn’t realize that they had quickly caught on and were not afraid at all of his skills. In fact, they were very glad to have such a friend. It didn’t matter to them where he was from.
Chapter Forty-Seven

As Scott returned to Buck as fast as he could, he remembered that he had dropped his cell phone when all of the noise started. He had wanted to hide it from Bruce and his thugs. He thought, *I told him way too much.* All that he could do now to help Buck in some way was to return to retrieve the cell phone. At least, he would make sure that they wouldn’t get their hands on that.

In the meantime, Buck and Merak had become aware that Scott was missing. His whereabouts were a puzzle at this point. They couldn’t imagine why he would leave. At least with them, he had some degree of safety. Merak was becoming concerned that everything was getting way out of hand. They should be out of here by now. Albali noticed that Merak was beginning to become anxious and quickly stepped in to try to calm him down.

Albali talked sternly to Merak explaining again and again that losing it at this point would not help. They had to maintain some degree of control. “Yes,” she said, “I am worried too.” Merak began to calm down. He realized that Albali was right. It was just all so frustrating. They should have never become lost in the first place. The whole situation was becoming more complex and he was beginning to fear that they would never be able to leave.

Buck and Moxie agreed to go looking for Scott. Merak
disagreed vehemently, arguing that they were endangering not only themselves but everyone else too. Merak demanded, “What if you are followed or captured?”

Buck replied, “I know what I am doing. I have wandered around these parts my entire life. We’ll be fine and we’ll take care not to bring any harm to anyone in trying to locate Scott.”

What Merak could not possibly understand is why Buck felt so compelled to find Scott. Scott never displayed any signs of being friendly to Buck or to anyone for that matter.

Scott was very near to where he had encountered Bruce. He decided that it would be best to make sure that they had all left. As he viewed the area, he saw something shiny on the ground. He thought, *That’s it. That’s my cell phone. I just need to grab it and return to Buck.* He counted to three and ran. He ran like he never had before. After grabbing the phone, he rushed back to his hiding place. He wanted to make sure that no one had seen him do what he just did. He wanted to make sure that no one followed him back to Buck.

From inside the vessel, Marfak was watching the whole thing. He realized that Scott had returned for the phone, presumably to call for help. Marfak could think of nothing more to do except to grab Scott. He had to get that cell phone from him. On the other hand, Scott wanted nothing to do with using the phone. He had known for quite a while that it wasn’t working. He didn’t fully understand why it wasn’t but he no longer cared. He just wanted to return to Buck.

Marfak was about to tell the children that he was going to use another one of his special skills when Nicky announced that very fact before he could. He was no longer surprised at this precocious child. She had been watching him and knew that something was about to happen. She also knew that he was preparing to use some of his magic, as she called it.
Scott was on board the vessel before he knew what happened. It took him a few minutes to realize where he was. “Marfak,” he cried, “I am so glad to see you.”

Marfak replied with some hesitation, “I am glad to see you, too.”

The children were sensitive enough to realize that Marfak really wasn’t glad to see whoever this was.

To reassure the children that there was nothing to fear, he introduced them to Scott. Jose didn’t say anything but he recalled seeing Scott taking long walks down by the water where the old guy and his grandson were always fishing. What Jose couldn’t figure out was how Scott fit into all of this. What Marfak couldn’t figure out was what Scott had been doing talking to Bruce? He also wanted to know exactly what he wanted to do with the cell phone that he had returned for. Needless to say, tension inside of the vessel was growing.
Chapter Forty-Eight

Outside the vessel, there was some tension, too. Merak was not at all happy that Buck and Moxie were out somewhere looking for Scott. In his opinion, if Scott wanted to take chances leaving the group, then let him go. Merak had had it with always looking for someone. They needed to stick together and get out of here.

Buck and Moxie were going along steadily keeping a watchful eye for Bruce and his gang. Moxie was following Scott’s scent without a problem. She had already figured out that he had gone to the vessel. When she shared this information with Buck, he was surprised. He couldn’t imagine why Scott would want to get there of all places. But, then again, stranger things have happened.

