



Secrets of the Hidden Valley

# A Sons of Inu Adventure

For middle and upper grade readers

by

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## **CHAPTER ONE: The adventure begins**

I suppose that most twelve-year-old guys would give about anything to be in my place right now. I guess I would too, if it could have all happened differently.

Here I sit in my own private cave behind a crystal-clear waterfall. I'm looking out through the water and down at my own private Hidden Valley - it must be a half-mile long and a quarter mile wide. There is lush green grass carpeting the flat floor of the valley. Grand strong trees reach up toward the sky from the gently sloping hillsides on the North and South. A twenty-foot-high rim of strong brown stone circles the uppermost ridges, making my valley a safe and impenetrable fortress.

There are no grown-ups here to bug me. I can do anything I please, whenever I please. I can swim in the cool waters of the deep blue creek that runs the length of the valley. It is alive with fish for me to catch when I feel like a fresh fried meal. There are apple, cherry and pear trees bursting with fruit, and walnut, maple and chinquapin trees just waiting to feed me. The hillsides are loaded with wild blueberries, youngberries and raspberries. Tasty, unusual vegetables seem to be growing everywhere for me to enjoy. The place is crawling with rabbits and squirrels. There are three wild ponies just waiting to be tamed. There are three wild goats, always happy to share their milk with me, and a dozen chickens supplying large white eggs daily. There are three beautiful dogs that love to play chase and swim and curl up with me in the shade.

From up here, at the mouth of my dry, cozy cave, I can look down on just about the entire valley. Dad had said it was one of the most unusual valleys in the World. He had said that he and I were the only people alive who knew about it. It's been completely hidden and forgotten for over two hundred years - that was when all the Indians, who had lived here, suddenly disappeared for some unknown reason.

I'm safe in here in the Hidden Valley because there is only one way in, and that entrance is impossible to find unless you know the secret. Even the most cunning of the outside animals never find their way inside.

Dad knew about all these things because he was an archaeologist. He had studied Native Americans and places like this his entire adult life. This Hidden Valley was his greatest discovery. Together, Dad and I learned to love it here during these past six months.

It was great that Dad took me with him all over the country on his digs and various expeditions. I guess he had no choice after Mom died when I was five. I'm lucky he taught me everything about surviving out in the wild. It's really been sad and lonely here this last month since Dad died in the fall off the black mesa out there in the middle of the valley. I buried him right outside the cave. I can look down on his grave from up here where I'm sitting. That way I can still feel close to him.

I suppose it's dumb for me to still talk to him but sometimes I do. It makes me feel better about being all alone now. Boy, I miss you Dad, but like you always said, "You have to learn to do the best with what life offers you." I've been trying Dad. I moved all our equipment up here into the cave. It stays dry and cool. Now I just have to figure out what to do about me.

Should I leave the valley and get help? Should I stay and make a life for myself here? What would the people outside do with me if I left? Where would they take me? I don't have any relatives. Sometimes grown-up's get screwy ideas about what's best for a kid. Until I'm really sure I'm just going to stay put, I think.

I still go down into town about every other day. They ask about you at the General Store and at the Post Office,

Dad. I tell them you have no complaints. I guess that's not a lie. It seems to satisfy them. Sometimes now, I can even smile about it when I say that. It is kind of humorous, really.

I've been keeping up the phony campsite we had put up outside the valley, so folks wouldn't suspect where we really had been - where I really am now. Even though I brought most of the equipment up here to the cave, I don't think anyone will suspect. Nobody ever comes up to see us anyway. Some folks in the village ask why you never come to town anymore. I change the subject or say you're deep into something new!

I sure wish it weren't so lonely here. In one way, I was never lonesome when it was you and me, Dad. You were always around to talk to when I needed that. In another way, though, we never stayed in one place long enough for me to make any friends my own age. Come to think of it, the people I really think of as my friends are all your age or older, Dad. I guess in that way I've been terribly lonely most of my life. Now that you're gone, Dad, I really need somebody to talk to and to do stuff with. I'm all alone in the World now, you know.

Maybe I should spend more time down in the village and get to know some kids. I've already met a few of them. Sarah is the granddaughter of an old couple everybody just calls Gramps and Maude. He's a fine silver smith. He and his wife live in an old log cabin about half way between here and town.

Sarah seemed nice enough. She's here for the summer. I think she is thirteen, but she still talks with me. She acts older, though. She coaxed me into kissing her once. I really didn't want to. I must not be a good kisser. She's never asked me to do it again. She seems to know a lot of kids. Maybe I'll drop by her place tomorrow and see what happens. Right now, I need to catch some fish for supper. My stomach's growling.

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Tripp got his fishing pole and can of worms and slipped out into the bright, warm sunlight from between the waterfall and the sturdy, brown rock hillside. Soon he was down the hill and across the valley to the creek. He had a favorite fishing spot right where the creek came out from under the hillside. It

left the valley the same way on the other end - right under the solid rock of the far hill to the West. There really wasn't a good deep place to swim, but Tripp had ideas about building a dam and making a great swimming hole just north of the black mesa.

Tripp - well his actual name was David Thomas Taylor, but he had been called Tripp from as far back as he could remember - had been Professor Taylor's only child. He had his Father's shiny, black, hair and strong body. His ever-present broad smile and dancing brown eyes were from his Mother. Tripp was about average size for a twelve-year-old.

His Dad had told him he was well built for a boy his age, but Tripp wished his muscles would begin developing more. He had always been very good at sports. He had considered sending away for a body building course but hadn't done that yet.

The last seven years of his life had been spent with his father - mostly out exploring, as his father had tried to discover how Indians – Native Americans – had lived hundreds of years before. Tripp had books to study, just as if he had been in school. He had done very well in science, geography, and history - not quite so well in English and math.

Like his father, Tripp loved the outdoors and exploring. He had often thought it would have been wonderful to have been an Indian, living back in the seventeen-hundreds - just him and the land. His father had told him he would have probably made out fine too, since he had learned how to live off the land so well. Tripp didn't believe in reincarnation (coming back after dying as some animal), but if he had, he thought that undoubtedly, he would have been an Indian in his former life.

On that day, Tripp used some of his survival skills and soon caught a bass and two nice blue gills. He was baiting his hook to go after a forth when he noticed the swirling sky was rapidly growing dark. Large, restless clouds had begun to roll in.

Tripp talked out loud to himself.

"I guess there's a storm brewing. I hate storms, especially the ones in this part of the country. The rain comes down by the bucketful, and the lightning and thunder are just

plain scary. I suppose a twelve-year-old guy shouldn't get scared of storms, but I've always hated them. I'll be safe and dry back at the cave."

The sky grew darker and the wind picked up. Although the thunder was still just a faint sound in the distant sky, Tripp could feel it make the ground shiver.

He took off on a trot and was soon back at the cave. The rain, however, had already set in, and Tripp was soaked from head to toe. He slipped out of his wet clothes and arranged them to dry on sticks around the fire.

Tripp never let his little fire go out. He always kept red hot coals glowing there in the rock fireplace which he had built at the back of the cave. It was right beneath a small hole in the wall that worked like a natural chimney, sucking out the smoke. He had matches and flints and such, but his Dad always had done it that way so that's just how Tripp intended to keep doing it. Professor Taylor had been a very smart man and a super father.

While the Professor and Tripp had been studying the Hidden Valley, they discovered many caves in the ring of hills. Most of them had colorful, detailed drawings covering the walls. Tripp and his father had begun the task of deciphering what the pictures meant.

Tripp couldn't keep from thinking about the Mystery of Three's, as his father had called it. The pictures showed three of almost everything. There would be three goats in a picture or three horses or three people. The members of each group of three always looked identical.

The day before he had died, Tripp's father had decoded a special pictograph - that's a series of pictures that tells a story or gives a message. That one told of the sacred eyes of Inu. Inu had been the Indian's chief and god. His eyes were pictured like huge diamonds. They were always painted pale violet. The pictograph was special because it seemed to present a riddle. As far as the Professor had been able to tell, it said: "When the sky is aflame and Inu's eyes live, their touch will make three, and aging will cease." Tripp's father had not had time to figure out its meaning.

There was one other pictograph in which Tripp was really more interested. It was more like a map. It showed a

waterfall with a cave behind it. That's why he had selected that cave as his shelter and home base. It had to be an important place if someone had gone to all the trouble to make such a map. At the bottom of the map was a pictograph the professor had decoded as saying: "Inu's wealth is behind his eyes. Violet to red. Violet to green. Look back and forth and forward." It didn't make much sense, but Tripp was still working on it.

While he was thinking about the pictographs, Tripp placed a few small sticks and a medium sized log on top of the coals. A great cooking fire was soon ablaze. He cleaned the fish while the fire was catching. In another fifteen minutes, Tripp was dried off and enjoying fresh fried fish with stick bread toast. The storm grew worse. He put several more logs on the fire for warmth. Then he sat up against the wall on his bedroll near the front of the cave and looked out through the waterfall. Still a bit hungry, he enjoyed a huge red apple for dessert.

"I know I'll be OK in here and if I just keep saying that often enough, I may even come to believe it. Dad said this was the safest place in the whole valley. Boy, how I hate that thunder, though! I guess the lightening is actually sort of pretty, the way it bounces off the waterfall. From in here it makes it seem like the whole sky is flashing. I have to get that portable generator hooked up to a water wheel of some kind so I can have electric lights in here. I guess that should be my next project. I'm not really afraid of the dark, but light is just a whole lot more friendly."

Tripp lay back. He had made himself a most comfortable bed by stuffing dried grass and leaves into one of the sleeping bags. It worked quite well as a mattress and was certainly better than a blanket on the hard rock floor. Even lying back like that, he could still see outside. Presently, there came one huge flash of lightening followed by a deafening clap of thunder. He flinched. At that same moment, Tripp noticed a very strange occurrence on the opposite wall of the cave. He got to his feet and went over to investigate.

There had suddenly appeared an eerie purple glow on the wall. As he was feeling the wall it happened again and startled him. He jumped back, but that time he saw exactly

where the glow had come from.

There were two crystalline rocks on the wall. Each one was about the size and shape of an old-fashioned glass doorknob. They were about four feet off the floor and two feet apart. Years of dirt and dust nearly covered them. He wiped them off and then sat down on the floor in front of them. For a long time, he just sat and watched the glowing stones.

"How did I ever miss seeing those two huge crystals before? Maybe the rumbling of the thunder jostled off some of the material that had been covering them."

KABOOM! came another clap of thunder.

"Well, nothing happened to the crystals that time. I'll just continue to watch them from here at a safe distance for a while longer"

A half hour passed and they still had not glowed again. Tripp got up and cautiously touched the one on the right. Nothing happened. He carefully took hold of it. It felt warm. Up close like that he could see they each gave off a constant, though very faint, purplish glow.

Tripp reached out with his other hand and took hold of the second crystal as well. It had the same qualities - the purple glow and the warm feeling to the palm of his hand. His Dad had not told him about such rocks, or gems, or whatever they were. Perhaps Tripp had discovered something new. His heart raced at such an exciting thought!

At that moment, there came another flash of lightening and the loudest thunder of the storm up to that point. The entire sky lit up and seemed to hold its glow for many moments. Tripp felt a jolt of energy surge through his body. It began from the crystal in his right hand and traveled up his arm, across his chest and down his left arm into the other crystal. It didn't really hurt as much as it was just plain scary! And scariest of all, the flow of energy just kept coming and Tripp could not let go!

"Help!" Tripp shouted out of habit.

Of course, no one could hear him.

"What can I do now?" he called, again out loud.

He began kicking against the wall, thinking that might help force himself away. It didn't. The sky filled with more brilliant flashes, and the energy flow grew greater. Tripp's

arms began to glow with that same purplish hue of the crystals. He looked down at his bare chest and it was as if he could look right inside himself and see his heart pumping and his blood flowing and his ribs moving in and out, faster and faster, as he began to take bigger and bigger breathes. There was another brilliant flash of lightening coupled instantly with a deafening clap of thunder. Tripp's mind went blank. He remained standing. His entire body flickered with that unearthly purple glow. What was happening? Would it never stop? What could he do?

## **CHAPTER TWO: Triple Tripp!**

Tripp could not be sure how much time had passed, but gradually his mind began to clear. Thoughts flew about in his head at a rapid pace:

What the...? Where am I? I seem to be standing in the middle of the cave, now, back away from the wall. I still can't see very well. It's dark. Everything is blurred. I can't move. My arms are reaching outward to the left and right and down at an angle toward the floor. I feel so warm. My breathing has calmed down. As far as I can tell, I'm not glowing anymore. I still can't seem to move enough to get a good look. It's like my muscles are locked in place.

Hey, it feels like I'm holding onto something with my left hand. I can't see clearly enough. I can barely move. I feel frozen here. There's something in my right hand too. This is too eerie! If I could only see! Maybe, if I shake my head, it will clear up. Good, I can move my head. I can move by shoulders. I can look down. I was right, I'm not purple anymore. I'm not glowing. I can see better now. I'll shake my head some more. That seemed to help.

I still can't move my legs. Let's see if I can make out what I am holding onto. I can squeeze whatever it is in my hands. If I didn't know better, I'd say I was holding hands with two people - one on each side of me. Maybe now I can turn my head far enough to look to the right. It hurts, but I can turn it.

"My GOSH! Who are you? And over there on my left side, who are you? What's going on here? How did you two

get in here? Where are your clothes? Why don't you talk to me and why are you holding my hands? Hey! Guys don't stand around holding each other's hands. But I can't let go.

"Hey, you on my right - you whose hand I just squeezed. You look just like I did back when I was about ten years old. You could be my twin, actually. And you, there on my left. You look about fourteen or so, but, otherwise, you look exactly like me, too. What is going on here?"

"Hey, you guys, open your eyes and talk to me. Let go of my hands. This is the weirdest thing I have ever heard of. Maybe I fell asleep and this is all a dream. That must be it. Things like this don't happen when you're awake! See, the storm is over and it's dark outside. It's night and I'm having a nightmare."

"It's no nightmare," came a voice that sounded a lot like mine, only a bit deeper.

"Was that you, big guy?" I said, looking to my left.

"Yeah, it's me, Tripp," the older boy said, slowly turning his head.

"Well who are you and how did you get here?"

"I'm not sure about that. I told you, I'm Tripp, Tripp Taylor. I seem to be a bigger version of you. I really don't know how I got here."

"Somehow, I knew you were going to say that before you spoke," I said.

"Yeah, I've been standing here listening to your thoughts, too. It's weird. It's like I know everything you are thinking."

"You think it's weird! What about me." I said. "One minute I'm all alone in the World, being scared out of my pants by a raging storm, and the next minute you two show up. By the way little guy. You there! Wake up or whatever. Open your eyes and talk to me."

"Ok. Sounds like a good deal to me. Hi. My name is Tripp Taylor, and from the looks of it, pal, you really were scared out of your pants."

"You can't be Tripp Taylor. That's my name. And about no pants, you see the rain - well, that's another story.

"Sorry, pal," the younger boy said, "But that is my name. It's the only one I've ever had, unless you count the

David Thomas part I never use."

"How did you know my real name?" I asked.

"I told you, it's my real name, too."

"This is getting too eerie, guys. Let's try to break this hand holding thing we have going here, Ok." I said.

"Ok," the older one said.

We shook our hands around and pulled and strained. Finally, the little guy flew free and fell to the floor.

"You ok," I asked.

"I guess so. This cave floor isn't real kind to a bare behind, though."

I found I could move so I turned toward the big guy. I put my right foot up against his hip and pushed with all my might. Finally, our hands separated. He staggered backward but caught himself and didn't fall down.

"It's dark in here," I said. "I'll build up the fire so we can see each other. Then, dream or no dream, we need to get down to some serious conversation."

The two new arrivals both pitched right in and helped. It seemed like they knew just how to do everything in my particular way. Even in the dark, they knew exactly where the wood was stacked. What was going on here? I pinched myself when they weren't looking. It seemed a dumb thing to do, but I was willing to try anything at that point.

The big guy went over to the footlocker and got out three blankets and handed one to me and one to the little guy.

"Here. It got a little chilly in here during all the excitement," he said. "We're going to have to think about clothes. I won't fit into what you've been wearing, and the little guy would get lost in them."

"Clothes are the least of our concerns," I said. "We need to figure out what happened here."

The big one spoke again.

"From looking us over, it's for sure we all really are Tripp Taylor. I mean just look at us. We are identical except for our size. We seem to all three know about the stuff here in the cave. I can't explain it, but, for sure, we are all Tripp Taylor."

The little guy spoke.

"But we can't all be called Tripp. That's too confusing.

We have to work out this name thing somehow so we can keep each other straight."

"Good idea," I said.

At least that would be some progress.

"I suppose since you seem to be the original Tripp," the big one said to me, "you should be the one to keep that name. I mean, you are just the way I remember I should be."

"Ok, then, that makes good sense," I said. "Now what about you two?"

The little guy spoke. "Remember how that lady archaeologist out in Arizona used to call me - or us or whatever - by the name Davy?"

"Yeah, you like that name ok?" I asked.

"Yeah. It always made me feel special. Like she really cared about me."

"I remember," I said. "That was a great feeling, wasn't it?"

"Yeah it was," the big one agreed.

"OK then, you can be Davy," I said. "How about you big guy?"

"Well, since it appears I am the oldest by a year or so here, how about if I use my - our - real middle name, Thomas. It was also Dad's first name. Thomas seems awfully formal though. How about Tommy or Tom, instead."

"It's settled then," I said. "Little Tripp, you are now officially Davy, and big Tripp, you are now Tommy."

"Do you think the girls might like the name Tom, better?" Tommy asked.

"Girls!" Davy and I said at the same moment.

"Yeah, you know, those pretty soft people of the opposite sex," Tommy answered. "As I recall, Dad told me - us - all about them one night not too long ago."

This jumping to fourteen, thing, was going to present some very strange changes. I had always thought girls were ok as friends, especially if they could climb trees and field a fly ball, but I didn't think that was what Tommy had in mind. Like other fourteen-year-old guys I'd known, I suspected he was having mushy thoughts. Well, that would have to be his problem. There would be no girls allowed up here!

We had been quiet for a few minutes, each one

momentarily lost in his own thoughts.

"Guys," Tommy finally said, "Have you noticed we don't seem to be reading each other's thoughts anymore?"

"Yeah," Davy said. "It felt like I got cut off from you two the second I broke free of your hand, Tripp."

"Me too," said Tommy. "I'll bet there was something about being together that way that let us do it."

"Here, take my hand again and let's try it," I suggested.

"What if we get stuck back together, like before," asked Tommy.

"We got apart once. I suppose we can do it again. Anyway, now that I know I'm holding hands with relatives, so to speak, it's not so bad."

We all managed a chuckle. It was the first time our nervousness had been broken. They both had that Taylor-kid grin, as Dad's friends had always called it.

"Well, Ok, let's give it a try," Tommy said.

We all reached out and held hands again. Nothing! It didn't seem to work.

"I don't hear a single thought," Davy said.

"Wait, guys," I said. "I had you in the other hands before. Davy was in my right and, Tommy, you were in my left. Let's switch hands back that way."

The others switched sides, and sure enough, we were immediately sharing our thoughts again. We separated easily.

"Hey, look at this spot I have on my right palm," Tommy said, holding it up so the flickering light of the fire lit it for us to see.

It was about the size of a dime and as shiny as a mirror. It felt just like skin, but it looked just like a mirror with a slightly reddish tint. Davy and I looked at our own palms.

"Look! Look! I have one in my left palm," Davy announced excitedly.

It was the same size but had a greenish cast to it. It was still mirror-like, but greenish. Then I noticed my own hands.

"I seem to have a spot on each palm, guys. Look at this! There's one greenish spot on my right palm and one colored just like Tommy's on my left."

Davy tried to rub his off but it was built in. It was a part

of his skin. Tommy and I tried also, but with the same results.

"They must be transmission or contact points of some kind," Tommy said. "It's like when we are joined at the hands we are still one person, or at least one mind."

"I guess we won't have any secrets, then guys," I said. "That may cause some problems. We'll have to work out a system about that."

I was a bit concerned about having someone else know my deepest secrets and desires. But then, these guys appeared to really be me, so I guess it wouldn't matter. At that point they undoubtedly knew them all anyway. This was getting more confusing instead of less confusing.

"I suppose we'll never know for sure how all of this happened," Tommy said at last. "I feel so weird being two years older all of a sudden. I have this new body. Look at me, I'm taller, bigger muscles."

"And lots of hair in places we never had it before," Davy commented, breaking up in laughter.

We all laughed about that, a bit nervously, I suppose. Tommy was bigger and stronger, and his shoulders were broader, and his muscles were better developed.

Davy, on the other hand, had shrunk. He was back to where I'd been two years before. He was shorter and thinner and hardly had any muscles at all, especially when compared with Tommy. The small amount of body hair I had finally grown had disappeared entirely on Davy. Where I had hips and a waist and a bit broader chest, Davy was still just straight up and down. There was nothing wrong with that, but I imagined it would take a bit of getting used to again. Davy agreed with a sigh!

"I think I got the short end of the stick here, guys. Look at me. Where did all of me go?" Davy said, almost sadly as he looked himself over.

"Hey," I said, trying to cheer him up a bit. "Remember back to when we were ten? We thought it was the greatest age ever, and we didn't mind having a body like that. Don't fret about it. You just get to grow up all over again."

"Yeah, I suppose," Davy said, after a moment of thought. "Anyway, I - or we - really did love being ten. That was one of our very best ages."

"It sure was," Tommy chimed in. "Remember, we were living in that huge tree house we built on a mountain side in Virginia. That year was a blast!"

We were all three silent for a while. It seemed that I was the only real me. Davy was having to do the ten and eleven, thing, all over again, but at least he knew what to expect. Tommy, on the other hand, had suddenly jumped ahead two whole years without any preparation. It would be hardest on him, I thought. He had two entire years missing from his life.

Davy yawned and stretched. It had grown very late and we were all obviously worn out physically and emotionally drained.

"Why don't we get some sleep and continue sorting all of this out in the morning," I said. "I don't know about you guys, but whatever this has been, it's worn me to a frazzle!"

They agreed with me. We fixed two temporary places for them to sleep and we each curled up with our blanket and drifted off. I still wondered if it were all a dream. I'd know for sure when I woke up in the morning.

As it had all begun happening, I had hoped that it really was a nightmare and that I could just wake up and be rid of them. But at that moment, as I was falling asleep, I liked the idea of having two . . . well, what were they? Two other me's? No, they were more like two brothers. We sure looked identical - just younger and older. I had always wanted a brother. Suddenly I had two. It just might be the greatest thing ever!

As I closed my eyes I whispered, "It's going to be ok, Dad. I'm not alone anymore."

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### **CHAPTER THREE: A new life begins!**

As usual, I was awakened by the morning light streaming in through the waterfall. I just lay there on my back for a while replaying the events from the night before. It had to have been a dream. Things like that didn't happen in the real World - not even in my wonder-filled Hidden Valley.

I cautiously turned my head to look around the cave. There they were, still sound asleep. They were both lying on their backs just the way I always sleep. Dad used to tell me that I snored in that position. I never believed him. Now I do! Just listen to the two of them sawing logs. Davy snoring in soprano and Tommy in base.

I think I'm a little jealous of Tommy and the way he looks now. I guess I just have to get over that. But just look at those muscles and how tall he is. I guess I'm going to be a pretty good looking guy when I get to be his age. That's good to know. But for now, this is me and that's Tommy and that's that!

I guess I'll just step out into my - our - waterfall shower and get cleaned up. They can sleep in a little longer while I make some plans. I can outfit Davy from old clothes I still have. I grew pretty fast this past year. Some of the old ones are still in pretty good shape.

Tommy will be another matter. Dad's stuff would still be way too big for him. We could cut off the pant legs and shirtsleeves but he'd still swim in them. If we can just outfit him well enough to go into town, we can buy him some new things.

"Hey, whose using my shower," Tommy said, sneaking up behind me and playfully jabbing me in the ribs. For a moment, I was startled - still lost in my thoughts.

"I just finished," I said smiling at him. "It's all yours, big brother."

"Big brother," Tommy repeated. "That's pretty nice. I always wanted to be a big brother, you know."

"Yes, I do know," I reminded him. "And, if you'll search your brain, you'll remember that I always wanted to have a big brother too, so I suppose this is working out pretty well for all of us, isn't it!"

"Yeah. I think it is going to be terrific," Tommy said, looking warmly into Tripp's eyes, and nodding.

"It's a beautiful view from up here, you know," Tommy said, looking out over the valley as he lathered himself up with soap Tripp had made from lye and grease.

"Yeah. I was just thinking that yesterday afternoon before the storm rolled in," I said.

"I know," Tommy replied. "Remember, I was still part of you at the time."

"This is going to take some getting used to, isn't it?" I said.

"I guess it will, Tripp," Tommy agreed. "Speaking of getting used to, this calling you Tripp is a bit strange for me, also."

"We'll adjust to it. We could always adjust to anything. That's one great thing Dad taught us, you know," I answered.

While Tommy enjoyed his shower, I dug out some clothes I thought would fit Davy. In the process, I ran across a pair of Dad's old cutoffs from a few years back. He had been a lot thinner then. I thought they might fit Tommy until we could come up with something better. As he stepped back into the cave, I tossed them to him.

"See if these fit," I said.

"Oh Yeah, these are Dad's from a couple of years ago. I was thinking about them just now, myself. Well, let's see here."

It was a struggle to slide them on over still wet skin but it was finally accomplished.

"They fit fine, I'd say. What do you think?" Tommy

said, turning around a few times.

"Look good to me. Can you believe that you can really wear Dad's cutoffs?"

"It's still a shock," Tommy said ever so seriously. Then he added, "How about if I go on down and fish for breakfast. As I recall, we don't have enough food up here for the three of us."

"I'll come along," I said. It felt so great to have someone there with me.

"What about Davy?" Tommy asked.

"A good chance to try out our mind sharing thing," I said. "I'll just hold his hand and think to him where we will be."

"And what if mind sharing doesn't work while we sleep?" Tommy asked.

"Let's face it, Tommy, Davy knows the routine around here as well as you and I do. He'll find us. We're not dumb kids, you know."

Tommy chuckled at that as I slipped into my own cutoffs. In another minute, Tommy and I were walking side by side across the valley to the creek.

"Race ya," Tommy said, taking off on a dead run.

"No fair! I yelled."

I did my best, but I couldn't keep up. Boy it was going to be great if I could become that fast in a couple more years. When he finally slowed down and let me catch up I jumped on his back and pulled him to the ground. Tommy had me pinned and calling for mercy in two minutes. It was great! When he got off of me I just lay on the ground and looked up at him.

"I'm so glad you're here, Tommy," I said.

"Me too, I think," he said, reaching down to help me up. The moment our hands met we shared our minds. Tommy was saying he was happy to be with me, but he was thinking about being with a girl! This mind thing could get pretty interesting!

We had caught five nice fish by the time Davy found us. He had found my old cutoffs. They were ok with a belt. He had brought a container along so we could pick berries. I tied the fish to a stringer in the water and we raced up the hill to the blueberry patch. I came in a close second and Davy a panting and distant third.

"Look you guys," Davy said, huffing and puffing, "it's not fair to run off and leave me like that, you know. There's no way I can keep up with this puny little body I just inherited."

Tommy and I put Davy down on the ground and tickled him up one side and down the other. He giggled and flailed his arms and legs and we had a great time. Then we just lay there smiling at each other as we caught our breath. Davy ended up sitting on Tommy's chest, trying to pull out at least some minor victory from the whole thing.

"How about if I carry you piggy-back next time?" Tommy asked Davy.

"It's mind boggling but sounds like it's worth a try, Davy answered."

With the berry bucket and our stomachs both full, we headed back. We were so happy to be together. It's hard to describe. It was like we were all parts of the same person, but now we were each free to enjoy the other two. It's hard to explain. One thing I knew for sure at that moment - we were going to be the best friends that had ever been.

Back in the cave, Tommy fixed the fire and I got the fish ready in the large frying pan. I had been using the little one since Dad - well, since I had been alone. Davy was exploring the wall and the crystals that had led to all of this.

"Do you suppose these are the eyes of Inu?" Davy asked.

"Say, you might have something there," Tommy said. "Let's see, what was the riddle that Dad decoded?" "When the sky is aflame and Inu's eyes live, their touch will make three, and aging will cease."

"When the sky is aflame, could have meant when the lightening was flashing so intensely last night," Davy suggested.

"And when Inu's eyes live, might have meant when they glowed, as if they had come alive," I added. "There must be some connection between the lightening and the glowing eyes. Maybe the crystals are connected someway to a spot outside the cave that attracts the lightening."

"We'll have to climb up on top and search that out after breakfast," Tommy suggested. "If we are right about this riddle so far, then I suppose the part about the touch making

three, makes sense. Tripp touched the living eyes of Inu and made three of us."

"Right," said Davy. "Now what about that last part, and aging will cease?"

"Well," I said, "cease means stop, right? So, aging will cease must mean..."

"Oh, oh!" Davy broke in. "If it means aging will stop, that means I'll never even get back to being twelve again. I'll have to stay ten forever."

"Let's not panic, guys," Tommy said. "Maybe there is another meaning that we just haven't seen yet."

We all sat down on our beds and remained quiet, deep in thought for a long time. What if we would really never get any older? Would that mean we would never die? That idea had some interesting possibilities! But just to stay the same age forever sounded awfully boring. What else could it mean?

"I don't think we're probably going to solve that last part right away," Davy said at last. "Let's eat and maybe something will come to us. You know, like when we try to remember too hard, sometimes nothing happens, but as soon as we stop, boom, there it is!"

We all agreed. The fish were great! We made plans about building a huge paddle wheel to put on one side of the waterfall to run our little generator. Then we would be able to string up the electric lights that Dad had always carried to light his digs. We could also run the short-wave radio. We thought so much alike we didn't even need to hold hands. I figured we really did have the same mind.

It sounded eerie, but then, it was also nice to know you were sharing absolutely everything with others as special as those guys. It was like I didn't have to hide anything from them. No deep dark secrets. It was like a relief or something. I couldn't explain it. Just to know that they both knew how I felt about everything was going to be great!

"I think I could stay here forever," Davy said, at last.

"Just wait 'til your hormones kick in kid," Tommy joked. "Then you'll feel the need for other kinds of companions besides just us guys."

"I suppose so," Davy said. "If you say so. I was beginning to think some about girls, now that you mention it."

That was back before I went backwards in this time tunnel," he added, with a sigh.

"Yeah, I think about girls some. I guess that's what you mean," I said. "One good thing at least, I guess."

"What's that?" Davy asked.

"Well, if you do have to stay ten forever, at least you will be able to remember that time we kissed Sarah, last month. That was pretty good, wasn't it?"

"That was a peck on the lips," Tommy interrupted, sarcastically. "A real kiss is a whole lot more than that!"

"And just how would you know, Mr. Hormone?" I asked.

"Well, I guess I don't, but I have these feelings now that tell me it's a whole lot more."

"I can see we're going to have to allow for new things in our life, guys - girls!" Tommy said with a brand-new kind of smile.

"In your life, maybe," Davy said, "but not in mine."

Davy sounded sad, blue even. We were all quiet for a long time, just sitting and looking out over the valley. We were each deep in our own thoughts - something quite new to each of us. We were the same and yet, now we saw that we weren't the same. What had just seemed a little confusing an hour before had suddenly become very confusing.

"What are we going to do about this shared mind thing?" I asked at last.

"What do you mean?" Tommy asked.

"Well, up 'til now, as one person, we've shared the same thoughts and memories and ideas and feelings. You know what I mean. Now, we can either go our separate ways and each build up our own private minds from here on, or we can still share it all. I wonder which we want to do?"

"That's something we do need to decide, I guess," Tommy agreed.

"I vote to keep on sharing," Davy said right away. "What do you say, Tripp?"

I didn't know what to say or I wouldn't have raised the issue in the first place.

"I really don't know. Maybe 'Big Brother Tommy' will want to keep some of his big boy's thoughts to himself."

"I can't see why I'd want to do that. Remember, guys,

we are all really Tripp Taylor. I vote with Davy. I think we should continue to share our mind so we all have the benefit of each other's experiences and thoughts."

"But what happens when you start thinking about girl stuff that might bother little Davy?" I asked.

"Hey, I'm you and you're me, remember," Davy said. "Just because I look younger doesn't mean I still don't have the very same mind and memories and knowledge that you two have. I didn't get dumber through this, you know. I didn't forget anything. My body may not understand some of Tommy's thoughts and needs, but they sure won't bother me. I mean, my mind, at least, will still understand whatever Tommy's mind understands."

Wow! For sure his mind hadn't shrunk. His ability to use words had even seemed to improve.

"So, how do you vote, Tripp?" Tommy asked.

"Well, I suppose this has to a one hundred percent yes vote or it fails, right? I guess I vote with you guys. Let's keep us together. Now how do we go about doing it?"

"My suggestion is that once a day - like before we go to sleep, say - we join hands and do our sharing for that day," Davy said.

"Sounds good to me," added Tommy.

"Let's give it a try that way and see how it works," I suggested. "Last thing at night. It should be a great time together."

"What if we have had some bad thoughts or angry thoughts about one of the others," I said, still fretting about that private thought thing. "You know that will be shared, too."

"Hey, we are David Thomas 'Tripp' Taylor, guys," Davy said. "We've kicked ourselves all our life for some of the dumb things we've done and thought. This won't really be any different. Besides, it will keep us honest in the way we deal with each other. If something makes us upset, we just have to bring it out in the open right away. Agreed?"

We all agreed. That would be a better way to live anyway. Dad and I had always been mostly honest with each other, I thought. This would be just as great. At least we should give it a try.

"Well, the first day of our new life together is here,"

Tommy said. "Let's get on with it by getting this place in shape. That's how Dad taught me - us, I mean - to do it."

"Beds are probably first on the list," Davy said. "My neck is still stiff from last night's ordeal on the sleeping bag."

"And electricity for in here," I added. "I guess we all remember the plan for the paddle wheel. Davy, how about if you fix the new beds, while Tommy and I go cut some wood for the paddle wheel?"

"Sounds good," Davy agreed. "You know, maybe we should think up some sort of a signal to use to call each other, just in case we need someone."

"Not a bad idea. I should of thought of that," Tommy said.

"Well, you just did!" Davy said, smiling.

We got a mild chuckle out of that. The weirdness was beginning to be fun.

As the light from the sun reflected off the waterfall and into the cave, it happened to hit the palm of my hand. The spot on my palm acted like a mirror and bounced the light back. In fact, it was better than just a mirror. It bounced a ray of light every bit as straight and focused as a laser beam.

"Did you guys see that?" I asked.

"Yeah," they chimed together.

"How did you do that?" Davy asked.

"I'm not sure. Here, let me try it again."

I tried several different ways. Tommy and Davy did, too. Soon we were flashing light rays all over the place and at one another.

"That could be a great signal during the day, guys," Davy suggested. "We could signal each other with our mirrors - or whatever they are. It would be silent, if for some reason, we didn't want to be heard. Let's try it."

I flashed at Tommy and he flashed at Davy. Davy caught Tommy's signal in his own mirror spot. The two of them instantly looked at each other as if something special had happened.

"What?" I asked. "What's going on?"

"Here," Tommy said. "Catch this ray in your left palm and see what happens."

I did, and immediately I understood. As the ray met me

from Tommy, I was sharing his thoughts, just like when we held hands and touched our spots.

"Wow! Do you guys know what this means?" I said excitedly.

" Yeah," Davy said, jumping to his feet. "We can transfer our thoughts to each other over distances. We have to try this out and see how far it can travel."

"Ok," I said. "After Tommy and I get over on the hill to cut the wood, you signal us and we'll see what happens."

Tommy picked up the axe and saw and I grabbed a coil of rope and a large hunting knife. We were off at a trot for the hill a quarter of a mile away. Tommy didn't try to race. He just kept up a steady pace that I could manage. I looked at him about to say thanks for that, but he already knew, so I just smiled and kept going. This brother stuff was the greatest thing I'd ever known!

Once up on the hill we saw Davy was already signaling us. It took a bit of practice, but soon we caught on to how to catch the beam from Davy's hand. Sure enough, we could hear his mental message. The little clown was thinking, "One small step for man, one humungous step for the Taylor brothers." That kid!

It was one more fact of our new life that we had to learn to handle. I thought that so far, we had been handling things very well. I held my hand up and flashed a beam at Tommy. He caught it. I might have known. He was thinking about girls!

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## **CHAPTER FOUR: When things go right, they really go right!**

By noon, Tommy and I had cut all the wood we would need for the paddle wheel. We had tied it together into a sled-like arrangement and began pulling it back across valley toward the cave. It was heavy, even for the two of us.

"I wish the runt, Davy, were here to help," Tommy said with a smile.

"You'll hurt his feelings calling him that," I said.

"Yeah, I don't know why I even said that. I'm sorry. I guess at ten I often thought of myself as a runt, you know?"

"Oh yes! I know. It wasn't much fun. Let me try to get his attention up there with a beam," I said.

I focused a ray of light at the waterfall. There was no response. I played it around and back and forth. Then at last, I caught Davy's thoughts and told him we needed his strong back. He was delighted to be needed, and was down from the cave and across the valley floor in a flash. This signal we had was fantastic. More and more, it seemed like it all just had to be a dream.

We left the wood at the base of the cliff. We would build the wheel down there and then hoist it up to the waterfall. All of us were tired and sweaty so we lay back on the grass in the shade of a beautiful ancient oak tree to rest and cool off.

Davy said it first, though we were all thinking it.

"Thomas, your sweat even stinks like a fourteen year olds. Let's hit the creek for a swim and get cleaned up before lunch."

It didn't take any more convincing. That time Tommy

did take off as fast as he could run. It was impressive watching him. He jumped so gracefully when he'd come to a log or rock. It was like an Olympic athlete running the hurdles. I stayed back with Davy. I remembered I had always been the fastest ten-year-old I'd ever encountered. At twelve, I would still have had to give it all I had to beat him. I didn't try that time.

When we got to the creek Tommy was nowhere to be seen. We dove in to find him. It didn't take long. He dunked us both, but good! We jumped him and finally got him under.

It had been fun and cool, and we felt clean and rested when we finally climbed out a half hour later. There was no doubt about it though. We needed to build a dam and make a much deeper swimming hole.

We sat on a hollow log, waiting for the sun and breeze to dry us off. The three ponies trotted up to the edge of the clearing not thirty feet away. The three dogs had been there watching us with great interest, and they bounded off to greet their old friends.

We sat silently watching the ponies. They stood silently watching us. They were beautiful. Each was tan and white with a golden-brown mane and four white stockings. They looked identical. Again, it was that three, thing. Dad had said I should stay away from them 'til he had had a chance to look them over. This was the closest I - we - had ever been to them.

Davy got up slowly and began moving toward them. They watched. He walked. He began talking to them. His innocent, high-pitched voice reminded me of how it had been to be ten. It had been a great time, actually. At that minute, I envied Davy just a bit.

The ponies didn't flinch as Davy neared them. One of them moved up to meet him. Davy reached out and patted its forehead. It nuzzled him on the shoulder. He moved around to the side and began stroking its neck and back. The pony seemed to be enjoying it all. The others moved in to get some of the attention. Soon the four of them seemed to be good friends. Davy started back toward us. The ponies followed him. Before long the three of us were petting and stroking three of the most magnificent looking ponies we had ever

seen. I call them ponies, but they were the size of small horses.

Davy climbed up on the log and coaxed one of the ponies alongside. He slowly arched his leg over its back and gradually placed his weight on it. Before you knew it, Davy was up on its back. The pony didn't seem to mind at all. In fact, he appeared to be quite used to being ridden. How could that be? There hadn't been anyone in this valley for over two hundred years. Davy and the pony trotted off across the meadow as if they had been doing it together every day for years.