Moxie checked out the area and was able to signal an all clear to Buck. He moved forward to join her. The next question they had was where Scott was. They didn’t think that he was inside of the vessel. After all, how could he have gotten inside?

As Moxie moved closer to the vessel, her sharp ears detected Scott’s voice from inside of it. Well, that answers the question as to where he was but they still didn’t know how he had managed to enter the vessel. She reported her findings to Buck who was just as perplexed by the whole series of events.
Finally, Moxie and Buck decided to knock on the outside of the vessel. Maybe Scott and Marfak would hear them. Maybe they would even let them in. At first they knocked lightly, then realized that in order to gain the attention of those inside, they would have to knock much louder.

When Marfak heard the loud banging, he quickly moved the children to the other side of the vessel. He motioned to Scott to be silent. The children smiled when they imagined what Scott would think of what was about to happen. When Marfak opened the image to see who the intruders were he was pleasantly surprised. “Why, its Buck and Moxie,” he exclaimed.

Nicky whispered, “Watch. He’ll get them in here just like he did Scott.” Scott overheard her remark wondering what that meant.

Without much of an effort from Marfak, Buck and Moxie were inside of the vessel. Just like Scott, it took them a few minutes to realize where they were and whom they were with. “You need to stop doing this stuff,” laughed Buck. Marfak couldn’t agree more. Scott just stood and stared at everyone. The children giggled with glee as they greeted Moxie. They loved the big old dog at first sight. She returned their affection with long, wet kisses.

Buck, Marfak and Scott discussed all that had happened. Marfak was glad to learn that Scott had acted innocently enough when he told Bruce what was happening. Scott was scared. So scared, that he ran to the first person that he thought would help him. He was very sorry now, though. Additionally, he was concerned as to what Bruce and his gang would do about the information that he had shared with them. Buck did his best to try to convince Scott that they were not angry with him.

While all of this intense discussion was going on, the children reveled in delight as they played with Moxie. They accepted the
fact that she could talk, never questioning for a moment why she could. When they decided that they had played enough and that they wanted more treats, they went directly to Marfak. Well, actually, Nicky approached Marfak. Of course, he was only too glad to provide what she requested.

“Hold it just a minute,” admonished Buck.

“What is going on here?” Scott asked.

Buck kindly explained to Marfak that he was being taken somewhat advantage of. “These children should not be eating gobs and gobs of ice cream and drinking all of this soda. Why, they will get sick from all of this,” explained Buck. A very confused Marfak apologized profusely saying that he never meant any harm.

Buck laughed saying, “Oh, we know that you didn’t mean any harm. However, I am going to have a talk with the children, if you don’t mind.”
Chapter Forty-Nine

Buck almost broke out in laughter when he saw the looks on the children’s faces. They knew what they had done and, from the looks of the ice cream and syrup smeared all over their faces, they had done quite well. He helped them to get cleaned up as best that he could. After all, he never was much of a disciplinarian with children. Much to their relief, he never said a word about what they had done to poor Marfak.

Nicky felt so bad about taking advantage of Marfak that she apologized. Marfak replied, “That’s quite all right. I probably would have done the same thing in your place.” Nicky looked up at him and wondered where he was from. He was so very nice. Buck caught the look of admiration in Nicky’s face. He, too, was impressed with the way Marfak had handled the children. He couldn’t have done much better himself.

Scott was talking to Jose and was surprised to learn that none of the children had parents, at least not parents that they knew of. They all lived at a nearby children’s home. Jose assured Scott that no one would come looking for them. When Nicky overheard this remark, she told Scott that Jose was telling the truth. She added, “We are often gone for several days at a time and no one worries that something may have happened. Usually when we
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return, we are punished for a few days. But that never stops us from leaving again.”

When Marfak heard their sad tale, he pleaded with Buck to allow him to give them just a few more treats. Buck thought for a minute or two then asked the children, “Do you like pizza?”

They all yelled, “Yes!”

Buck described pizza to Marfak and before they knew it, there was a large, luscious pizza pie right before them. As the children were busy eating the pizza, Buck explained to Marfak that pizza is kind of a healthy junk food. Marfak at best was totally confused now. Although he was thoroughly enjoying the children, nothing was making much sense to him.