I tried next. I had the same results. Then Tommy tried. Soon we were riding side by side at a speedy gallop. Our long hair was flying like the mane of the ponies. We had never really done bare back riding before. I wondered how we knew how to do it.

We rode them back to the bluff below our cave. We dismounted and patted them for a while longer. They could use a good brushing. Maybe we could do that later on. After a bit the ponies wandered off, grazing their way over toward the black mesa.

We were all wondering the same thing. Could it be those ponies had been here for over two hundred years? Did aging really stop once you had been duplicated, well, triplicated, actually, I suppose. That had been almost too much to think about. At any rate, it had been a really great time. We were sure the ponies would be back. We had made them our friends.

"I am famished," Tommy said. "I'll go catch some more fish."

"I'll pick some fruit," added Davy.

That left me to find the goats and get some fresh milk and maybe search out a fresh egg or two along the way. In no time at all I had the milk and eggs. Back in the cave I whipped up some dough to make stick bread. I cut an apple into slices and wrapped each slice inside the bread dough. Then I stuck each one on a stick and positioned all of them over the fire to bake. They would make great sweet snacks for later on.

For some reason, the second pictograph message began running through my mind. Let me see. How did it go?

"Inu's wealth is behind his eyes. Violet to red. Violet to green. He looks back and forth and then forward moves."

I had figured the wealth-behind-the-eyes part must refer to Inu's great intelligence. That made sense. Dad had always said what you knew and how easily you could figure things out was the greatest treasure you could ever have. Looking back and forth might refer to being careful or cautious. I wasn't so sure. Looking forward might refer to being able to see into the future or maybe just to plan for the future. The color part made no sense to me at all.

That explanation was just decoding a saying or a philosophy, though. Why would a philosophy be written as part of a map? I was sure it was a map of my - our - cave. It even showed the chimney opening. It had other marking on it also that I didn't remember. I'd have to get it out and the three of us could look at it while we ate.

It was almost two o'clock when the fish and fruit arrived at the cave. It was the first-time Tommy and Davy had been alone together. I hoped it had gone well. I could tell from the looks on their faces that it had. Great! To have been given brothers was super enough, but to have found that we really liked each other and got along so well was simply fantastic! Dad would have loved to see this. I still missed him, but my new brothers helped to ease the loneliness.

I son had the fish fried. I dug out the map from Dad's strong box where he had kept his private papers. We examined the map. It was, actually, a copy that Dad had made of the real map which was on the wall of another cave across the valley. We walked around our cave locating each item on the drawing. There was a gigantic, three pointed star etched into the rock wall on the north side, right where the map said it should be. Tommy rubbed the dust from it with a rag, and found it was painted bright yellow. It was beautiful.

On the map of the back wall, to the left of the fireplace that I had built, was a huge circle about five feet in diameter. It had lines radiating out from it on the map as if it were a picture of the sun. Again, Tommy used his rag, and from under two hundred years of dust he began revealing a glass-like plate. The cleaner it became the surer we were it was a window of some kind. It was probably made of some natural

glass. We would finish cleaning it later, but what had been cleaned, let in brilliant rays of light. A window of that size would most certainly fill the cave with light.

"I imagine the entire walls are painted these same bright colors as are shown here on the map, don't you suppose?" Tommy stated, more than asked.

"If you're right, this will be a beautiful place once it's cleaned up. It will be like a palace or something?" Davy said excitedly.

He was right. With painted walls and fancy designs, a huge window for light at one end, and a ten-foot square opening at the waterfall on the other end, it would be beautiful. I estimated that it was about forty feet from front to back and nearly twenty-five feet wide. The height varied from about twelve feet at the front to maybe eighteen feet in the middle and then back down to ten or so at the back by the window. There was plenty of room for us, and now, with some light in the back, it would make a very pleasant place for this new family to live.

"I'll bet the paint on the walls is tar based and that's what keeps the place so totally dry. It's not damp in here like it is in most caves," Tommy observed.

I had thought the same thing weeks before, but back then there had been no one to share it with. That had been my thought that had just come out of Tommy's mouth. How wonderfully weird!

"Maybe we should set aside some time each day to scrub on the walls til they get all cleaned up," I suggested.

"Good idea. It would be nice to have a real home here," Davy said. "I mean, you guys know this camping out stuff was always great, but remember how nice it was back at our house with Mom. That seems so long ago. I hardly ever think about it anymore. That's too bad. Mom was such a fine lady."

Tommy and I agreed, of course, since that was also directly out of our shared mind and memories. For the next few minutes, we just sat and shared stories and memories about Mom and the things we had done with her. It was a nice time.

Then, after a while, as I was looking back down at the

map I asked, "What do you suppose gives with this message? It seems like a statement of philosophy or a religious belief. Why would it be attached to this map?"

"Maybe this was the god's temple or home, or something like that," Davy suggested.

"Could be," Tommy agreed.

"Let's look over this last side of the cave," I said, moving along. "Here on the map are drawings of three huge faces spread out along this entire wall, and they all look pretty much alike."

"Look at the eyes," Tommy said, pointing at the map. "The faces on the right and left have regular eyes, but the one in the middle has round, glassy eyes. They look like those magnified pictures of fly eyes in a science book."

"The crystals!" I said. "Do you suppose these crystals are the eyes on this center face?"

Tommy began rubbing around the crystals with his rag. Davy and I found rags of our own and pitched in. Soon it all began to take shape. It was a face, no doubt about that. We uncovered a mouth, a nose, eyebrows. A little more rubbing and cleaning revealed that it was, indeed, the center face on the map, and the crystals were exactly where its eyes should be.

"Do you suppose this old guy called Inu was triplets? I mean everything else we seem to dig up about this place comes in threes," Tommy asked.

"Could be," I said. "But only one has the crystal eyes."

Tommy and I studied the map in more detail up at the front of the cave where there was more light. Dad would have flipped over all this. It made me miss him even more. I looked out and down through the waterfall at his grave.

"He'd be so proud of us," Tommy said, noticing what I was doing. "I mean, here we are actually discovering the things that he had only dreamed of finding."

From back in the cave, Davy's excited voice interrupted us:

"Look here, guys," Davy called.

We quickly joined him.

"What's up, pal?" Tommy asked.

"They turn! When I turn this crystal on the right, its

glow changes from purple to red - just like in the saying."

"What about the other one?" I asked, reaching out and trying to turn it. It moved and began glowing emerald green, again like in the saying - purple to red and purple to green. None of us understood it. We looked at each other in silence.

"Better put them back the way they were, I suppose," I said, half asking permission of the others.

"Wait," Davy said. "This one pulls out."

And so it did. He pulled it out about six inches. It was really a long narrow cylinder that fit back into a hole in the rock. It wouldn't come all the way out, however. Tommy tried pulling on the other one. It slid out, also. Not only that, but a door-sized section of rock to the left of it swung open. It revealed a dark, musty smelling room, carved out of the solid, rock hill. I got the flashlights and we shined them inside. All of us were leery about moving inside. It was exciting and scary at the same time. We laughed nervously.

"I'll admit it guys," I said. "I'm scared."

Tommy and Davy agreed, but we were more curious than frightened, I guess, because we kept right on looking, seeing what we could make out there in the eerie blackness.

We soon discovered that it was a room about fifteen feet deep and wide. It was round and had a domed ceiling. There were huge piles of little rocks, or something, all around.

"You guys stay out here in case the door closes," Tommy said. "I'm going inside to look around."

I was so scared that I thought I was going to wet my pants. I think Davy did! Tommy entered into the darkness. Davy and I did our best to help light it up with our flashlights.

"Guys, you'll never believe this," Tommy said, his voice echoing in a ghostly way from inside the cavernous room. "This place is filled with little silver disks."

"Are you sure?" I asked, sticking my head in as far as I felt I dared.

He tossed out a handful of the disks. Each was like a coin with a hole in the center. They were a little bigger than a half-dollar and twice as thick. There was no design on them. It was silver all right. I got brave (or dumb) and entered the room also. It was like a huge vault piled high with those silver disks. Tommy sat down on a pile and began rolling around

and pulling the disks up over himself. We were rich! After a few minutes, we went back out into the main cave.

"Now what, guys?" Tommy asked.

"I think we should bring some of the silver out here, just in case the door closes and we can't get it open again," Davy suggested.

"Good thinking," Tommy agreed.

Tommy went back in with a bucket and loaded it full. It was so heavy he had to drag it out. We looked at one another and let out yelps that must have been heard for miles around. We danced around like crazy guys. Davy did the Indian Victory Dance we had learned once out in Nevada. We were overjoyed.

Then it hit us! We were rich, but we had nothing to spend it on. Maybe we needed to rethink this plan of ours to stay in the hidden valley forever!

We went back to the front of the cave and sat on our beds. We munched on the stick bread apples. I could tell, I would have to make more of them if we were to have any left for evening.

"Then, in unison, as if our minds were joined, we said, "Let's think this over for a few days before we make any decision."

That had been one of Dad's favorite expressions. We knew it well and were sick and tired of hearing it. When we realized what we had just said, we smiled and chuckled. In some ways, it seemed, Dad would certainly be with us forever.

"It's probably good advice, don't you think," I said.

"Yeah. We need to think this through very carefully, guys." Tommy said. "We need to decide just exactly what we want to do with our life - lives, I guess, now - during these next few months or maybe even years."

Davy and I agreed, and we went about cleaning up the dishes in our automatic waterfall dishwasher.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: Getting comfortable**

Before the dishes were done, I heard one of goats bleating loudly, like she was in pain. Davy heard it too. He and I headed outside where the sound of the waterfall wasn't so loud. The bleating was coming from up above the cave. That area was one of the goat's favorite grazing spots, though I had never figured out why. There were only a few scraggly weeds peeking out from between the rocks up there. Down in the valley they could find all the grass they could ever want just standing in one spot. Goats! They were as hard to understand as girls!

"I see her!" called Davy, who had run on ahead.

I had been known for my surplus of energy when I was younger. Davy still seemed to have it. Once, when I was five, I overheard my teacher telling Dad she thought I was hyperactive. I remember Dad's response:

"He has every reason to be. So was I, and I guess I have turned out ok, wouldn't you agree, Mrs. Pace?"

I smile to myself every time I think of that and, now that Davy is around, I seem to think about it often.

"Over here," Davy called as I topped the ridge.

It was the highest point on the hills around the valley. I could probably see fifty miles in all directions. The view was mostly of beautiful, wooded hills, and broad flat pastures and fields of hay and sorghum spreading through the valleys. There were dozens of lonesome looking houses dotting the countryside. Mostly poor people lived in them, Dad had said. Poor in money, I think he meant. I had met some of them and

they sure weren't poor in friendship or love for their families and friends.

There were seven little communities I could see from up there: Two to the East, two to the North and three to the South. I couldn't see the two that were to the West because the hills at the other end of Hidden Valley obstructed my view.

When I caught up with Davy, I saw that the situation was more than a little serious. The goat had gone out on a ledge that was barely wide enough to hold her, let alone any would be rescuers. Her right front hoof had slipped into a crevasse in the rocks and she couldn't free it. Davy was calming her down by talking gently and patting her softly on the back. She seemed to respond instantly to his touch. She stopped struggling and stood quietly as if just waiting for us to take care of her. I had always been good with animals, but this performance of Davy's certainly topped anything I had ever done.

"I think I can crawl between her legs and get out to her foot," Davy said as I arrived.

"That's too dangerous," I said, sounding ever so much like Dad used to. "Let me find a long stick we can tie onto your belt. That way I can hold you."

I found a strong, ten-foot-long stick with a fork on one end. I loosened Davy's belt to the furthest hole. That way I could twist a loop into the back of the belt and run the stick through it to the fork. It seemed quite secure.

Davy kept touching and talking to the goat. Then, as if she knew his next move, she spread her back legs apart. That provided enough room for Davy to inch his way beneath her on his stomach. He wished he'd had a shirt on, as the rocks were harsh against his chest and stomach.

He kept moving forward, ever so slowly. Once, the goat became a bit restless. Davy reached out and touched her leg and she immediately calmed down again. I even think I saw her shake her head as if to say, "I understand. It's all ok now." Well, I'm sure she really didn't, but it certainly seemed that way.

"I need a stick to use to pry the rocks apart," Davy called back to me.

I looked around. There was such a stick about fifteen

feet away. I couldn't reach it and still hold onto the stick that secured Davy.

"I'll have to let go of you in order to get it," I said.

"I'll just stay real still. It will be fine. You get the stick."

I put down the end of the long pole and quickly got the pry stick. My quick move must have startled the goat, as she moved her back legs and slipped, sitting down right on top of Davy's legs. Davy called out as if in pain.

"I'm ok," he called. "It was more being surprised than being hurt. With all that hair, she's a lot lighter than she looks. Hand me the stick."

Keeping a tight hold on the pole, I crept forward toward Davy. I held the stick out as far as I could, but Davy couldn't reach it. I crept even further forward. I would soon be so close to the edge, that if Davy slipped over the side, I wouldn't have enough leverage to hold him.

Grasping the very end of the stick between the tips of my fingers, I slid it out over Davy's back. He reached up over his shoulder with his left hand but still couldn't grasp it.

"Try your other hand, I suggested. The stick is closer to your right hand."

He slowly made the switch, as rocks began to fall away beneath the ledge.

"Hurry up, Davy," I called as calmly as I could, considering I was scared stiff.

Davy finally grabbed the stick and carefully began maneuvering it toward the crack. Then it hit me. I had read that goats couldn't back up. I wasn't really sure if that had been about goats or sheep. Either way, I figured if one of them couldn't, probably neither of them could. I didn't say anything to Davy yet. He soon had the stick in place and I could see him begin to pry. With the stick in his left hand and her leg in his right, he soon had her hoof free. A large chunk of the ledge dropped away and I heard it tumbling and bouncing its way down the side of the cliff.

It was then I dropped the bad news on him.

"Davy, I think there is still one problem," I began.

"I know. Goats aren't supposed to be able to back up," Davy said.

I should have known he'd have remembered that, too.

"Just be quiet back there. I think I have discovered a way to handle this."

I was quiet and glad he couldn't see me shaking. He could probably feel it through the quivering pole. Oh well, at least I was being quiet.

Then the most amazing thing happened. Davy took hold of her leg and she stood up, freeing Davy's own legs. Davy began inching his way backward, out from under her. Even the weight from his light little body was enough to cause more rocks to give way below the ledge. The front edge of the ledge slumped down about six inches. The sure-footed goat stood her ground. I pulled harder to help Davy scoot back to safety. I didn't want to lose either one of them, but if it had to be a choice, I wanted to make sure my brother was safe.

In another minute, Davy was back on solid ground. He stood and put his hands on the back of the goat and she began to back up. One careful step at a time, she continued to back off the ledge until she was safe.

I moved to Davy's side and hugged him.

"How in the World did you get her to do that?" I asked, as the goat and her two friends moved on to search out more scraggly green morsels.

"When I touched her, it seemed she did just what I was wishing she would do," Davy said. "So, I tried sending her several more picture thoughts. Each time she responded just right. It's a new thing I can do, I guess. We'll have to explore it some more and see how it really works. Who knows, maybe it will work on people too."

Davy sensed I had been scared silly. He grinned at me.

"I guess we must have been a bit more the daredevil at ten than you are now, Tripp," Davy said.

"Yeah," I answered. "And for your information, at twelve, I'm a whole lot more sensible than I was at ten!"

As we started back down the hill to the cave, Davy spoke.

"I don't get it," he said.

"What don't you get?"

"How there can be three girl goats here and no boy goats. The way I understood it from Dad's talk, it takes both

kinds to make babies."

"I've wondered that, too, Davy. It must be the triplet-making ability this valley has," I answered. "Somehow one girl goat must have become three."

"But goats can't work the crystals in the cave. How do you suppose they got themselves triplicated?" Davy asked, as we slid down the embankment to the path that led to the cave opening.

"I guess we'll have to go exploring a bit more. There's bound to be a place somewhere," I said. "Did you notice that the ponies are all boys?"

"I wasn't sure but I thought so. I didn't know how to tell for certain," Davy answered. "Do you suppose they get lonely for girl ponies?"

"They probably do," I answered. "I think our own Tommy the pony boy is getting lonely for girls too."

Davy and I laughed at that. We knew Tommy's thoughts about girls, but neither of us really understood his feelings about them. That was very strange. Knowing something and feeling something were two pretty different things - at least when it came to this boy-girl stuff. Suddenly, there was this new 'feeling' part of Tommy that Davy and I couldn't really understand.

When I had kissed Sarah, back before we were triplicated, it felt sort of nice, I suppose, but I sure wouldn't walk a mile out of my way to do it again. I really think old Tom would walk ten miles for one.

Oh well. It's just one more way we are different. Dad always said differences among people were good. They helped us learn new things and to appreciate each other more. I suppose he was right. For now, at least, Davy and I agreed that Tommy can do the girl kissing for all three of us. He should like to hear that!

"Where you guys been?" Tommy asked, as if upset, when we got back to the cave.

Davy explained. Tommy had been worried when he couldn't find us. We should have told him we were leaving. We all agreed to do that from then on. It was nice that Tommy had been worried. I mean it was nice that I had someone who cared enough about me again to be worried. I had missed

that a lot since Dad had died.

We spent what was left of the afternoon working on the paddle wheel. It turned out great! It has six spokes sticking out from a thin, log axle. We flattened the ends of the spokes and bound on large flat pieces of wood to catch the water and turn the wheel. Later, we will run a rope loop from the axle log back into the cave to the generator. When the wheel is turned from the water falling on it, it will move the rope, which will turn the generator and that will produce electricity. We will string up the camp lights, and the whole cave can be lit at night. We will also be able to listen to the radio again. That will be super!

Tommy had trapped a rabbit and we made stew for supper. I added some wild potatoes and some carrot-like root vegetables that grew on the north hill. I made some more stick bread and Davy brought in the milk. It was a good meal and we all got full. Tommy ate as much as Davy and I put together - more, actually! He was always hungry, so I knew I would have to start keeping lots of stick bread snacks on hand. It was nice to have a big brother around. I felt safer.

It was almost ten o'clock when we got the supper dishes done. We took our showers and sat on the hill just outside the cave to dry off. It was a really nice night - cool and clear. The crickets were performing their nightly symphony - with an occasional Katydid solo.

"Well," Davy began, obviously excited about something. "I think it's time to do our mind sharing thing like we said we were going to do every night."

"Yeah." I agreed. "I suppose that right out here with the stars up above and the cool breeze rustling by us is as good a spot as any, isn't it?"

"Before we do this, I have to apologize to you, Davy, for something I said about you to Tripp earlier today," Tommy said, looking Davy in the eyes and being very serious. "I called you a runt and I really didn't mean anything bad by it - well, maybe I did, I don't know for sure. Anyway, I wanted to tell you myself in words before you read it from my thoughts. I'm sorry."

"That's ok. Thanks for telling me, though," Davy said. "But just remember, I may be the runt in size, but I have

exactly the same fabulous brain that you two guys have."

Tommy and I agreed that we would keep that in mind. Then Davy looked at me and I at him. As was rapidly becoming the pattern, Davy spoke first:

"As long as we're confessing stuff, Tripp and I referred to you as Tommy the pony boy. You sort of had to be there to catch the meaning. We just meant that like the boy ponies must miss having girl ponies around, we thought that at your age and all, you must be missing having girl humans around."

"Hey, actually it was nice of you to realize that, guys. I do remember how useless girls seemed when I was younger - especially at your age, Davy. I know you can't understand how I feel now, and yes, I sure do wish there were some girls around. That was really nice of you guys to think about that, you know! Thanks!"

"Any more confessions before we begin?" I asked, sort of laughing.

I think we were all a little nervous about this first time. I had never shared my deepest thoughts with anyone before, and there would be no way to hide anything once we had joined hands.

"If there is anything like that, guys, we all have to agree to be understanding about it. There are bound to be some slip-ups like that sometimes. We have to remember that we are all David Thomas Taylor, and we share his mind. If anything comes up, we have to promise right now that we will talk it out immediately and not get mad or hold grudges, agreed?"

We all agreed.

I remembered how unpleasant it had felt when I had first realized I was holding hands with two male strangers that first night. Now, it felt so good. It was like I was connecting with the rest of myself. I could tell from looking at Tom and Davy that they were just as eager as I was to do this. We joined hands.

In a way, that first time was a disappointment. It only took about five seconds and then it was over. This mind sharing process happened at the speed of light. We looked at each other in amazement. We all read each other's minds and agreed on one thing. We needed to hold on to each other

for a while longer, whether it was necessary or not. We lay back on the grassy hill, our hands still together, thinking back and forth to each other for an hour or more. No words left our lips. It was the most wonderful experience I - we - had ever known.

We decided together that night about this I and We thing. When we would speak of the time before our triplication we would each use the word I. To explain anything that had happened since then, we would say we. It was still confusing but we'd work it out.

"I suppose we need to get some sleep," Tommy said at last.

He let go of my hand and I let go of Davy's. Davy had already fallen asleep.

"Poor little guy. I guess we wore him out today," I said. "You and I have to remember that at ten, Davy needs more sleep than we do. This is weird."

"Yeah, it's weird," Tommy agreed with a big grin, "but isn't it great to be three brothers!"

Tommy and I just sat there, knees up, arms wrapped around them. The two of us talked a while longer. Davy slept. The moon drifted across the night sky. The crickets and cicadas continued to fill the night with nature's music. A lonely owl hooted at a mouse, scurrying to safety under a rock. It was a good time for two new brothers.

Tommy carried Davy inside and I pulled a blanket over him. I felt like giving him a kiss on the forehead the way Dad used to do to me, but I didn't. I'm not sure why.

Tommy said good night to me. It was the first time that had happened. I smiled to myself there in the dark of the cave and answered back with my own, "Good night, Tommy." I figured he was probably smiling too.

The moon shone on the waterfall and it reflected into the cave, casting a warm, blue glow on the floor and walls. I couldn't get to sleep right away. There were so many things to think about. I hadn't done my studies for several days and knew I had to get back to them. I loved to learn new things and I had missed the studying. I was excited about installing the water wheel the next day. I thought about how nice it had been to make the extra food for Tommy. It had been great to

watch Davy going after the goat. It was good to have learned how important Davy and I were to Tommy. I was pretty lucky, I thought!

I whispered my usual good night to Dad, pulled my blanket up, and was soon asleep.

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## **CHAPTER SIX: New experiences**

"We have to begin hitting the books again, guys," I said as we finished our breakfast.

"I know," they said together. They had read that thought the night before, I supposed.

"I have this fantastic theory," Davy said, rolling his hands together as if he were some kind of evil magician. "I'll bet a billion dollars in silver - which I just happen to have - that if we divide up the subjects, and each of us just studies two of the six, we can use our mind share thing to transfer what we've learned. That way each of us will know everything in all six of the subjects.

"This could be the greatest idea ever," Tommy said.

Since it seemed a bit like cheating to me, I said, "Well, let's give it a try. But if it works, I think we should each study harder on the subjects we are working on so we can learn even more."

We agreed that would be a good idea. We decided that instead of a half hour a day on each one, like I had been doing back before the triplication, we would each study a full hour on each subject. That way we would be learning twice as much as before. We also decided that the first thing every morning was the best time to do our studying. We would get it out of the way, and then we could get on with the other activities of the day.

We began the plan that very morning. After two hours, which was still less time than I used to spend, we stopped, and nervously joined hands. ZAP! Just like the night before,

in about five seconds we all knew everything about all six subjects. It was absolutely awesome!! We jumped up and held onto each other, dancing around and whooping like we had just discovered a cure for cancer, or something.

After we had calmed down, we began making plans for the rest of the day. We agreed we needed to test this new telepathic skill of Davy's on other human beings. The only place to do that was down at the closest village. It was called Pleasantville - a very appropriate name. The people had always appeared happy to see me. We also had to figure out a way to explain the sudden presence of Davy and Tommy.

"It wouldn't really be a lie if we said you two had just joined Dad and me out here," I suggested. We all laughed when Davy corrected me by saying:

"Don't you mean we just un-joined you?"

We decided that story would work and wouldn't hurt anyone, so that would be it. We dug through the clothes to find things for Davy and Tommy to wear. We could use some of Dad's money to buy them new outfits once we got to town. Davy wanted sneakers and safari pants with lots of pockets, and Tommy wanted the sexiest tank top in town. It was their life, their clothes and their image, I decided. Let them get whatever they wanted. As an afterthought, I figured that I just might look for a new ball cap and tee shirt, myself.

We didn't have shoes that would fit either of them there at the cave, so we decided we would all go into town barefoot. Our feet were well calloused and used to it, since we never wore shoes around the valley. I needed new shoes anyway, so we would each get a pair.

We also made a list of provisions we needed - flour, cooking oil, canned vegetables we could name, sugar, and coffee - we needed to get coffee in order to keep them thinking Dad was still around to drink the gosh awful stuff. We didn't dare give them any reason to suspect that Dad had died, or for sure, they'd make plans to take care of us. More than ever, it seemed to us that we were doing a pretty fine job of that all by ourselves.

The plan was that Davy would touch some folks and try to send them a mental message. What message should it be? We decided he would ask them how old they were, and see if

they answered. As well as being a practical test, it would be fun, even if a bit mischievous! We had to chuckle as we thought of old Mr. Packer at the General Store telling his age. I guessed he'd say seventy. Davy guessed seventy-five and Tommy guessed eighty. The one of us who came the closest, wouldn't have to do dishes for a week. Not a big deal, really, since dishes took all of sixty seconds. It was just the idea.

Finally, we were all outfitted in cutoffs and T-shirts and were off to the village. Tommy carried Dad's wallet and the list. It seemed that's how people would expect it to be - the oldest son being in charge. It took about twenty minutes to get into town. It was really nice being there again. The sign at the edge of Pleasantville said it had a population of four hundred people. I doubted there were still that many. It was an old and dilapidated sign. Anyway, they were all glad to see us. It had been over a week since I had been down.

By the time, we finally made our way to the General Store, I had introduced my newly arrived brothers at least three dozen times.

Davy sent his mental message to Mrs. Wilson first. She ran the Post Office. Tommy and I about broke up when out of the blue she announced, "Why I'm sixty-four, how old are you boys?"

We told her, collected our mail, and giggled our way outside where we could safely explode in laughter. Next, he tried it on a boy about his own size.

"I'm nine," came the answer along with a very puzzled expression. The kid even turned around as if to locate who had asked the question. Then the biggy - Mr. Packer.

"I'm proud to say I'll be seventy-eight in six months," was his response. Some quick arithmetic told me that meant seventy-seven and a half. Davy and Tommy had tied, and that made me the dishwasher for the week. That was ok. It had been fun.

Wearing our new clothes and carrying our supplies, we left the store. It was then that a serious Tommy called Davy and me to come close to him.

"Guys, I have discovered one more new skill I think I should let you in on," he said in that low, business-like voice of his.

"What do you mean, new skill?" I asked, eager to hear what he had found.

"I mean, that when I touch someone - like when I just shook hands with Mrs. Packer - I can tell what they are thinking at that moment."

"You mean you can read their minds," Davy said. It was really a question.

"It sure seems that way, but just what they're thinking about at that immediate moment," Tommy said. That was quickly followed by, "Boy, will this be great on dates or what?"

"Cut it out, Tommy!" I said a bit sarcastically, trying to get him to be serious again. "I think you should try it out on a few more folks, just to be sure."

"Let's find a gorgeous girl or two, then," was Tommy's suggestion as he began looking up and down the street.

Davy rolled his eyes and I nodded at him in agreement. Pony boy was at it again!

"Let's go over to the cafe and get something to eat. I'm starved anyway," Tommy finally suggested. "I can surely find some folks in there to try it on."

It was actually a good idea. A real meal would be great. The milk shakes were super! The chocolate pie was superb! Once we had finished those, we ordered steaks - well done - and baked potatoes with butter and sour cream. The waitress couldn't believe we all ordered exactly the same things, but after all, we did have exactly the same likes and dislikes - well, at least where food was concerned.

Tommy had managed to touch several people, including a teenage girl and the waitress. When we left, the first thing he said was:

"She liked me, guys. The girl at the counter with her mother was thinking how cute I was. It was great! She liked me!"

He turned in circles and whooped and hollered, flapping his arms in the air and looking the part of a wounded duck. If we hadn't been glad to see Tommy so happy, it would have been downright embarrassing.

"How about the others?" I asked.

"Well, the waitress thought Davy was the cutest kid she'd seen in years, and she thought Tripp was just the right

age to be friends with her son, Jonathan - Jonathan Jacobson. They live in the white house across the street from the school. He likes baseball."

"Hey, pretty thorough, I'd say," I replied. Davy nodded in agreement. "I suppose you got the girl's address, too, didn't you?" I added, smiling.

Tommy just smiled back and looked down the street at a small yellow house across from the school building.

"Let's go over to the playground at the school and hang out a while before we leave for home," Tommy suggested.

"I think a mind sharing would be both interesting and probably embarrassing right now," Davy said, taking a running leap up onto Tommy's back. Away they ran, horse and rider, off to the playground. I followed a bit more slowly. Somehow, I had ended up with all the packages. I didn't really mind. It was nice to see my brothers having such a good time together.

Before the day was over, the girl from the cafe had stopped by the playground, and she and Tommy had gone for a walk. Davy enjoyed the slide and merry go round. I spent a half hour just swinging and thinking. Dad used to say he'd never known anyone who enjoyed just sitting and thinking as much as I did. We all had good times in our own ways.

Several boys dropped by and Davy and I got to know them. They invited us back to play ball on Saturday. I wasn't sure if we'd do that. It would probably be lots of fun, though. We'd see about it.

It was seven o'clock when we finally reached Sarah's grandparent's cabin. Maude had some fresh peach pie she insisted we try. We were willing! It was delicious. Sarah and Tommy went for a walk. He was really getting into this going for a walk thing. I pulled out one of the silver disks and asked Gramps about it. He was a silver smith by trade and made his living making and selling jewelry and vases and things like that.

He called it an ingot. Although he appeared surprised that we had it, he also seemed very happy to see it. He weighed it and said he'd buy it from me, if I wanted to sell it. We made a deal. I had no idea silver was worth so much. I thought I could trust him.

Still, I wanted Tommy to see what Gramps was really thinking about the silver piece. When he and Sarah returned, I pretended to put Tom in a hammer lock so I could put our palms together and mentally ask him to find out what Gramps was thinking. He managed without any trouble. Then, we were on our way, home.

Gramps had given us a fair price. He could be trusted. They were good people, just as I had figured. I only hoped he hadn't been suspicious about the origin of the silver piece. About that, Tommy hadn't been able to be sure.

Our sharing was more than a little interesting that night. The message took its usual five seconds, but Tommy blushed for five more minutes afterwards. He had really had a grand day! He'd gone for walks with, held hands with, and kissed two different girls. In the process, he had also read their minds and found out how much they really liked him. He was on cloud nine! I wanted to ask him how he knew how to go about kissing a girl, since he really hadn't ever had any good practice. I didn't ask. Maybe I'll do that later on (ask him, not kiss a girl!).

Davy and I had had a good day, also. We were all three tuckered out, and hit the sack early. His smile didn't leave old Tommy's face all night long! I wondered if I would ever get to be that age so I could enjoy girls, too? Somehow, I needed to find out if I had actually stopped aging. If that had happened, it wouldn't be long until the folks in town would begin wondering. How would we explain that?

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: New skills, new responsibilities**

The next several weeks seemed to go by way too fast. We went into town every Saturday for supplies and to play ball with the guys. All three of us enjoyed playing ball. Of course, Tommy always spent some time with Suzie, his new girlfriend. Then, on the way home, we always stopped off at Maude and Gramps' place. We often sold him another silver piece, and Maude would 'force' us to eat pie or cake or cobbler! Tommy and Sarah usually found a way to sneak some private time together. That Tommy! Two girlfriends! Luckily, they didn't know about each other.

The water wheel and generator worked just super. We hung up the lights and were able to listen to the radio at night. Many nights we were too busy doing other things, but we always at least caught the news so we knew what was going on out in the World.

We soon had the inside of the cave sparkling clean. It really tuned out beautifully. We found that the background color was tan and the designs were in reds and yellows and greens and violets. Almost all of the designs were made up of threes - three lines or three symbols or three people, things like that. The back window turned out to be huge, and it gleamed like a diamond once Tommy got it all polished up. It had a smoky cast to it, so we couldn't see through it, but it flooded the cave with morning sun and then continued to fill the space with a nice warm glow all day long.

It stayed so cold in the silver room, that we began using it like a refrigerator. Gramps said he would buy all the ingots

we wanted to sell. He never asked where we got them. It appeared to be a good and private way to keep us in spending money until we decided what we were going to do with our lives.

We marked our measurements up on the wall, so we could check our growth, or lack of it, every month. More and more I came to believe that we would never grow beyond what we had been at the time of our triplication.

We decided that in order to protect our secret of the Hidden Valley, we needed to build a little log cabin on the outside, so people would think we had a permanent place to live. That would be a project for the very near future.

We finished the dam on the creek and it made a swimming hole nine feet deep, twenty feet wide, and almost fifty feet long. It seemed to us that it was the greatest swimming hole ever. We made a diving platform and a log raft that we anchored out in the middle.

We had become so tan that we really looked the part of Indian lads. I had always thought that Indians had the most beautiful skin of any group of people I'd met.

The ponies started coming around every time we were out in the valley. We'd ride them every day. One whistle and they all three would come on the run. We each found one we liked the best. We bought some curry brushes in town and brushed them down every couple of days. They seemed to really like that. They loved apples and we just happened to have lots of them.

It wouldn't get very cold during the winter. We were just a few miles north of the Louisiana border in southern Arkansas. Things should continue to grow year 'round. More and more, it seemed like a paradise. Everything we needed, and even most of the things we really wanted, were right at our fingertips. I thought we could probably be happy just staying there forever. Forever was a long time. If we never began to age, we might really get to stay forever. That was hard to think about.

In a way, it was nice to think that I'd never die. At the same time, it was really sad to think I'd never grow up. At least with Tommy around, Davy and I would get some idea of how it would have been to be a man, even if he he'd never get

to be a totally grown up model.

We found a tunnel in the black mesa where there was another set of crystals and where we think the animals got triplicated. If we ever wanted more ponies or goats, we could just take one of them in there and we'd have more. The rabbits, squirrels, chickens, and birds seemed to have figured out how to make babies the old-fashioned way. I might never get to be a father. That was sad to think about. I thought I'd have been a good one. There still appeared to be a lot we didn't know about this place and about our new selves.

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"Ok guys, I've got this new theory," Davy began. "Sometimes we can't flash our mirrors straight at each other because something is in the way between us. I got this idea, that if we could both aim at the same spot, maybe where our rays meet, they would be able to transfer our thoughts to each other anyway."

"You mean like if we could both see that white rock out there on the Mesa, and we'd aim our rays of light at it so they'd meet, then maybe we could still send mental messages between us?" Tommy asked, trying to clarify Davy's idea.

"Yeah. Exactly!" Davy replied. "Let's try it on something closer first, though."

We moved outside to give it a try.

"Like that shiny rock down there below us on the ground," Davy suggested.

We each caught some light in our palm and reflected it toward the rock. Tommy's got there first and mine was second. Tommy and I didn't hear each other's thoughts. Then Davy's ray found the target. KABOOM !! The rock exploded into a zillion pieces. We were more than startled. We were speechless. I swallowed hard. So did Tom and Davy. We just stood and looked at each other.

"What a weapon!" Davy said, finally. "It's as good as a phaser."

"I'll say," Tommy added.

I just nodded, still shaking a bit from the demonstration.

"Let's try it again to make sure it was us and not something else," I managed to say after a while.

We found another target rock a bit further away and we

all took careful aim. First Tommy found it. I waited until Davy was also focused in. Then I brought mine into line. KABOOM again! It was certainly no coincidence that time. What did we have?

"Ok guys," Tommy said. "Let's just slow down a little and see what we do have. One ray won't do it. Two rays won't do it. But all three rays, and the target explodes. Is that what you two saw?"

"Right," we agreed together.

"Let's go down by the mesa and try it out on different sizes of targets to see how big the object can really be. We have to be really careful with this now, guys, or we could accidentally blow up something valuable.

We dashed across the meadow to the mesa. Tommy held back and stayed with Davy and me. He would usually stay with us now when we were running somewhere together. We'd see him running like the wind, though, when we weren't with him. It was really an impressive sight.

Once at the foot of the mesa, we picked out a small boulder about three feet in diameter. We stood back some fifty feet to be safe. We took aim and again we blew it to smithereens. Then we got in position to aim at a six foot boulder. We had the same result.

When we tried a ten-foot boulder, something different happened. A large cloud passed overhead, and I was having difficulty catching the sun's rays from where I was standing, so Tommy and Davy had been holding their beams steady in place for about a minute when I finally found a good spot. Before I could aim, Tommy yelled, "Wait! Look at that!"

Their two beams were drilling a hole all the way through the boulder. In about two minutes their beams had completely penetrated the huge rock.

"So, three beams blow things up and two bore holes," Tommy said.

We ran over to examine the boulder close up. The hole was smooth as could be and straight as an arrow. Touching it cautiously, I found it wasn't even warm, the way I supposed it would be. The hole was about the size of a nickel. Once our curiosity had been satisfied, we moved back, and all three of us took aim again. That time the boulder cracked apart, but

didn't explode. When we attempted it on a fifteen-foot boulder, we only cracked off some of the stone from the front of it.

"Looks like our power beam has some limits," Tommy said, sounding relieved to have learned that.

"Yeah. I'd say up to about six or eight feet we are pretty devastating," Davy said. "After that, we can do damage, but it would take a long time to blow it all apart."

It seemed we had still more to learn about our new powers and our new life. After all that excitement, we decided to go for a swim. This time Tommy did beat Davy and me, but we weren't far behind. We mostly just stood around in the water or floated about, talking and thinking about our new discovery. What would be next, we wondered?

While we were letting the sun and breeze dry us off, we fished and caught a nice lunch for later on. The ponies dropped by, just to be nosy. We rode them for a few minutes and had a good time. Our hearts really weren't into having fun at that moment, however. We couldn't stop thinking about our many powers and what we should do with them.

We could merge our minds by holding hands. We could transmit thoughts to each other by bouncing rays of light from our mirrored palms. Tommy could read the minds of people and even some animals by just touching them. In the same way, Davy could put ideas into the minds of people and animals. Together, any two of us could bore holes through solid rock, and the three of us could disintegrate huge pieces of dense material. It was also my opinion that we were each learning new things far faster than I used to be able to learn them. In the past three weeks, we had finished an entire semester's studies.

With such new gifts and powers, it seemed to me that we needed to talk quite seriously about how we were going to spend our lives. Before we headed back home - that had become the word we all three used for the cave, now - I asked for a mind sharing. I knew we had all been busily thinking, and since the decisions facing us were so tremendous, I figured the more we each knew, the better. The other guys agreed. It was a rush that almost overwhelmed each of us. We ended up a bit dizzy and were all shaking our heads.

"I guess that'll teach us to think so hard," Davy joked.

It made us all laugh, partly because it was true, and partly because it had been a bit scary. We walked rather slowly and deliberately back across the velvety green meadow toward the glistening waterfall and our safe, comfortable haven within.

We silently went about the tasks of preparing lunch. Tommy fried the fish. I made the bread and Davy, as usual, found the goats and got our milk. Davy liked the goats. He talked to them with his mind. Tommy and I knew that of course, but we never said anything about it. Tommy fried some potatoes also. That was a good change. We ate, and we talked, though not about any one thing in particular - small talk, Dad used to call it.