Buck, Scott and Marfak had a long discussion as to what they thought they should do next. Of course, foremost in their thoughts was what Bruce might do with the information that he now had. That could really complicate matters. Marfak suggested that Buck and Moxie return to Merak. He needed to be aware of everything that had transpired.

Buck asked Marfak, “Can’t you tell him from here?”

“No,” replied Marfak softly, “I am beginning to lose some of my power. I need to save it for when we really need it.”

Buck knew what he meant. They were relying on Marfak to get everyone and everything back to where they needed to be when this was all over.

Scott volunteered to go. “No,” replied Buck, “it is best if Moxie and I go.”

“You know,” said Scott, “Bruce and his gang knows where this vessel is now. Is there some way to camouflage it or move it to another location?”

“Well,” replied Marfak, “I didn’t think about that. Yes, I can move it. But moving it would definitely get us some unwanted attention.”
Buck thought a while then suggested that they wait the short time until nightfall to make their move. “Where would we go?” asked Marfak.

“I know a place where we can hide. It is not too far from where Merak and everyone else are waiting for us,” replied Buck. This seemed to be the answer. Leaving the vessel here was just inviting trouble. They didn’t know what Bruce and his friends might be up to.

The next most obvious question was what to do about the children. They couldn’t just throw them out. They might walk right into Bruce and his thugs. They decided that, for now, they would keep the children with them. At least, they would be relatively safe. Marfak could only imagine what Merak would say. He had been complaining that this whole adventure was becoming way too complicated. Wait until he finds out about this, thought Marfak.
Chapter Fifty

At the first signs of dusk, Marfak gracefully eased the vessel to its new area. The children were delighted to be flying in a real space ship. Marfak had to smile at their innocent interpretations of some of the very complex operations.

Buck and Scott were working out the details on how to manage to get everyone off of the vessel. They certainly did not want anyone to see them. That would leave it wide open for attack. They agreed that Marfak’s skills should not be used. Those had to be saved for the final moments when he would try to put everything back to the way that it was.

Buck recalled that there was a path going along the base of the foothills that they had landed next to. The path was overgrown and would provide them shelter. It would also lead them close to where the rest of the group was still waiting. He and Scott explained to the children that they had to be very quiet. Without causing them undue concern, they also referred to what they might do if something would go wrong. Within that explanation, they emphasized that they did not expect any trouble.

The children were looking forward to the adventure. This definitely was a whole lot better than their mundane lives that they lead at the children’s home. They knew that there were
others like Marfak. They hoped that they would have the same magical skills. Nicky smiled at this thought. She was looking forward to asking for more of her favorite, ice cream.

In the meantime, Marfak was using some of what was left of his precious talents to view the immediate area outside of the vessel. Moxie was doing all that she could to make sure nothing was nearby. After a few moments, both appeared to be satisfied that no one was out there.

The excitement heightened as the children realized that it was time to make their exit. They were secretly hoping for something to happen. If the opportunity presented itself, Buck and Marfak would be surprised that they could handle just about anything. They had spent many hours watching their action heroes and often dreamed of being just like them.

On the other hand, Buck, Marfak, Scott and Moxie were wishing that their escape would be uneventful. They didn’t want to have to deal with Bruce and his gang again. Scott was still feeling guilty about what he had done. If anything happened as a result of his lapse of judgment, he would never forgive himself.

The group that left the vessel represented a contrast in moods. The children were excited that they were about to embark on another part of their adventure. The rest of the group feared that something terrible might happen.

Fortunately, the distance from the vessel to where everyone was waiting was a short one. In Buck’s mind, it wasn’t short enough. He was apprehensive the entire time. That seemed to make the path never ending. Happily though, they reached the spot where everyone was anxiously awaiting their arrival without incident.

At first, they were greeted heartily. Merak couldn’t wait to confer with Marfak. The topic of the conversation would definitely be leaving. The children watched the joyous reunion
from one side. Everyone seemed to forget for the moment that they were there. Buck remembered though and called them forward for a round of introductions.