I was sitting facing the picture of Inu that was the furthest forward in the cave. That picture had three eyes - one green, one red and one crystal. They had been formed by embedding stones of some kind, right into the wall. They were absolutely beautiful, especially when they caught and reflected the light that danced through the waterfall in the afternoon sun, or the light from the playful fire at night. It gave me an idea.

"Guys, you ready to try out one other cock-eyed theory?" I said slowly, turning toward them as I spoke.

"Sure! Why not," answered the always-ready-to-try-anything, Davy.

"What's on your mind?" Tommy asked, a bit more cautiously. "Must be something new in the last few minutes."

"It is. See these three eyes on Inu Number One," (that was our name for that particular picture).

"Yeah, so?" Tommy said.

"He has an eye that is the same color as each of our palm spots. I was just wondering what might happen if we each reflected our beam onto the eye that was the same color as our spot."

"We'd probably end up blowing the cave away, or something," Tommy said, immediately taking a very cautious position on the whole idea.

Davy was more positive about it. "I'm game," he said. "Let's give it a try and see. There's no other way to find out."

"Not if Tommy doesn't think it's a good idea," I said. "We agreed that we all had to concur before we'd take any major step about things. I think this is a major step."

Tommy walked over to the picture and touched the eyes. He stood back and studied them. At last he agreed to give it a try. We positioned ourselves so we could each catch a ray coming through the waterfall. The light danced around in the water and that made it difficult, but eventually we all found one.

We were each a little frightened, I think. One by one we found our mark. What we had thought might turn out to be just frightening, was nothing compared with the truly awesome experience we had next!

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## **CHAPTER EIGHT: The anointing**

The gem-like eyes in the picture began to gleam brilliantly. They slowly slid out toward us. They were long, crystalline cylinders, and extended out a distance of twelve inches. Then, amazingly, between them and us, the figure of a man appeared. More than a little bit startled, we immediately assumed it was a hologram of some sort, but still, it looked alive. He stood an impressive six and a half feet tall. He was a Native American dressed as Inu himself, as we had come to know him from all the pictures and pictographs.

We sat there as if frozen to the floor, gazing up at him. We were breathless. It was beautiful. It was terrifying. Inu looked like a kindly father. He was looking down, as if quietly studying us. It seemed to each of us that he was looking directly into our own face. He raised his hands high above his head. Then, the most astonishing thing of all. In a deep, strong, yet mellow voice, Inu began to speak to us in English.

"Beautiful Sons of Inu: You have been chosen to receive the Three Eternal Gifts - the gifts of mind and power and immortality. I charge you to use these gifts wisely in the causes of peace and love and nurture. Use them to improve the lives of all men. Never use them for evil. Never use them to gain personal power or to extract revenge.

"Listen most carefully my sons, to all of my words. Heed my cautions. Fill yourselves with knowledge from the ages. Learn from all men's successes and errors, and grow wise. Cherish the ways of love and compassion taught to you by your first parents, Thomas and Betty Taylor.

"You are from this moment forth, the chosen three who shall carry to the World, the ways of the Inu. You are now, you always have been, and you always will be, my sons. Be brave. Be kind. Be fair.

"Behind my picture is the Chamber of Knowledge. Learn well, all that it has to teach you. I will leave you now. Call me to return when you feel you are prepared to carry out this sacred duty that I have conferred upon you. May your journey be fulfilling, exciting, and triumphant. May all men everywhere benefit because you have lived."

He reached out his huge right hand and rested it first on Davy's head, then on mine and finally on Tommy's.

"You are now the true and anointed Sons of Inu. It is my proudest moment."

His smiling, strong image gradually faded away. The cylinders slid back into place. Another stone, set as an earring in the picture of his face, began to glow that now familiar violet hue. We just sat and watched, trying to understand what had just taken place.

We each had felt a rush of power entering our being when Inu had touched our heads - and he had touched us. From that moment on, there was no question as to how we were to spend our lives. Our mission was to improve the lives of those around us - to build a better World for all people. It felt absolutely right. We eagerly took up the challenge.

Tommy stood up first, then Davy, and finally I joined them. Filled with pride, we looked at each other for a long moment. We then moved in close together and stood clinging to each other for the longest time. We smiled, we laughed a bit nervously and we shed a few tears - not really knowing why. Suddenly it all made sense. It was all clear. We were special boys. We had all been inside of me all these years. I had been preparing us for this special mission all of my life. Somehow, Inu had called me here. It was an awesome feeling that filled our young beings.

"It's the handle to the Chamber of Knowledge, you know," Tommy said, pointing to the glowing stone in the earring.

Without hesitating, impatient Davy reached out and turned it. A door swung open, back into another huge room,

carved there into the mountain-side. It was thoroughly lighted from a series of glowing gems around the ceiling. There were pictographs covering the entire surface of the walls. There were more pictures on what seemed to be hundreds of six-foot-high slabs of stone standing upright in long columns the length of the room, like huge books in a library.

On the first column was a picture of three boys - one about ten, one about twelve, and one about fourteen. They were shown studying the pictographs in the Chamber of Knowledge. There would be a lot for us to learn, but at that moment it appeared we would have an eternity in which to do so.

From that moment of the anointing, life was never to be the same. We worked hard at our studies during those next nine months, so we could be filled with all the knowledge we could ever possibly need. We studied the successes and failures of mankind down through history so we could become wise and make better decisions, ourselves. We developed our bodies so they became the strongest and most skilled bodies possible for our ages.

Even our play times became more fun. We still swam and rode our ponies, and raced and climbed trees, but it all seemed to take on a grand new purpose. We skipped stones on the creek and fished and trapped. We played hide and seek and swung from tree to tree on ropes. We played ball with the guys in town. We developed a wonderful life.

Finally, we thought the time had come to go out into the World and fulfill our destiny as the Sons of Inu. That night we were going to ask the great Inu if we were ready.

As I suspected, none of us had grown or physically matured a single bit since the triplication occurred nearly a year before. It still was hard to accept the fact that none of us would ever get any older or taller than we were.

As time goes on it will become impossible to explain all that to the folks down in the villages, and to Maude and Gramps. Sarah came back again for the summer, and Tommy thought she suspected something. It would certainly be more noticeable by the following summer. Tommy still enjoyed being with her, or any other girl he could round up, for that matter! It seemed that Davy and I would never get to

really understand those kinds of feelings. We enjoyed having Tom try to explain it all to us though. Davy still covered his head with a pillow when Tommy got to the romantic stuff. I guess I was sort of interested. I thought I might enjoy kissing a girl once in a while. It sounded so great, the way Tommy told about how it made him feel.

We had been running laps for about an hour, just like every morning, and it was time to swim and have some fun. I just sat on the edge of the raft for a long time thinking over the wonderful and exciting events of the past year.

During that time, Davy had developed into a great diver and swimmer. He practiced during all of his free time. That's what it took to be really great at something - dedication and practice. Tommy still loved to run and jump over things. He was the fastest fourteen-year-old I'd ever seen. In fact, none of the kids, not even the older ones, down in the village, could keep up with him.

I got more into archery and baseball. I'd become an excellent pitcher and hitter. I always got chosen first and my team usually won. With my bow, I could hit the center of a silver disk at fifty yards. I knew that was great.

My muscles weren't nearly as big as Tommy's, but they seemed to be just right for the things I liked to do. Tommy looked like a junior Mr. America. I think the bodies that Davy and I developed, looked pretty great too, given our ages. That's what Tommy said, also. I knew the kids in town looked at all three of us with envy when we had our shirts off.

The three of us still looked alike in our faces. We had let our hair grow long like Inu's, but we each wore it back in a ponytail. Gramps had made us special silver, ponytail clips. We had heard that some of the mothers in the village complained about our hair. Oh, well, mothers have always complained about boy's hair! It was even told in the pictographs we had studied! Tommy said the girls liked it that way. That's all that mattered to him!

We were completely tan all over, and I wondered if it would be permanent, like Inu's beautiful color. I hoped so. During the past year, we really came to feel more like Indians than anything else. Dad would have approved of that. He had really loved the Indians he had studied. His grandfather had

been half Indian. Dad had been proud of that. So was I. Dad had explained to me that many Indians now preferred to be called Native Americans. Regardless of the term I used for them, I intended it to show my greatest respect for a grand people.

Tommy made us some loincloths from rabbit pelts, and I made matching moccasins. They looked similar to the clothes in the pictures around here. It was amazing what you could learn to do when you just decided to try. We wore them in the Valley when we felt the need to get dressed up and look really great.

I had found my bow and arrows in the Chamber of Knowledge. There was one stone box in there that had a heavy stone as its lid. It was so heavy that even the three of us together couldn't move it. We suspected that Inu would tell us about it when the time seemed right.

We had discovered another skill. When we placed one of the silver disks in our palm so the mirror spot showed through the hole, the disk stuck in place until we turned it clockwise. When the disk was in place that way, we could see into the night, as if it were broad daylight. It was a fantastic skill and it made the night seem a lot less scary.

There was another thing Dad would have been proud of. We had learned how to decode all the pictographs. It had become just like reading English for us. It turned out that each tall rock in the Chamber was like a book. The pictographs on each were like chapters. We memorized them, just as Inu had instructed us to do.

The stories told us that Inu's tribe had been a gentle and loving people. They were super intelligent as well as full of fun. They never made war or even fought among themselves. They were helpful, and were sought out by other tribes to solve their problems and mediate their disputes. There was no record about why they had left or what had happened to them. We would have really liked to have known. Maybe our great grandfather had been one of their descendants. At least it was fun to think he had been.

Well, it's hot just sitting out here on the raft, thinking. I guess it's time to stop remembering and begin swimming.

"Davy! I think the time has come to play dunk little

brother," I called, as I leaped off the raft and onto his shoulders.

We splashed and bobbed around, first one being dunked and then the other. It was great having a little brother.

About that time, Tommy cannonballed us both from the platform. Soon Tommy had both Davy and me by the backs of our necks and under the water we went. I grabbed one of Tom's legs and Davy grabbed the other. With one mighty effort, we sent Tommy backward, head over heels under water himself. We wrestled around for a few more minutes before getting out to dry off and go make lunch. It had been another good morning.

We made our way back home and soon had downed an eggs and bacon lunch, and had the dishes cleaned up.

Davy checked his height against the wall, just in case he'd grown since the day before! No such luck. He sighed, not really unhappy, but still having a hard time fully accepting his situation. I knew how he felt. I still checked every once in a while, myself. Tommy had stopped doing that. He was still more concerned that he had missed out on his entire thirteenth year of life, since he had skipped from twelve, right to fourteen.

We needed to go into the village that afternoon, so we got dressed in our regular clothes and headed out. We needed some provisions and I took two silver disks to sell to Gramps. We stopped at his cabin first. It seemed we had timed it perfectly to get in on some dessert. Davy and I ate inside with Maude and Gramps, while Tommy and Sarah took theirs out onto the back porch.

Davy and I kept the conversation going long enough for Tom to get some kissing done, and then we said good-bye and set off again down the dusty dirt path toward the village. The path wound down the hill like a giant snake that was quietly warming itself in the mid-day sun. It was a gentle slope. A brisk, cool breeze rushed up to meet us.

Presently, Tommy caught up with us. Once down in the village, we purchased our supplies and picked up the mail - mostly advertisements since there was no one to really write to us.

The main purpose for our visit was to take the school

tests so the authorities would be satisfied that "Dad's" teaching us at home, was good enough. Actually, we had to hold back a whole lot on what we really knew, or else they would have pegged us as some kind of geniuses and decided to place us somewhere special because of it. The testing took about two hours. The principal seemed satisfied. He said he would send our father the results.

We split up for a while and each went off to find our own friends. It was a good afternoon, but like most trips to town, it seemed to slip away too quickly. We met at the cafe for supper and then headed back up the hill toward home.

We were excited, because we had decided that would be the night we would call back Inu, and see if he thought we were ready to begin our quest to help mankind. We were all a little nervous as we took our showers and got ourselves ready for the big event.

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## **CHAPTER NINE: The time had come!**

None of us was frightened that time. We were eager to see and hear Inu again. We felt we wanted to dress up for the occasion. We put on our loin cloths and seated ourselves in a semi-circle in front of the picture. Soon the beams were focused and the crystals came to life. The imposing, smiling figure of Inu had returned.

"Beautiful Sons of Inu," he began again. "Tell me of your preparations."

I spoke first and related all that we had studied. Then Tommy told him about the ways we had been preparing our bodies. Davy said how we had grown to love one another and spoke of how we were eager to take our skills out of the Valley and help the people of the World.

"You have done well, my Sons. You have grown in mind and body and spirit, just as I first required of you. Have you studied successes as well as the mistakes and misdeeds of Man down through the ages?"

"Yes Sir, we have done that," I answered.

"Have you studied the sacred pillars in the Chamber of Knowledge?"

Tommy answered: "Yes, Sir, we know them all by heart."

"Do you truly believe you are my sons - the Sons of Inu?"

"Yes, Sir," we answered in unison.

It was the first time I realized that I truly did believe that.

"Davy, you will stand," Inu directed, looking down at

Davy, his face and eyes radiating great love and affection, and even pride, toward the lad.

From behind his back, Inu produced a set of buckskin clothes - a vest, a breech clout, cut-away trousers, boots and a beautiful beaded chest plate.

"Rid yourself of what you have on and don these - your new and sacred garments."

Davy looked at Tommy, reluctant to give up what Tommy had made for him. Tommy nodded in full understanding. He took the old loin cloth from Davy and laid it aside. Davy put on his new outfit. He looked fantastic!

"Thank you, Sir," Davy said. "I will cherish these always."

"Davy, as the youngest of my sons, I charge you with the mission of love. It is only through love that mankind can survive and prosper and realize its full potential. Leave love in your path, always. As the Son of Inu your new name will be Davado - boy of love."

Inu turned toward me.

"Tripp, you will stand. Replace what you are wearing with these new garments."

Like Davy, I too handed my old loin cloth over to Tommy, and eagerly slipped into my new outfit. Immediately, I felt transformed into something very special.

"Tripp, as my son in the middle, I charge you with the mission of peace. Peace flows from love and love from peace. You are to be the great arbitrator, the one who teaches the benefits of peace and the folly of conflict. You are the problem solver. As the Son of Inu your new name will be Trippano - the peacemaker."

"Thank you, Sir. I will do my very best."

"Tommy, you will stand. Replace your old clothes with these, my Son. As my eldest son, I charge you with the mission of nurture. It is your task to tend to those in need of care, and to ease the suffering and misfortunes, which befall all men. Especially, Tommy, I charge you with the care of your brothers. Although from this moment forward, to the end of time, none of you may be physically harmed by any force of nature, I am unable to protect your spirit, your character, your integrity. It is these things I leave in your care and counsel,

Tommy. As the Son of Inu your new name will be Tomorka - young caretaker.

A single tear slowly rolled down Tommy's cheek. It was an emotional moment for all of us.

Inu looked down at us as if he were a proud father seeing his sons for the first time through the window in the hospital nursery.

He asked, "Are there questions?"

"Yes, Sir," I asked. "Are we to wear these wonderful garments at all times, like into the village just as our regular clothing?"

"These garments are only to be worn when you are assuming the roles of your missions. When they are on your backs, let your beautiful long hair flow free."

"No offence, Sir," Tommy said, "But won't people think it is odd that the Taylor brothers dress up like Indians? Won't they poke fun and make jokes. How can they take us or our missions seriously?"

"My dear Tomorka. You see, my Son, you are already looking after the welfare of your brothers. I am proud of you, for that. Let me explain further. Look into each other's faces. Do you see that now, attired in your sacred garments, you look not like the Taylor boys but like me, Inu, your father and protector?"

We did. We still looked alike, but we looked just like Inu. When wearing our garments, no one would ever suspect that we were the Taylor boys. I supposed that once out of these garments, we would again look like we used to. I didn't ask because we would find that out, ourselves, soon enough.

"How are we to know who needs our assistance?" I asked.

"It will just come to you, especially as you share your minds each evening. You will know."

"What if we don't understand what we need to do?" asked Davy.

"I am always with you during your mind sharing experiences. I will guide you."

Even as tan as Tommy appeared, Davy and I could see that upon hearing that, he was blushing. It was probably because of the thoughts he had shared about him and girls,

and that he now realized Inu also knew of them. Inu sensed Tommy's embarrassment, also. He reached out and put his strong, comforting hand on Tommy's shoulder. Tommy looked up into his face.

"My son. Your thoughts are normal and wonderful. Never be ashamed about your human side, and having the feelings and desires that go with it. You have known right from wrong since Tripp was a tiny boy. Act on what you know to be right. Never put yourself down for the thoughts that journey across the plains of your mind. It is in your mind that you can try them out and judge their value and decency. Feel fortunate they visit you there first, before they drive you to action. In your mind, you can take the time to distinguish the bad and shameful from the good and decent. To decide in favor of that which is right, is the highest of all human skills."

"Thank you, Sir. I appreciate that you said those things. That really does help me," Tommy said.

It helped all of us. I thought that was exactly what Dad would have told him. That gave me a very special feeling deep inside.

"May I ask one more question?" Davy asked, raising his hand as if in a classroom.

Inu smiled down at him, and Davy knew he was allowed to speak.

"What did you mean that no physical harm can come to us? You mean we can't be killed by a knife or bullet, or can't be hurt if we fall off a cliff like Dad did?"

"You have answered your own question. Your flesh is of the gods and it cannot be destroyed."

We were silent and just stood with our eyes fixed in admiration on this wonderful, strong, wise figure who now called us his sons. Once again Inu reached behind his back, this time producing three beaded headbands. He placed one of them around Davy's head. Inu then withdrew a brilliant red feather from his own feathered bonnet. He kissed it and put it to Davy's lips for him to kiss. Then Inu placed it into Davy's headband. I received a pure white feather in the same fashion. Tommy's was bright sky blue.

"Red for love. White for peace. Blue for nurture. May they always remind you of your missions. Good-bye, now, my

beautiful and beloved sons. I will return when you are in need of me."

Inu took Davy's head between his hands, leaned down and kissed his forehead in a lingering, unhurried, loving manner.

"Thank you, I understand," Davy said, looking up into Inu's face.

Before I could really think about why Davy had said that, Inu did the same for Tommy who responded in the same way. Then I received my kiss. With that kiss, everything Inu had been saying and everything we had been learning, seemed to come together. In that split second it all made perfect sense. We could do this! We would do this! We wanted more than anything else in the World to do this!

"I have one final requirement, my Sons. You are never to be the first to use force. Although you possess magnificent strong bodies, you have also been given superior brains and wise minds. Use them first - always. When you must protect yourselves or others, and there is no way other than force, use no more than is absolutely necessary to bring peace to the moment. Never be provoked to violence by mere words or you are the weaker one. He who uses words to inflict pain or to call forth violence is to be pitied, for he is disregarding his most special gift - that of being human."

With that charge to us, Inu's smiling, strong presence faded away, and we were again alone. We looked each other over, turning around and around and strutting about like the proudest of peacocks. Each set of clothes fit perfectly. We looked spectacular!

"I guess we'll never out grow them, at least," Davy joked.

Finally, we could all laugh about that, and we did. We were so excited. We had so much energy.

"I really need to just go outside and run with the wind," Tommy said.

Davy and I ran, too. We ran up the hills and back down into the valley. We ran in straight lines and around in circles. Our hair flew behind us. We yelped and screamed and laughed. We leaped over fallen logs and small boulders. We were letting out months of tension, months of worry, months of

uncertainty and fear. It was a wonderful time out there that night in our fine new outfits. For the first time, we knew without doubt, that we were, The Sons of Inu. We looked the part. We felt the part. We were proud and confident in the part.

On the way back home, we stopped at the bottom of the hill and sat down in the cool grass beside Dad's grave. I told him what had happened and that we still loved him very much. Davy said he missed him and that he thought Inu was very much like he had been - loving, wise and strong.

Tommy said: "Dad, you know that no one will ever replace you and Mom in our hearts. You and Mom gave us our life and our values. Now Inu has given us our immortality and our mission. It is very special to have had two fathers. Rest in peace, dearest Dad."

By that time, we were all crying, quite silently, to ourselves. We were content to sit there for a long time, each of us lost in his thoughts. We felt drained. Davy reached out his hand toward me and I, in turn, reached out toward Tommy. We shared our mind for a long time that night. For the first time, we sensed that Inu was there with us. We figured Dad was, too.

## **CHAPTER TEN: The first mission**

As usual, I was the first one awake. The night before, we had undressed in the dark and then crawled right into our beds, so we hadn't seen each other's faces after we had removed our special outfits. Before I stepped into the waterfall for my shower, I took a few seconds and looked into the faces of my brothers. Sure enough, we were back to being the Taylor boys again.

Once I got used to it, the cool water felt great. I just stood there for a lot longer than usual, letting the clear, bubbling water wash away the dust and refresh my whole being. I looked out over my valley - our valley now, I supposed. The ponies were playing a game of chase with the dogs gleefully nipping at their heels. The goats were grazing on a ledge not ten feet away from me. They paused and looked up as I unsuccessfully tried to splash some water in their direction.

The creek flowed like a thin blue, wavy line down the valley floor now splashing over the dam we had built to create our swimming hole. The valley was green of grass and brown of stones. It was dotted with a rainbow of colors from the wild flowers and fruit trees scattered about, as if each of them had been carefully placed by a master painter.

I moved outside to sit in the grass on the hill by the path and dry off in the morning sun and gentle breeze. It wasn't long until Tommy was up. After a quick shower, he joined me on the hill.

"Some night we had," he said, obviously still excited by

it all.

"I'll say," I said. "We're Taylors again, did you notice?"

"Yeah. I looked at Davy first thing after I got up."

After a short silence, I gave words to my solemn thoughts.

"Inu has given us a huge job, you know."

"Yeah, I know. We're up to it though. I know we are," Tommy replied.

"I suppose," I said. Actually, we had already learned to believe in all those things Inu required of us - peace, love, charity, living a good life, valuing knowledge, non-violent solutions to all problems. Dad and Mom believed those things. They had just always been a part of us.

Soon Davy joined us, still yawning and not yet showered. He brought us each a stick bread apple treat. We munched. We could tell Davy had something on his mind.

"I think we should begin helping out by just doing little, easy things at first until we get the hang of this mission stuff," he said, sounding uncharacteristically cautious.

It made sense, though.

"Like what? Any ideas?" Tommy asked.

"Yeah. Like old Miss Marple, there on the edge of town. Her garden has gone to weeds. She'll never get anything good out of it that way. We could go down tonight after she's in bed and weed it for her. That would be one kind of helping like Inu means, wouldn't it?"

"Sounds like a great place to begin to me," Tommy said. "How about it, Tripp?"

I agreed. We knew she had hoes and spades and rakes in her tool shed. The door had fallen off long ago, and we had been able to see into it as we walked by her place on the way in and out of town.

"Can we ride our ponies and take the dogs?" Davy asked.

Tommy and I looked at each other thinking it through.

"I suppose if this is a practice run, we should give it the whole treatment," Tommy said.

Davy and I smiled our agreement. An exciting day began to take shape. While Davy showered, Tommy and I fixed mush and stick bread toast. I cut apple slices and fried

them. We heated the maple syrup for the mush, and we all had a fine breakfast.

Our first job was fixing someway to hold our garments. We bent tiny saplings into hangers and strung a rope at the back of the cave on which to hang them. That done, we studied for two hours in the Chamber of Knowledge and did our usual mind sharing to distribute the new knowledge among us. Then we ran for an hour. The dogs always loved that part of the day. The ponies watched from a distance, seeming a bit put out that we didn't need them in order to move along so fast.

After that, it was into the swimming hole for an hour, mostly just for fun. We dived and swam races and saw who could go the furthest under water. Tommy and I were about equal in that skill, and from day to day we never knew which one would win. That day I won by about ten feet. That meant the two of them were waiting to dunk me as soon as I came up of course, but it was fun. We lay on the raft and talked for a long time, making plans about that night and our first adventure as the Sons of Inu.

Then I practiced with my bow and arrows. Davy went back to swimming laps. Tommy took off running around the upper ridge of the valley. For some reason, we were all better at our individual sports than we had been before. We had all just expected it would be that way, now. After all, we were special boys, with special missions, and we had to be the best.

I bagged three squirrels for lunch and had them cooking on a spit over the fire by the time Tom and Davy got home. Davy drifted to the back of the cave and lovingly stroked his new garments. Tommy and I smiled at each other and just watched him out of the corners of our eyes. In so many ways he really was a ten-year-old, again. We wondered if we were settling into our particular age roles, as well.

Mine, of course, hadn't had to change. I was still twelve, the age we had been before the triplication. Tommy was acting older, I thought. He had become more protective of Davy and me even before Inu had asked him to be. He never tried to be the boss. None of us did. He just looked out for us and that made me feel safe and loved.

\* \* \*

The sun had set, and it was nearing ten o'clock.  
"Isn't it time, yet?" Davy asked for the tenth time.  
"I think it must be," I answered.

Tommy looked out through the waterfall into the black sky and nodded his agreement.

We felt so excited as we took our precious garments down from where they were hanging and put them on. Just as Inu had us do, we each kissed the feather before we slipped our headband into place. It was like a pledge to do our very best.

As we moved outside, Tommy whistled for the ponies, and by the time we were at the foot of the hill, they were there, waiting. The dogs soon joined us.

"Davy, I think you should tell the animals what we're up to, before we go any further," Tommy suggested. "They will need to be very quiet."

Davy touched each of the animals, his mind sending them the plan for the night's activities. They calmed down and became quite business-like. We each mounted our pony and made our way out through the valley's hidden entrance. It was the first time we had taken the animals outside. We wondered if they had ever been out there before.

They seemed quite comfortable on the path to town. We kept an easy gallop most of the way and then slowed to a walk as we neared Miss Marple's place. We left the path and circled around behind her shed. Davy told the animals to remain there. The moon was full and bright, and we could see with no trouble at all.

Her house was dark. There were plenty of tools. We worked swiftly but quietly, not talking at all among ourselves. We piled the weeds on her burning pile. Later, when they dried out, she could easily get rid of them. After about two hours, the garden was spotless. There were rows of lettuce and cabbages and tomatoes and carrots. Even new radishes and green beans and cucumbers were free to grow.

As we cleaned off the tools and put them away, Tommy pointed at the door to the shed. It was lying on the ground. We knew what he meant. He and I stood it up and looked it over, while Davy, using his night vision, searched for screws

and screwdriver inside the darkness of the shed. One hinge was broken but the top and bottom ones were in good shape. I removed the middle one. Tommy held up the door and I screwed the top hinge back in place. Davy did the same to the bottom one.

The wooden latch had broken, but Tommy had soon whittled a new one. The door was as good as new. We looked around to see what else needed our care. Her front walk was made of flat stones laid close together and cut slightly into the ground. The foot-high grass growing in between them had overtaken the walk. We spent another hour with trowels and fingers, digging out the grass. Soon the walk was clean as a whistle, as Dad would have said.

In the evening breeze, the back door to her house slammed back and forth, making what must have been a most annoying racket inside. The spring was broken. Davy used some pliers to make a new loop on one end. I moved the hook so it could be re-attached. Tommy replaced two broken boards on the floor of the back porch and silently screwed them down tight. The house needed a coat of paint, but that would have to wait until another time.

"That's about all we can do here tonight," Tommy whispered to us.

"One more thing," Davy said. He took out a silver disk, and with a nail scratched on it the words, Sons on Inu. "How about if we leave this for Miss Marple? People should know that it's because of Inu that these deeds were done. This way it's not like we are taking credit for personal gain or power, like Inu warned us."

Tommy and I thought about what Davy had said. It would be good to let people know that there was a new force for good at work in the World. If it had a name, it would mean more to people. We agreed. Davy carefully hung it on the door to the tool shed. We mounted up and silently left the village.

We felt so good inside about what we had done. Now she would have her vegetables and wouldn't have to worry about the two doors. The porch floor and the front walk were safe now. At least a small part of the World had been made better because of us.

We rode faster than ever before. Our ponies sensed the great joy of the moment. They headed back to the hidden entrance without guidance. They had done this before. We wondered how long ago that might have been. The feeling was indescribably wonderful!

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN: Doing research**

It was three in the morning when we arrived back at the cave. The early morning air had grown quite chilly so I built up the fire. Its light filled the room. Our once beautiful outfits were grungy and dirty. I imagined they would wash up fine. We hung them up anyway. We were still too excited to sleep, so I put some apple treats on to bake while we cleaned up in the waterfall.

Then we enjoyed the snacks and the inviting warmth from the fire. We wondered if Inu would be pleased. There was one way to find out. We sat in a close circle and held hands. Inu was extremely pleased and so were we. Toward the end of our sharing, we received a message that some problem existed at Maude and Gramps' place. Since it was not an emergency, we would check it out first thing in the morning - well, probably first thing in the afternoon. It looked like we would be sleeping in.

Davy hit the sack first. I soon followed. Tommy was sitting looking into the fire, as I lay down and prepared to go to sleep. I just watched him for a few moments. Before he got into bed himself, he pulled the cover up around Davy and kissed him on the forehead. I quickly closed my eyes to see if I would get the same treatment. Sure enough, I did. I was so lucky that Tommy was part of my new family.

\* \* \*

Unfortunately, I was unable to sleep in past eight o'clock. I had never been much good at sleeping in. Tommy and Davy had not seemed to inherit that particular trait from

me, however. They slept on while I slipped out and went for a walk. I needed to get some thinking done. The dogs joined me. I walked up to the very top of the South ridge where I could see down into Pleasantville. Then I made my way all around the rim of the valley. There was a path of sorts, from all the running Tommy had done up there. I practiced with my bow from time to time, wondering how and when I might get to use that skill on one of our missions.

It was ten by the time I returned to the cave. Davy was standing outside waiting for me. He had breakfast ready. Tommy was still asleep, but not for long. Davy tickled the soles of his feet and he was soon not only awake, but up and across the room, putting Davy in a shoulder spin, much to little brother's delight.

Then I noticed it. The garments, that had been so badly soiled the night before, were perfectly clean. They looked brand new, as if they had never even been worn. It was a total surprise, but then we had come to take such things in our stride - so many mysterious things had already taken place. None the less, I had to think how much most mothers would pay for a line of kid's clothes that were self-cleaning.

Over pancakes and bacon and all the milk we could drink, we planned our day. We wanted to go down into town and see if our visit had caused a stir. We needed to stop by Gramps' place to see if we could help out there in any way. It seemed like a dress up occasion so we wore tee-shirts and shoes as well as our usual cut-offs.

We stopped at Gramps' place first. As usual, they were glad to see us. Sarah had already gone down into town for the mail. Tommy sighed and looked disappointed. I had noticed a broken window out in Gramps' shop.

"So, how are things," Davy said, trying to get right to the point in a casual sort of way.

"Kind of sad," Maude said. "For the first time in all the years we have lived up here, someone broke in and took some silver and jewelry from the workshop."

"Can't understand it," Gramps said, shaking his head. "That kind of thing just never happens in these parts."

"When did it happen?" I asked.

"While we were out for a ride in the wagon yesterday

afternoon," Gramps answered.

"Any idea who might have done it?" Tommy asked.

"Nope," Gramps said, again shaking his head in disbelief. "No idea at all."

"Anybody new been around lately?" I asked, hoping we weren't appearing to be too nosey.

Gramps looked at Maude. Maude spoke.

"Sarah had a boy come by two days ago. He's new to the village - he and his mother. Sarah brought him up to meet us. That would be the only one. He seemed quite nice, really."

"How old is he?" Tommy asked, mostly, I thought, to find out if he had some competition for Sarah's attention.

"He's fifteen. His mother took a job at the General Store. I got the idea they have moved around a lot. She looks so young to have to be raising a teenager. I mean we love Sarah and she never gives us any problem, but I must admit, we are always ready for her to go back to Hot Springs when September rolls around."

I hadn't ever thought about kids being hard on parents, before. I had thought it worked the other way around. I had always been a good kid, but sometimes I had done dumb stuff and Dad had grounded me. It made me wonder if, now, I was being hard on Tommy. I'd find out later.

We told them how sorry we were. Each of us managed to put away one more freshly made doughnut. Then we were on our way down to the village. About half way there we met Sarah as she was coming up the path. We chatted for a few minutes and then Davy and I said we were going on ahead. We left Tommy with Sarah. We hoped he'd get information about the new kid, and not just get his weekly allotment of Vitamin K (kissing).

As Davy and I walked past Miss Marple's, she and two of her neighbors were out in the yard looking things over. She seemed so happy. That made us feel great all over again. She had the silver disk in her hand and was showing it all around. Not saying anything against Miss Marple, but she was known as a bit of a gossip. We knew that soon the whole town would know about the Sons of Inu.

Tommy finally came along on a dead run. He caught

up with us just before we entered the Post Office.

"Jeff is his name," Tommy said. "He's fifteen, and Sarah thinks he has been in a lot of trouble. That's probably why he and his Mom have moved around so much. Sarah said he seemed nice enough, but that he had a chip on his shoulder about life not treating him fairly. I think we should try to meet him ourselves, so I can see just exactly what is on his mind - if you get my drift."

We picked up the mail and asked the Postmistress where the new folks lived. She gave us directions. We dropped by. Jeff was sitting on the front porch of a really run down, unpainted dump of a place. Tommy went right up to him, introducing us and putting out his hand in friendship.

Surprised by the unexpected friendliness, Jeff stood up and shook Tommy's hand. He invited us to sit on the porch. We talked for about fifteen minutes. Eventually he showed us around the place. He had a tent he liked to sleep in out back. He said it was cooler than in the house. Like Sarah had said, Jeff seemed like an ok kind of guy. He was a bit shy, but then he was new. He seemed rather unhappy, also, and certainly didn't expect that people would act friendly toward him.

"We'll be playing ball over at the school diamond in about an hour. Better come over and join us," I said, as we prepared to leave.

"Nah, I'm not much into sports," was his reply.

"Well, you don't have to play, but at least you could come over. It's always a nice bunch of guys," I said.

Tommy added: "The girls usually come to watch. Better at least come over to check them out!"

Jeff smiled and looked at Tommy, the two of them sharing something Davy and I couldn't really be a part of.

"OK, maybe I will, then."

We left, hardly able to wait until out of earshot so we could hear what Tommy had discovered when he shook Jeff's hand.

"He's the thief all right. I'm not clear about why he took the stuff. He buried it behind the church and doesn't seem to have any intention of going back to get it until he and his Mom are ready to move on. He seems to think that will be very soon."

Within minutes, we had the missing items dug up and safely stashed in Davy's shoulder bag. We would return it later, without Maude and Gramps' ever knowing who had done it. Our bigger question was how we could help Jeff to stop his stealing.

"Maybe Jeff needs a visit from the Sons of Inu tonight," I suggested.

The others agreed.

\* \* \*

We didn't want to chance having Gramps see us and suspect that it was us who had returned the stolen items, so we took a different, longer route home. It was a little used path through a small, beautiful woods. It was cool and shady. Tommy said he and Sarah had come there sometimes. There was a small pond that looked very inviting in the heat of that afternoon. We kicked off our shoes and waded along the edge.

Davy caught a frog and immediately made friends with it. Several snakes slithered into the water as we passed by their sunning spots. Ever curious gray squirrels peeped around the tree trunks to see what was going on. Rabbits sat quietly, wiggling their noses and watching us from a safe distance. The cardinals and blue birds sang as if happy to see us.

We soon needed to be moving on. Tying the strings of our shoes together, we draped them over our shoulders and made our way, barefoot, on up the hill. The secret entrance into the Hidden Valley was a huge stone door, hidden behind a thick stand of tall evergreen trees. One push on the right spot and the stone swung back into the hill, revealing a long, wide tunnel that opened onto the floor of the Hidden Valley. The door closed by itself.

Once inside the valley, the dogs were soon at our sides. We raced to the swimming hole. Tommy was in first, of course. I held back a bit so Davy and I jumped in together. We were hot and dirty from the dusty path and more than ready for a refreshing dip. We mostly hung around close together, treading water and swimming in place. There were plans that had to be made for that night.

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## **CHAPTER TWELVE: The first face to face mission**

We were still planning, as we collected our clothes and made our way home. We still needed to secretly return the stolen silver to Gramps and Maude. We knew we didn't dare leave a silver disk or they'd know it was us. We hadn't thought about that the night before. We would work on an explanation in case they found out and asked.

Our major mission would be to go to Jeff's house and visit him at his tent. We had to decide just what needed to be said to him.

"Maybe we need to take the stolen silver things along to Jeff's to prove to him we know about the theft and where he stashed it," Davy suggested.

It was at times like that, that Tommy and I suddenly remembered Davy was ten years old in body only - not in mind!

"Good thinking," I said.

We continued to plan and to wonder just why Jeff felt he had to steal. No one in the village was what you could call well off, but no one would ever think of taking something that didn't belong to them. I doubted if most of the families even had keys for their doors. This stealing thing was just unheard of in those hills.

When night came, we carefully and proudly donned our garments. Tommy called the ponies, and once again, the Sons of Inu were off together.

Since Jeff and his Mom lived on the far edge of the town, we circled the village. We left the ponies in a grove of

trees, and the dogs stayed with them to watch over things. The front of Jeff's tent was open to let in the cool night air. Jeff was asleep with his head toward the back. The house was dark.

Tommy entered the tent first and clapped his hand over Jeff's mouth. Davy sat on Jeff's legs and I held his arms. Davy reached up and touched Jeff's hand, mentally telling him to relax. Tommy spoke first:

"We are here as your friends, Jeff. You don't know us, but there is no need to be alarmed."

Jeff stopped struggling and we let him sit up. In the dark, he could hardly make us out. We carefully brought him outside where the moonlight left no question as to what we were. He was more than a little startled when he saw he was in the grasp of three young Indians.

"I want to take my hand from your mouth now," Tommy said, "but only if you promise not to call out. OK?"

Jeff nodded his agreement.

"Who in the devil are you guys?" was his first and logical question.

"We are known as the Sons of Inu, but that is not really important," Tommy continued. "What is important is that we know you stole the silver and jewelry from Sarah's grandparents."

Davy produced his shoulder bag and let Jeff see inside.

"So, you have some silver and other stuff in there," Jeff said. "That doesn't prove I took it."

"We are not here to get you into trouble over it," Davy said. "We just want to help you find a way to stop doing such things."

"Up to now, your stealing seems to have made yours and your Mom's life pretty unpleasant, wouldn't you say?" I added.

Jeff remained silent. He just looked at us, still stunned about it all.

Tommy recited some of the trouble Jeff had been in before coming to Pleasantville - information he had learned during that first handshake, and confirmed again, as he now held his hand to Jeff's shoulder.

"How do you know about that? No one here knows

about that. Where are you guys from, anyway?"

"Just believe us that we know all about you and we want to help."

"Yeah, sure. Like all the judges and probation officers and do-gooders I've ever known," Jeff said sarcastically, shaking his head in disbelief. "You'll end up running me and Mom out of this town, too."

"That's not our plan," Davy said, kneeling beside him. "We will return the stolen stuff to Gramps ourselves, and no one will ever know you were the one who took it."

"I don't get it. What's in it for you?"

"That's not important either, Jeff," I added. "We want to be your friends. All of the people here in Pleasantville do if you'll just give them a chance."

"The people are pretty nice around here, actually," Jeff said. "I met some nice kids just this afternoon. They made a special point to come clear out here and introduce themselves and invite me to play ball with them. I can't understand why they'd do that."

"Why not?" Tommy said. "You seem to be a decent kid - except for this stealing thing."

Soon, Jeff was talking freely about himself and his past. Davy's hand was on his knee sending him comforting and trusting messages. Tommy's was on his shoulder, checking out the truth of his statements. At last, we began to make progress.

"I've only stolen stuff in a few towns, really."

"Come off it, Jeff," Tommy said, in a forceful tone. "I know you've been in trouble for stealing ever since you were five years old back in Fort Smith. We want to listen to you, but only if you are going to be truthful with us."