Immediately, Marfak noticed the look on Merak’s face. He knew this would not be a welcome addition to the group. In fact any addition wouldn’t have been received well. Albal, Matthew and Jessie were having a great time with all of the children. They didn’t notice that Merak was not at all pleased with what was going on.

During this time, Scott kept to himself. He felt that somehow he was the cause of a lot of these problems and was trying to think of a grand plan that would help everyone.
Chapter Fifty-One

Bruce and his gangs had regrouped at their hang out at the neck of the woods outside of town. Bruce was trying his best to maintain a macho façade. He didn’t want anyone to recognize that he had been scared out of his wits back there. After all, that type of behavior did not become a leader of a gang. Especially not this one, where any display of fear was considered a sign of cowardice. In that case, Bruce might well find himself in serious trouble with some of these thugs.

He wanted to say something but before he could, Ivan asked, “Well, boss, what do we do now?”

“What do we do now?” he answered. “Well, I’ll tell you. I have a great idea that will make us all rich and famous,” Bruce continued. All the while, he was thinking to himself that he had to come up with something fast. Then, it dawned on him. Why, with the knowledge that they had gained from Scott, they could capture these whatever they were and become real heroes. That would bring them all fame and fortune.

As Bruce presented his idea, the others listened carefully. Every one of them wanted to be rich someday. This seemed like the way to make that happen. Once Bruce laid out the general idea, the others jumped right into the conversation with details
about how they would go about executing a successful capture. Each one believed that their plan was the best one. Bruce was smiling contentedly in knowing that he was back on top again.

After a while, Bruce brought the arguing to a stop. They needed to act quickly. All this nonsense about whose plan was better was not getting them anywhere. They decided to merge several of the ideas. Each one had strong points that would serve them well.

One of the gang members, Ivan, was hesitant about this whole proposal. He had seen enough to know that whoever or whatever it was that was out there did not mean to bring any harm to anyone. The old guy that was with them was somehow familiar. He just couldn’t quite place him though.

Unfortunately, Ivan also knew that if he so much as hinted at this, that he would find himself in big trouble. He decided that by going along with what was being planned, that he might be able to make sure that no real harm was done. He would have to convince Bruce that the quickest way to fame and fortune was to make sure that the soon to be captives were taken unharmed. *Well, he thought, this shouldn’t take too long.*

Bruce was having second thoughts about the entire plan. The vivid image of the display of power that they felt while trying to attack that weird object was scary. Each encounter with them had been terrifying. He couldn’t admit that though. He hoped that their plan was solid enough to deal with whatever the defense would be. He realized that if they failed this time, he would have to answer a few questions.

As Bruce and his gang were making their plans, Buck and everyone else were also deciding what to do next. The popular vote continued to be to get everyone back to where they were originally, before this whole nightmare had begun. Of course, this had been made a little more complicated with the children under
their care. After learning all of what had happened, Merak had conceded that bringing them back was the best possible solution. However, he had also emphasized, that it was a temporary one. The children were to be returned as soon as it was deemed safe to do so.

As everyone in both camps settled in to finalize their strategies, night fell giving the allusion of calm and peace. Along with that, also came the darkness causing some eerie shadows to appear and strange sounds to be heard. Both groups had agreed to wait for the first lights of dawn. That would give them some cover as well as enough light to see where they were going.

Buck’s group, of course, would be returning to the vessel. The other vessel belonging to Albali, Izar and Mira was a short distance away. Everyone would board simultaneously. At a time that Marfak chose, he would use the last of what was left of his skills to return Buck and his own group back to the train. They had made the difficult decision to return the children to the children’s home.
Chapter Fifty-Two

As if to betray the dangers that they were about to face, the morning dawned beautifully. Buck had often enjoyed taking long walks with Bull on mornings like this. He wondered how their relationship would change when all of this was over. Well, he thought, maybe we won’t remember anything. Perhaps it will be like a dream that is forgotten so soon after waking up.

The others were watching Buck. As he was most familiar with the area, he was going to decide when to start. Everyone was anxious to begin the final phase of this adventure. That was not the case for the children. They wanted the drama to continue forever. This had every indication of being something that they could brag about for a long time.