Jeff gulped big time, at that.

"Well, ok. I don't know how you know all this stuff, but you might as well also know that telling the truth isn't one of my strong points either."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Davy said, patting his little hand against Jeff's knee.

He told us about his Dad leaving when he was a baby, and about his Mom having to work at low wage jobs since she had quite school to have him. She had never been able to

afford nice things for him - not even food and clothes, sometimes. That had been when he had begun to steal.

When he had been small, he'd often been caught as he had tried to sell or trade what he had stolen for food or candy. As he had grown up, he had become more skilled at that. For the past several years, his mode of operation had been to steal a lot of valuable stuff and stash it. Then he had let himself get caught stealing some little thing, and his Mom would move, rather than having him face charges. Once in a new town, he would sell what he had stolen in the previous town and would spend the money on things he wanted. When that had run out he'd start all over again.

"I don't know why I'm telling you guys all this. I never told anyone all this stuff in my whole life. Mom doesn't even know. In fact, I really hate Indians, and you guys are certainly Indians. You got some magic spell on me or something?"

Jeff was getting upset, again.

"No spells, Jeff," Tommy said. "We are just concerned that you are wasting your life away, and now that you're fifteen, this stealing becomes really serious business in the eyes of the law, you know."

"You sound like my Mom."

"Then maybe you should start listening to her," Davy said.

"Here's a deal for you to think about," Tommy said to Jeff, as he looked him straight in the eyes. "Sarah will be leaving in two weeks, and Gramps and Maude will need help up at their place - mowing, painting, gardening, things like that. They always hire someone to help. We'll put in a good word for you if you want the job. It wouldn't pay big money, but I'll bet it would be enough to help you and your Mom in a lot of ways."

Tommy nodded to us that Jeff was giving it sincere consideration. Davy let go, so as to not influence Jeff's decision. This one had to come from him. It did. He agreed.

Tommy ended our visit with these words:

"We'll be keeping such close track of you, Jeff, that we'll know every time you take a leak, let alone if you ever even think of taking anything while you're up at Gramps' and Maude's. You got that really clear now inside that red head of

yours, old man?"

Jeff looked right at Tommy.

"Yes. I have that very clear. I don't know what to say. No one ever treated me like this before."

"Do you suppose that has anything to do with the way you treated them?" Davy asked, not expecting an answer.

We got up and started to leave. Jeff followed us for a few steps.

"I'm sorry about that crack I made about Indians. I guess I really never even knew any personally before. Just heard stuff, you know. Don't I even get to know who you guys are?"

Tommy put out his hand and shook with Jeff. "My name is Tomorka. I am the eldest son of Inu.

Then I took Jeff's hand and said, "My name is Trippano. I am the middle son of Inu.

Davy followed suit: "I'm Davido, the youngest son of Inu."

He took one of the etched silver disks and handed it to Jeff.

We turned and disappeared into the grove of trees.

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It was midnight when we arrived at Gramps and Maude's place. They were asleep. Davy slipped into the workshop and piled the silver and jewelry on the bench. Tommy and I carefully removed the broken glass from the window in the door. Not having a pane of glass to put in, we covered the opening with a burlap sack. I took the measurements so we could get the glass and fix it another day.

Before we left, Davy motioned us inside. He had arranged the silver pieces so they spelled out Inu.

"Since we can't leave our usual calling card, do you suppose this is ok?"

Tommy and I agreed that it was fine. In no time at all, we were back home.

"I think it was a pretty successful evening, don't you?" Davy asked, as he lovingly hung up his garments.

We all loved our outfits, but for some reason his set was extra special to him.

"Yeah. It was great!" I answered.

Tommy and I hung up our things and then we all showered. Before we had our sharing time, we each had a pear and some cinnamon stick bread. Well, actually, Davy and I had a pear - Tommy had three! He was always starved! Then we joined hands.

For some reason, we were all sending thoughts about our own problems and the jealousy we sometimes felt toward each other. It called for a good long talk afterwards.

It seemed that Davy was jealous of Tommy and me because he would never get to be our size or achieve our strength or speed. He would always be thought of as the little Taylor brother, when in fact, his mind was every bit as old and as superior as ours.

Tommy was upset because, although all of his feelings told him he wanted to have a wife someday, he would never be old enough in appearance to actually do that. Anyway, he thought it wouldn't be fair to a wife, since he would never age and she would. He was jealous of Davy because Davy would never have those needs for wife. He thought life would be much easier that way.

I felt caught in between being a little kid, who was a whole lot like Davy, and being a young man, who had the beginnings of a lot of Tommy's feelings about girls and such. I couldn't go back to not having them and yet I'd never really fully develop them. It was like being teased toward something that I could never have.

It was a heavy and serious talk. It was the first time any of us had realized that some problems cannot be solved. We had to find ways to accept those situations and live with them. We decided we each had to find other things that could make us feel whole and worthy of respect. We would help each other. I thought we had already begun doing that in lots of ways.

I could see where Davy felt put down physically when we ran faster and lifted heavier loads or picked him up off the floor when he teased us. But I reminded him we would have never been able to rescue that goat if it hadn't been for his lighter weight and slender body. If I had tried to go out onto that ledge, my weight would have collapsed the rocks and the

goat would have fallen over the edge. He understood, but I doubted if it really helped him much. He wasn't asking Tommy or me to stop running fast or being stronger or things like that. He was truly happy for us, just not for himself.

After Davy fell asleep, Tommy and I talked a long time. We both felt better afterwards. When we stood up to go in to bed, Tommy reached out and gave me a big hug. I hugged him back and held him close a bit longer than usual. We were so lucky that Dad and Mom had taught us about love and caring and the family feeling. We missed them both that evening, but were proud of the fine parents they had been to us.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Sarah is lost!**

It was going on five in the afternoon when Davy heard it. The bell we had hung in a tree at our phony campsite outside the valley was ringing in a most furious way. It was there with a sign, which said to ring it if we couldn't be located. Running at top speed, it took Tommy about three minutes to get from the cave to the camp. Davy and I brought up the rear by several minutes.

By the time we had arrived, we saw that it was Jeff. He was talking with Tommy in a loud and excited voice. I hoped he hadn't come to cause trouble over Sarah. I understood older guys sometimes went so far as to fight over girlfriends.

It was nothing like that. Jeff said he and Sarah had been exploring the old mine about a half mile away. She had fallen through a rotten platform and down into a shaft. Jeff had no idea how badly she may have been hurt. She had not answered his calls down to her.

I began talking with Jeff while putting my hands behind my back. Tommy and Davy secretly touched my palms with theirs. We held a short mental conversation. What shall we do? Shall we go as the Taylors to help, or is this a job for the Sons of Inu? Davy gave us a solution. Tommy would go with Jeff to the mine, and Davy and I would go find the Sons. Then when Davido and Trippano arrived at the mine, Tommy could slip away, and don his garments that we would leave hidden nearby.

"I'll go with you, Jeff," Tommy suggested. "Davy and Tripp, you go see if you can find the Sons of Inu. We may

need their help.

Tommy and Jeff took off on a run down the hill and then due west. Davy and I knew where the old mine was. In no time at all, we had changed and were galloping at top speed toward the entrance to the mine. We left Tommy's pony and his outfit hidden about fifty yards away. Then we rode on up to where Jeff and Tom were standing.

Jeff looked at us. "Where's the big guy?" Jeff asked.

"He'll be along any minute, I said. "Tommy, you'd better get back to Gramps' place and let them know what's going on. We'll handle it here."

We dismounted and I shook Tommy's hand to mentally tell him where to find his pony and garments. He took off on a run.

"Now, Jeff," I began, "what has happened here?"

"I talked Sarah into exploring the mine with me. She didn't want to. She said it was too dangerous, but I convinced her to just go inside a few feet so we could at least see what it looked like. I really just wanted to make her think I was brave, I guess."

He took us inside and pointed to a hole in the ground about ten feet from the opening. It looked to be a boarded over shaft. The ancient boards had, long since, rotted thin, and when Sarah had stepped on them, down she went.

Using my night vision, I could see clear to the bottom of the shaft. There was no sign of Sarah, although there seemed to be three tunnels running off from the main shaft. It was a good thirty feet down. That had been quite a fall. All the timbers and boards in the mine appeared to be too rotten to use, so I went outside and quickly cut a small straight tree with my axe. I removed its branches, leaving a strong, five-inch thick log. We would lay it across the top of the opening, attach a rope, and let ourselves down, hand over hand. All of our physical training would certainly come in handy now.

"It's dark down there," Jeff said. "How will you know where you are?"

"Let us worry about that," Davy answered. "You just stay up here and wait for Tomorka to arrive. Tell him what we have done."

"It was my fault. I should be the one taking the risks,

not you guys," Jeff protested.

"Just do as we ask, Jeff. This is no time to play hero when you're not prepared."

That calmed him down. In another two minutes, Davy and I were both at the bottom of the shaft.

"Sarah!" I called down each of the three tunnels. There was no response. One of the tunnels was straight and only ran about forty feet. We turned our attention to the other two. Each tunnel made a turn after about sixty feet.

Instinctively Davy started down one and I took the other. It was wet and musty smelling. It must have been abandoned for a hundred years or more. There were large stones along the floor that had fallen from the walls and ceiling over the years. It made progress slow and demanded great care. Sections of the ceiling looked like they could collapse at any time. I worried a bit about Davy, but we each had our job to do.

Finally, I made it to the bend in the tunnel, only to find it ran into a dead end. I made my way back to where I had started. Tommy had arrived and was standing there, trying to decide what to do.

"This one is a dead end," I reported. "No sign of Sarah. Davy took this one. Let's catch up with him."

Jeff called from up above:

"Do you see her, yet?"

"Nothing yet," Tommy called back. "We are going to follow one of the tunnels now. You stay up there and wait for Gramps, you understand me?" he said in a deep, commanding voice that really surprised me. I think it may have even surprised Tommy!

"Davado!" I called. There was no response. We made our way to the bend and saw that it actually was a T. There was one tunnel going off to the right and another to the left. I took the right and Tommy the other.

I heard Tommy calling out for Davy. I called out too. Still there was no response. The debris on the floor was much worse in that tunnel than it had been in the other one, so my progress was quite slow. I doubted that Sarah would have come this way, but I needed to make sure, so I trudged on. Eventually, I came to another dead end. At least we knew

where she had to be, I thought to myself. I turned around and started back to catch up with Davy and Tommy.

It took nearly ten minutes to find them. The situation wasn't good. They had run into a dead end also - and Sarah was nowhere to be found!

"How is this possible?" Davy asked. "She couldn't have just disappeared."

It was puzzling to Tommy and me also. What had we missed? We each sat on a small boulder to rest and think things through.

"Sarah wouldn't have been able to see in here, like we can," Davy said, thinking out loud.

"So, she would have probably had to feel her way along the walls," Tommy added.

"Could we have missed some opening that she thought felt like the main tunnel?" I asked, hardly believing it was a real possibility.

"Not likely," Tommy said.

We sat silently and thought some more.

"Maybe we all saw something significant, but it didn't seem important, so we didn't pay attention to it," I suggested. "Let's share our memories on what we have observed and see if anything jumps out at us."

We did our sharing. It seemed we had all stopped to look at the same crack in the wall in this very tunnel. It was about half way in. Maybe that meant something. We worked our way back to that spot.

The crack, which at first glance seemed to just run straight up and down the wall, was actually a continuous crack, forming a rectangle the size of a very large door. The dust had fallen in to fill most of the crack, and so, with just our casual glances, we had missed seeing it.

Tommy felt all around it and removed the dust with his fingers. He pushed on it, but it wouldn't budge. Maybe we were on the wrong track, I thought to myself. Tommy continued to brush off the surface of the door with his hand.

"Look there!" Davy said. "It's our silver disk."

We all examined it more closely. It was up about three feet off the floor, and it indeed looked like an imprint of one of our disks. Davy reached out and pressed on it. The great

slab of gray stone slowly opened inward. It revealed another tunnel. This one was different. It was brown in color, rather than gray. It was less like a mining tunnel and more like the tunnel leading from the secret opening into our Hidden Valley. We all noted that immediately.

"Do you suppose this leads into our valley," Davy asked. It was the question Tommy and I were asking ourselves, as well.

"It's our only lead. Let's follow it and see," Tommy suggested.

Walking in this tunnel was easy. The floor was like a sidewalk having been made by placing hundreds of four-foot square slabs of smooth flat rocks edge to edge. We broke into a trot with Tommy bringing up the rear as if to protect us. Davy led the way.

We must have run for five minutes. If we had our directions straight, we were heading right back underneath the Hidden Valley. We soon came to a stone staircase. It spiraled up at least one hundred feet through a fifteen-foot-wide shaft.

It had the unmistakable pictographs of the Inu Indians on the walls. We charged up the stairs, this time with Tommy in the lead. At the top was square hole in the ceiling, but it was covered from the top by a large slab of rock. Tommy tried to move it. No luck. I added my strength to the endeavor, but still no luck.

Ever-observant Davy, standing back and taking it all in, had again noticed the image of a disk, painted on the front of the top step. He slid between Tommy's legs and pressed on the picture. The heavy slab of rock above us began to slide to the side, and light filtered down from above. It was almost blinding to us - our eyes having been accustomed to the dark as they were.

Tommy carefully poked his head up through the opening.

"Want to guess where we are, guys?" Tommy said, half laughing, half disgusted.

"In the Chamber of Knowledge?" I asked.

"How did you know?" Tommy asked.

"It just came to me. This is the big stone box we could

never open, isn't it?"

"Sure is. Do you suppose that Sarah got through the opening?"

"No, I can tell it hasn't been opened recently," Tommy said. "I guess we missed her somehow. Better head back as fast as we can and take another look. We can try to figure all of this out later on."

We were down the stairs on the fly and soon back through the tunnel to the big stone door. Once out into the mine, Davy touched the disk and the door closed, again looking ever so much like a regular part of the wall. We headed back toward the main shaft. About half way there, I thought I heard a faint cry.

"Stop here, guys," I said. "Be quiet. Hear anything?"

Sure enough, we all heard it. It might have been Sarah, but the sound was coming right out of the solid rock floor.

Davy called out, "Sarah, is that you?"

The voice grew silent. We looked at each other. It was an eerie and uneasy moment there in the dark of that musty, damp, deserted mine.

## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN: The death trap**

On hands and knees, we searched the floor of the tunnel just above the spot from where we thought we had heard the cries. We moved the fallen stones and pushed away the small boulders. The dust and dirt was an inch thick. Davy went back to the main shaft to find some boards we could use to draw across the floor and remove the accumulated dust and gavel. While there, he reported our progress up to Jeff.

On his way back, Davy kept one hand against the wall, as if trying to duplicate what Sarah might have done. He was within eight feet of us when a large, previously cleared, section of the floor swung down, and Davy slid below the floor.

Thinking incredibly fast, Davy shoved the boards he was carrying, between the trapdoor and the front edge of the opening. That kept it from being able to swing back up into a fully closed position.

"Davido!" Tommy called, kneeling over the open crack in the floor.

"Yeah. I'm ok," came his reply. "There's a tiny room down here. Looks a lot like a dungeon or something. The floor's wet. Sarah is here. Let me take a look at her."

Now that we had found her, our problem was how to pry open the trapdoor far enough to pull her out. Tommy jumped over the trapdoor, and back to where Davy had been just before it opened. He felt along the wall, examining it for a lever or pressure spot of some sort.

"Here it is," he called at last. It's a long narrow slab of

rock running top to bottom. It would be impossible to miss if you were feeling your way along. There was one on the opposite wall as well. It appeared a similar device had once lain across the width of the floor.

"This place was intentionally booby trapped," Tommy said. "Someone, probably the Inu, must have wanted to keep someone else, out of here."

"Sarah is unconscious," Davy called up to us. "She has a gash on her forehead. I have stopped the bleeding, but her pulse is weak and her breathing is very shallow. She appears to be quite pale, though that's hard to tell with this dark vision thing."

"Sure you're ok?" I asked, double-checking.

"Yeah. I'm just fine. It's quite cold down here and there is water on the floor. In fact ..."

"What?" Tommy called down.

"The water seems to be rising. We're sitting in it now and it has covered my lap. It's come up about six inches since I arrived down here. Must be some kind of death trap. Pretty effective piece of work, I'd say."

"Stop admiring the handiwork, and see if you can see anything that will help us get you two out of there," Tommy said, again in his new deep, impressive voice.

"It's on a counterweight that must be nearly the same weight as the trapdoor. It's balanced to hold the door in place. There is a latch that keeps the trapdoor fastened until it is tripped by the lever on the wall. I imagine just a little added weight to the trapdoor and it will swing right down. Just don't let that weight fall off, or it will slam shut again. By the way guys, the water is up to my belly button. I'm holding Sarah's head and shoulders up out of it."

Tommy positioned himself so he could push down on the trapdoor with his feet, while pushing with his arms against the front edge of the hole in the floor. Quickly, he forced the door down.

I jumped into the hole to help. By that time, I was thigh-deep in water. I took Sarah from Davy. I bent over slightly and he climbed up my back, stood on my shoulders and pulled himself out of the hole.

"The rope from your shoulder bag," Tommy suggested.

Davy tied one end around a boulder and dropped the other end down into the hole. He then climbed back down to help. We looped the end around Sarah's chest, just under her arms, and tied it tightly. We knew that Davy would never be able to lift her weight, so he took her from me and I climbed the rope.

Try as I would, I couldn't lift her out either. We needed Tommy's strength, but we also needed him right where he was.

"There is a big six by six-inch timber back at the main shaft," Davy called. "Maybe you could force it in place to hold the door down so Tommy can help you lift Sarah."

Once again, the big brain in the little body had come through for us. In order to jump across the hole to the other side, I knew I'd need to have a running start. That meant clearing a path. I worked fast.

"Guys," came Davy's calm, soprano voice once more. "It's up to my shoulders. I'd suggest you move your tails up there."

That was it. However much running room I had, was going to have to be enough. I reached up and touched my feather for good luck, took a huge breath, and ran as fast as I could. My leap cleared the hole by three feet. I was amazed. So was Tommy. Neither of us spoke of it.

I soon had the timber back at the trapdoor. It was too long, so I trimmed it with my axe. I carefully lowered it into place. Tommy cautiously let up on his pressure. The timber was holding. Tommy sprang up onto the floor and together we pulled Sarah to safety. We untied her and lowered the rope to Davy. He quickly scampered up the rope. Everyone was safe.

Tommy was holding Sarah in his arms, talking to her in a gentle, soothing tone of voice, which I'd never heard from him. It was very sweet and calm and - well, a lot like the tone Dad had used when he had talked to me about Mom. I figured it had to do with love.

I kicked the timber lose and the trapdoor flipped back up into position. We heard the latch click into place. Davy stepped on it as a test. It was quite secure again. We would have to decide what to do about it later on. Right now we

needed to get Sarah out of the mine and down to Doc Newberry in the Village.

Tommy carried her, while Davy and I ran ahead to fix a loop in our main rope. Tommy lovingly placed the rope around Sarah and asked Davy to stay down and hold her head until he and I could climb out and pull her up. Tommy was hand over hand up that rope in thirty seconds. It took me about twice that long to join him.

Within five more minutes, Sarah was safely above ground.

"Gramps still hasn't come," Jeff said, quite upset.

"I'll ride to get him," Tommy said. That would be best, since he was to have done that originally. Tommy and his pony practically flew across the hillside toward the cabin. He had become a great horseman.

Sarah was still unconscious, when Davy first spied Gramps' wagon coming over the hill. While Jeff was waving his hands to get Gramps' attention, Davy and I disappeared into the trees and watched from a distance. Jeff gently loaded Sarah into the back of the wagon, and he and Gramps drove off in the direction of Pleasantville. I had to wonder if Sarah knew she had two boys in love with her.

Davy and I headed back home. Near the entrance, we met Tommy, dressed in his Taylor boy cutoffs.

"I'm going to run on down to the village and see how she is. You guys get the ponies back inside and then follow as soon as you get changed."