Bruce was also the decision maker. He had chosen to begin their journey shortly. He wanted to catch everyone by surprise before they had the chance to even think of using those strange powers. They would attack fast, running in from all different directions. After a lengthy discussion, they had all agreed that the captives should not be hurt in any way, just scared.

As Bruce and his gang left to begin their attack, Buck and his group began their trek toward the vessels. They moved quietly but quickly through the variety of undergrowth and behind the
tall trees. As far as each group knew, their plans were going well.

Bruce and his gang were unpleasantly surprised when they ran into Buck’s camp screaming and yelling only to find nothing there. Now, Bruce was worried. Some of his thugs had already begun question his abilities. This didn’t help. Bruce was very astute and realized quickly what had happened. He announced to his waiting comrades that they had to move quickly to the vessel. Buck and his group had left much earlier than anyone expected.

Meanwhile, Moxie and Bull sensed that Bruce was not too far behind. They encouraged their group to move faster. Moxie was keeping a sharp eye on the children lest they fell behind. But the children were actually leading the group. It seemed like they were so familiar with the path that they were taking that they didn’t even have to look where they were going. Their feet carried them surely and swiftly.

Bruce was beginning to worry that they might never catch up. Ivan became concerned when he noticed that several tempers began to flair. That won’t be good, he thought. Bruce stopped to look around for any possible short cuts. He just didn’t know of any. However, the children did. They turned without warning down a steep hill. “Follow us,” they shouted, “we can show you a short cut.” Old Buck and Scott were smiling. This was the very same short cut that they had played on a very long time ago.

Buck and his gang arrived at the vessels long before Bruce even had a chance to catch up with them. There was a moment of realization that this was it. Terebellum’s desire to stay had been addressed. She understood that such a decision would not work. In fact, she was already beginning to feel the affects of being in this environment way too long. Her only hope was that someday that would change. In the meantime, Brandon and Terebellum were forced to say farewell for now.

There wasn’t much time. They had to also get Izar, Mira and
Albali on their vessel. Quickly, Kraz, Kuma, Terebellum and Merak boarded the vessel. Marfak stayed behind to execute the powers that would be needed to return everyone to the train. Izar, Mira and Albali rushed toward the area where they had left their vessel and boarded quickly. They signaled that they were ready to go.

This was it. The final moment when Marfak would try to return everything exactly the way it was. The children were to be returned to the home. They clearly did not want to go; however, not returning them would bring changes to the future that could not be determined. Those very changes could even put their lives in danger.
Chapter Fifty-Three

Marfak summoned what was left of his powers to return everyone swiftly to their original places. Buck and his group were deposited to a spot just outside of the train. They would have to actually remember to get on board. Marfak didn’t fear that would be much of a problem. What he did fear was that Buck, Matthew, Brandon, Jessie, Moxie and Bull would recall what had happened. How that would affect what they would do was not exactly a sure thing. The children were returned to their home. Of all that he had to accomplish, this was the one thing that he dreaded the most. He had grown fond of them and didn’t like the thought that they were basically all alone.

As all of this was taking place, Bruce and his gang were hurrying toward the area. Marfak worried aloud, “I have to finish this soon. If not, everyone could be left in a state of limbo.” He rushed as much as he could. Just when he was almost finished, he saw Bruce coming straight at him. Marfak froze. Fortunately, he was already far enough into accomplishing what he had to do. As Bruce made a dive to capture Marfak, he vanished. Bruce was confused. To add to his dilemma, he had to turn around and face the group of thugs who were supposed to be his friends. Right now, that wasn’t the feeling that he was getting. In fact, the looks on their faces spelled otherwise.
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The vessels were speeding away with everyone on board. The children found themselves safely returned to the home. Buck and his group had somehow landed on top of a large boulder right outside of the train. As everyone looked skyward, they saw a last gleam of light. They knew, sadly enough, that their friends had managed to escape unharmed. Now, they had to face what was to happen next. There never were any guarantees that everything would return exactly to normal.

For now, they could remember every detail of their adventure. Buck had the forethought to have told the children not to say anything. It was time for Buck to get his brood back on the train. Then, they would have to see what awaited them. Hopefully, all would be exactly as they left it. As Buck looked around, he was amazed to find that the landscape had returned to what it was supposed to look like.

He could only surmise that they would never see the children again. After all, their childhood existed a long, long time ago. As near as Buck could figure, the children’s home had ceased to exist many years back. He couldn’t recall exactly when it had been closed. The whereabouts of where the children that had lived there would be something that he was hoping to look up in the future, after he finished this last train ride.

Brandon, Matthew and Jessie were anxious to see their families again. They were waiting for Buck to make the move to get them on board. Much to their delight, they were still able to converse with Moxie and Bull. However, they noted that there were long periods during which the dogs reverted to doing things the way that they used to. Brandon was hoping that his party had not been ruined. He remembered how much planning his Mother had put into it. She had been so excited.

After looking around carefully and watching for any signs from Moxie or Bull that someone might be milling about, Buck
was satisfied that it was safe for them to run the short distance to the train. Once on board, they had all agreed that they would go to the engine first. That was where they had been when they had left. If everything returned to the way that it was, then Brandon should be just about ready to blow the train’s loud whistle.

As they scampered up the steps and into the engine, Buck took every detail into account. He thought, *Well, so far, so good. It looks exactly as it should. Now, I hope that we actually have control of this old engine.* He held his breath briefly as he began to push and pull various devices to make the train start. For a brief second, nothing happened. Then, just when he was ready to give up, the old steam engine sprang to life.
Chapter Fifty-Four

As the steam poured out along side of the train, Brandon yanked on the whistle. A very welcome loud shrill was heard for miles around. “Yay,” yelled Jessie and Matthew in unison. The old dogs had curled up in their respective corners. They each briefly opened one eye to see what all of the excitement was about. When they saw that their young charges were all right, they promptly returned to sleep.

Slowly, Buck turned around. It was as if he was awakening from a long dream. Jessie, Matthew and Brandon were experiencing a similar feeling. No one said anything. It was difficult to explain this feeling of having been somewhere. “Well,” said Buck interrupting everyone’s thoughts, “now that Brandon has blasted away at the whistle, I guess that we should rejoin everyone in the passenger car.”

“Yes, of course,” replied Jessie.

As they made their way back to the passenger car, they met Sara. She told them to hurry; everyone was waiting for the guest of honor. Sara also mentioned that they had all heard the whistle. She said that everyone thought that it was a grand thing that Brandon had the chance to have such an experience for his birthday. Brandon agreed. Blowing the train’s whistle was definitely something that he would always remember.
During the conversation, Brandon happened to reach into his side pants pocket. He felt something. He pulled out a flower. Why, he thought, where would that have come from? Then, he smiled to himself. Of course, he thought, my mother would have placed it there. I will have to remember to thank her.

As they entered the passenger car, everyone joined in singing “Happy Birthday” to Brandon. He ran to his parents and hugged them as the song ended. His Mother was very happy that the day had gone off without a hitch. Everyone was looking forward to the short break that they would take at the next stop. On the way back, Brandon would open his gifts and cake would be served. What a perfect day, she thought.
Marfak, Merak, Kraz, Kuma and Terebellum were on their way. Terebellum had watched as Brandon found the flower in his pocket. Sadly, she knew that he would never know that it was from her. Marfak and the others watched too. The children were doing well. Everyone had, as Marfak had thought, quickly forgotten what had happened. Fortunately, along with that, everything else had returned to normal.

Albali, Izar and Mira were watching also. Albali was already missing the friendship that she had formed with Jessie. She, too, had watched when Brandon found the flower in his pocket. Without having been told, Albali knew that Terebellum had placed it there.

Bruce and his thugs were in a daze. They couldn’t figure out what they were doing in the middle of the woods. They usually hung around the center of town where they could cause some trouble. After looking around for a few minutes, they started the long trek back without saying a word about how or why they were there.

The dogs, of course, ceased to be able to communicate in human terms. However, had they been able to, they would have certainly been able to relate every detail of this tale.