He was well on his way down the hill as his final words were being shouted to us back over his shoulder. We were all concerned about Sarah, but it was obvious that Tommy felt something very special for her that Davy and I didn't.

\* \* \*

A good half-hour had passed before Davy and I got down to the Village. Doc's office was upstairs over the Post Office. We ran up the weathered outdoor stairway to the door. Inside were Jeff, Gramps and Tommy. Jeff and Tommy were pacing back and forth. Gramps was seated, tired out from the ride and stairs.

"We just heard. What do you know?" Davy asked immediately.

"Nothing, really," Jeff answered. "Doc hasn't come out of the other room since he chased us out."

"She hadn't regained consciousness yet the last time we saw her," Tommy added.

Then Jeff began to tell the story of the three Indian boys, and how they had risked their lives to save Sarah. He didn't think to ask how we had known how to contact them. I was glad, because that was something we had not yet planned for.

Jeff pulled out a silver disk and showed it to Tommy and then handed it to Gramps.

"This is what they gave me one night when they came to visit me," Jeff said, as if needing to prove they really existed. After all, the story about three Indian boys riding pinto ponies and charging in to the rescue, did seem pretty farfetched.

"You get hit on the head, too?" Gramps asked Jeff.

We had made a major mistake in using that silver disk as our calling card. Gramps was sure to make the connection. Gramps handed the disk to me.

"An interesting piece of work, wouldn't you say, Tripp?" he said.

"Yes Sir," I answered, looking him squarely in the eyes. "I'd say very interesting indeed."

"Sometime I'll have to tell you four boys the ancient legend about such a disk," Gramps said. "It came from a tribe that inhabited these parts several hundred years ago. Perhaps there is some connection."

Davy swears that Gramps winked at him as he finished speaking. At any rate, Gramps never asked anything more about the disk.

Doc came into the room, cleaning his gold, wire-frame glasses with his handkerchief.

"She'll be good as new after a little rest," was his announcement.

"She'd like to see Gramps," he said. "Then I think she should rest here til morning. You boys can come back then and help Gramps take her home."

That was Doc's polite way of telling us to leave.

We left the office and sat on the lower steps, waiting for

Gramps. Jeff offered to ride back to the cabin with Gramps. We thought that was a nice gesture and assumed he wanted to explain to Gramps and Maude about why he and Sarah had been at the mine in the first place.

Tommy gave Jeff a thumbs-up. Davy and I smiled and nodded. Soon, Jeff and Gramps drove off.

The Sons of Inu felt wonderful inside, but we were worn to a frazzle. We took our time getting back up the hill to our valley. We spent those next two hours just quietly bobbing around in the swimming hole. It was well after midnight when we entered the cave. We were all hungry, and ate our fill of squirrel stew, stick bread, and apples, before hitting the hay.

Our sharing had been very special that night. We had each been so proud of how well our brothers had performed. Tommy and I both had super thoughts about Davy. He beamed from ear-to-ear when he received them. So, did we. Little Davy was turning out to be quite a man.

## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN: The legend of the Sons of Inu**

Sarah had been home three days and had recovered very nicely. The cut on her forehead would heal and probably not even leave a scar. Gramps and Maude had invited Jeff and us over for a picnic. I figured it would be more than a little interesting having Jeff, Tommy, and Sarah all there at once. I could have enjoyed the humor in the whole thing a lot more if I hadn't realized how deeply my brother felt for Sarah.

The late day sun had begun to swirl its special reds, oranges and indigos across the western sky. We were roasting marshmallow over the now glowing embers of the once blazing fire. Jeff had never roasted marshmallows before. He was a like a little kid about it all. I sincerely doubted if he had ever been on a picnic, either, but he hadn't admitted to that. He really seemed happy. None of us had seen him that way before.

Gramps cleared his throat and said, "Well, I told you I would tell you the story of the silver disk. More properly, it is known as, The Legend of the Sons of Inu. I think this would be a good time."

"Great!" Jeff said, assuming a crossed-legged position on the ground closest to Gramps' feet. "Is it true, do you think - this legend?"

"That will be for you to judge," was Gramps' answer.

We all scooted closer. At that point Tommy was sitting close - very close - to Sarah. They appeared to be perfectly comfortable that way, even though it was a hot and muggy night.

Gramps began: "Several hundred years ago, perhaps as many as four, there lived in these hills, an American Indian tribe known as the Inu. It was named after their chief and man-god. They were a peaceful, happy, group of people who preferred to live in caves rather than the traditional teepees of other tribes. They grew crops and cared for livestock. It is said they had the richest silver mine on the entire continent, though that has never been confirmed. Among these people there was no sickness, no anger, no jealousy or unhappiness. It was as ideal a culture as had ever been created.

"As a young man, Inu had been offered immortality by the chief god of the heavens. In return for that, Inu would give up being able to father children. Without giving that trade-off sufficient thought, he accepted the chief god's offer.

"Even though Inu had created such a good life for his people, later in life he felt unfulfilled. He had no children to teach or to hold or to enjoy or to love. It was his private sadness. Added to this, foreign men came and began mistreating his people. They took their silver and their animals and forced the Inu to retreat further and further into the hills.

"Inu was bothered because his people had begun to learn of sadness and jealousy and the other unpleasant aspects of life, all too common among these foreigners. Using his great powers, he created a paradise, which he set deep inside an extraordinary hidden valley. He moved his people there, and they again became as they had once had been - a joyous, contented, self-sufficient people.

"Still, Inu had no children. Years came and went. His friends passed away. Inu felt quite alone, even though new generations were being born and raised around him. He decided that, perhaps, if he offered the gift of eternal life to any of his tribe who wanted it, he could begin keeping his new friends with him forever.

"Most of the members of his tribe said no to his offer, preferring to grow old and take their reward, as had been promised, in the happy hunting grounds in the sky. This too, made Inu sad and eventually, angry. In a single moment of deep sadness and rage, he put a curse on the tribe so there would be no more children born to those who would not accept his gift of immortality.

"The tribe became smaller and smaller, and at last it was only Inu who was left. He felt so bad for what he had done to his beloved people, that he exiled himself to live his life as a spirit, inside a solid rock bluff. Legend says it is that very bluff you see right up there on the eastern ridge of that range of hills.

"His last pronouncement was that after his own banishment had lasted for two hundred years, a fine young boy would be called into the Hidden Valley of Inu and would be transformed into the three Sons of Inu. Like Inu himself, the three boys would have immortality.

"They were to be charged with the mission of going out into the very World that Inu had forced his people to abandon, and to set, for the people who would then be living, the finest possible examples of the Inu beliefs. Through their deeds, these boys would demonstrate to the World the undeniable virtues of love, peace and nurture. Through these three lads, Inu hoped to redeem himself for the terrible plight he had wished upon his own people.

"And," Gramps said in summary, "those two hundred years have just now passed."

We all sat spellbound - partly by the story itself, and partly by the totally believable way in which Gramps had related it to us. Jeff accepted as fact that the Sons of Inu had been created, and that they now roamed the hills, fulfilling Inu's promise. The three of us also agreed, of course.

It seemed to me that Gramps knew a lot more than he had included in the story. Perhaps he would share that with us another time.

"By the way, you guys," Jeff said, "how do you know how to contact these Sons of Inu?"

We were finally ready for his question. Tommy answered for us.

"Our Dad is an archaeologist, as you know. He discovered some historic pictographs that revealed a lot about Inu and his tribe, including his Sons. From studying the material, we learned the method for calling them forth, but we are sworn to secrecy in the matter. The Sons desire their privacy. I'm sure you can understand that."

That story, which was really not a lie, seemed to satisfy

Jeff and Sarah. This time it was I who saw Gramps wink, as Tommy had been speaking. What did he know?

During the story, it had grown dark. The moon was but a tiny slip in the eastern sky, doing very little to brighten the hillside. Jeff seemed uneasy at the prospect of having to return alone to the village through the discomfoting darkness. I wondered, if at fifteen, most boys still became afraid, sometimes.

"Jeff," I said, "why don't Davy and I walk you down to the village. I imagine you haven't ever had to find your way from here in the dark. We can show you how to get there, then next time you'll know."

I think he realized what we were really doing, but he eagerly jumped at the offer. We thanked Maude for the delicious picnic and Gramps for the outstanding story. Jeff was so glad to have us walk him home that he didn't even seem to be bothered that Tommy was getting to stay behind with Sarah.

When we reached the edge of the village, Jeff thanked us. Davy said we'd be glad to walk him on across town to his place. Acting somewhat embarrassed about the whole deal, Jeff said he could make it. Davy and I turned and started back. We heard Jeff take off on a dead run, probably scared to death, but unwilling to admit it to us - or maybe even to himself.

On the way up the path, Davy and I talked about how great it was not to have to be scared of things anymore. Since we couldn't be hurt, the whole idea of being scared had mostly evaporated. It was too bad so many kids still had to be frightened about so many terrible things. Maybe we could find a way to help put a stop to that. We were sure going to try.

As we approached Gramps' place, we saw Tommy and Sarah. We had never really seen them kissing before, except in the pictures Tommy would send us during our mind sharing. That night we just stood at a distance and watched. He was so tender and gentle with her. We couldn't hear what he was saying in between kisses, but Sarah obviously thought it was wonderful.

After a few minutes, Davy and I figured Tommy had had his kissing ration for the night, so we began making noise

to alert him we were on our way. They stopped kissing and even seemed happy to see us.

"Let me walk Sarah back to the cabin, then I'll be right along," Tommy said.

They went hand in hand up the path, talking low as they went. He gave her a quick peck on the lips as he said good night. He turned and came after us on a trot. For some reason, kissing always seemed to give Tommy lots of energy. Davy and I didn't understand that. He ran circles around us all the way home. Davy and I had to giggle to ourselves - about just what we weren't even certain. Being in love, must be grand!

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## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN: Always on alert**

Every night the Sons of Inu had gone down to the Village and performed a service of some kind. We had weeded a few more gardens for older residents, painted the steeple on the church, fixed the leaky roof on the Town Hall, and planted flowers up and down the sidewalks of Main Street.

Each time, we continued to leave a signed, silver disk. Gramps still hadn't said anything about them. We had to wonder why, but thought it best not to ask him. Summer was drawing to an end and Sarah had left for home. Tommy was lonely for her. He wrote her several times a week. Sometimes Davy or I included a note in the envelope, after all, we liked her too, just in a different way, I guessed.

It was seven o'clock. We had just finished supper and had cleaned up the dishes. Tommy was outside practicing with his rope. He had decided being good with a lasso would be a skill one of us should develop. I was the archer. He would be the roper. Davy was searching for a new skill he could learn.

Suddenly we all stopped what we were doing as if we had heard a voice. It wasn't a real voice but one coming from inside our heads. Tommy rushed inside.

"There has been an automobile accident at the cliff by the bend in the river. I don't know how I know, but I do," Tommy said, already out of his cutoffs and on his way to the garments.

Davy and I followed, and in another two minutes, we

were running down the hill, whistling for the ponies. In fewer than ten minutes we were at the cliff and off our ponies, looking over the edge and down at the raging water some thirty feet below. The back of a car was floating out of the water about half way out into the river. The current was very strong as it whipped its way around the bend in the narrow gorge.

Tommy quickly secured one end of a rope to a nearby tree and over the side of the cliff he went. Davy went next and I followed. The river had swollen from two days of rains up north and was a wild torrent. The car swayed back and forth in the current as if at any minute, it might be swept away. Without a word, Davy stripped to his breech clout, tied the end of the rope around his waist and dove into the river, heading for the car. Tommy and I understood what he had in mind and we soon followed.

We approached from the upstream side. Davy was already securing the rope to the rear bumper when Tom and I arrived. He had pulled it tight so the car couldn't be washed away. Through the back window, we saw four people. The man and the woman in the front seat appeared to be unconscious. A baby and a little boy in the back seat were both screaming. The boy had undone his seat belt and was hitting at the windows, trying to get out.

"I'm afraid if we open the door, the car will fill with water and sink," I said.

"You're probably right," Tommy agreed.

"Why don't you two use your rays and cut a hole in the metal top," Davy suggested.

We positioned ourselves so we could use the bright moonlight. In no time at all we had a thirty-inch wide circle cut and removed. I slipped into the car and handed out the baby - car seat and all. Tommy handed the youngster to Davy who swam with her to the shore.

The little boy was next. He told me he was five. I told him we needed him to be very brave and do just as I told him. He wiped his tears on his sleeve and nodded. His little chin quivered as I lifted him out and Tommy pulled him free. Again, Davy took him from Tommy. The moment Davy touched him, the boy calmed down and relaxed. Davy was

touching his mind as well. Soon the boy had been delivered to the shore and given the important task of looking after his baby sister.

The mother was small, and I was able to lift her. I had released the back of the seat to lay it down and make working room. Tommy reached down inside to help me, and soon she was out and in Davy's arms, also being moved to safety.

The car began to bob and shift. The current was crashing against it. A huge log from upstream rammed into it and broke the side window. Water rushed inside. The weight of all that water broke the rope and the car began to drift down stream. I managed to hold the man's still unconscious head above the water. Tommy had been thrown off the car as it twisted and bobbed in the swirling current.

I felt completely helpless. The car spun around and around in the angry water. It banged against other tree trunks and debris floating in the river. Very soon the car was completely filled with water. I floated the man toward the hole in the roof and soon both our heads were outside where we could again take an easy breath. From the rear, I gripped the man around his chest. Pushing against the roof with my feet, I shoved us clear of the car, just as it sank out of sight into the churning, black, murky water.

I was doing my best to keep his head above water, but the raging waves kept splashing across his face. He coughed and sputtered and began struggling. He had regained consciousness at the worst possible moment. He was strong and scared, and he fought against me. I tried to talk to him, but in those circumstances, talk was useless. He turned and grabbed at my head. I submerged myself and got away, coming up behind him. I grabbed him again from the rear. We were rapidly being carried further and further downstream.

Suddenly he relaxed in my grasp. I supposed he had fainted again. That would make my job considerably easier. I did my best to move us toward shore. By then, Tommy had caught up, running along beside the river. He was twirling his lasso and I saw it shoot out toward us. It was a perfect shot. The loop settled around us and Tommy pulled it tight. Between the two of us, we soon had the man safely on the bank.

We looked him over and found no broken limbs. Tommy picked him up and carried him back upstream to the rest of his family.

"Davy is hiding our ponies and equipment and then riding for help," Tommy told me. "The village of Trent, can't be more than a mile from here. Help should be arriving at any minute."

By the time we arrived, the mother had come to, and was holding her children close. Tommy laid the man down so his head was in his wife's lap.

"He seems to have had a bad blow to the head, Ma'am," I explained. "Otherwise, he and the kids seem to be unharmed. How are you doing?"

"I feel dizzy but just glad to be alive. I can't thank you boys enough."

She broke into tears and sobbed. The kids joined in, and Tommy and I did our best to console them. With the sound of cars and people arriving on the road above, I slipped a silver disk to the boy and told him to keep it to remember us by. We were well out of sight by the time the villagers had arrived.

Tommy and I made our way back to the ponies, where Davy, dressed as a Taylor, was waiting. He had gathered our garments together and had them lashed into a bundle. We were soon on our way back to the Hidden Valley. As usual, we felt great, though completely worn out. We were muddy from head to toe.

The gentle, soothing stream from the waterfall helped us relax as we wound down from our exciting adventure. Davy continued to chatter away about it all, long after Tommy and I were ready to let it rest, but that was how I had been as a ten-year-old - how Davy was then - and that was fine. Tom and I smiled and just listened as he joyously babbled on and on. He still had a sense of excitement about things that I had lost somewhere along the way. It was good to relive it once in a while through that really special little brother of mine.

At about the same instant that Davy stopped talking that night, he fell sound asleep. Small bodies wear out quickly after such a strenuous time. Tommy carried him over to his bed and tucked him in, complete with his usual kiss on the

forehead. I joined them and I held Davy's hand for him as we did our sharing.

Davy smiled through his sleep as we let him know what an excellent job he had done. Tommy and I smiled at each other, knowing that we had performed well, also. We were so proud to be the Sons of Inu.

The two of us talked for a while, wondering about how we had received the call for help. We wondered if it had come from the victims directly or if Inu had a way of knowing, and had then called us. Although Davy and I had heard it too, it appeared that Tommy had the most talent in receiving that kind of messages. We decided it was probably tied in some way to his hands-on mind reading skill. However, it had come to us, we were pleased to know about one more new and remarkable skill that came with being the Sons of Inu.

We slept soundly and contentedly. Like Inu had told us, life should be about helping and giving, and not about taking. The wonderful warm feeling we each possessed deep inside us certainly seemed to bear that out. It was a good life we were building together - we three Sons of Inu!

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## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:**

### **The secret's out**

Jeff seemed to be working out well as he helped at Gramps' place. Both Gramps and Maude really liked him. As the Taylor boys, we had come to like him also. We spent time together when we could. Sometimes we played catch or football or went for a swim at the pond in the grove. Jeff was turning out to be a nice kid. He seemed to be amazed at that, himself.

As the Sons of Inu, we had arrived at Jeff's house about eight in the morning. His mom was at work and Jeff was up at Gramps' cabin digging the potatoes. We knew we had most of the day to work. The house was on the edge of town and there was a stand of pine trees between it and the village. We wouldn't be seen as we worked. It was a scorching hot day – strictly, breech clout weather.

Davy replaced rotted siding and broken porch boards. Tommy rebuilt the crumbling chimney to the fireplace. I repaired and straightened the front screen door so it would close. Then I worked on the roof, removing the broken wooden shingles and fastening new ones into place.

By noon, the house was ready to be painted. We ate a quick lunch that I had brought along and were soon back at work. With three brushes flying over the surface, the little place was all spruced up by three o'clock. We stood back and admired our work. Replacing the badly weathered shack, of earlier in the morning, now stood a pretty nice looking little house - white with blue trim. We packed up our gear. Davy left a disk on the front door. We rode off to a pine grove a few

hundred yards away where we could leave the ponies and change into our Taylor boys' clothes.

By three thirty, we were at the Post office. The Postmistress always knew all the town's gossip, and was more than willing to pass it on.

"Those nice little Indian boys have been at it again," she reported, as she sorted through the mail trying to locate ours. "They fixed up old Mr. Mackie's wood shed, you know."

"Is that right?" I said, trying for a surprised tone in my voice.

"Yes! And last week they dug Mrs. Maple's potatoes for her, too, they did. I don't know where they came from, but we're sure grateful they stopped by Pleasantville. Have you heard about the new one who calls himself, The Friend of the Sons of Inu?"

We looked at each other, startled and confused by what we had just heard.

"Why, no, we haven't heard about him," I said. "What can you tell us?"

"Well, it seems this friend has started doing things around town, also. He leaves a wooden disk the same size as that silver one that the Sons leave. He chopped and stacked the wood for the widow Wainwright. He cleaned out the gutters at the church. He even washed the store windows all up and down Main Street. Now what do you think of that?"

"Pretty nice!" I said.

We thanked her for the mail and the news and hurried outside to discuss this newest development.

"What do you know!" Davy said, with his usual enthusiasm. "It's catching!"

"That really is great," I added. "Who do you suppose?"

"We probably have no right to know," Tommy said. "If he, or she, wanted folks to know, he or she wouldn't do it in secret, right."

Tommy was correct. Deep down inside, though, I still really wanted to know.

We bought some supplies at the General Store and chatted with Jeff's mother for a while. She seemed happier than we'd ever seen her. She thanked us for being so friendly toward Jeff. It seems we must have been the very first friends

he had ever had. It was quite embarrassing the way she went on about it. We paid for our supplies and left.

Jeff was just getting back to town. We met him right outside the store.

"Hey, wait up, guys," he said, smiling broadly. "I just got paid and I need to give it to Mom before I'm tempted to blow it. I'll be right out."

Maybe we had worked a miracle of some kind, we thought. In another minute, he reappeared, waving three, one dollar, bills. Mom said I should take three bucks for myself. You know what I'd really like to do with it?"

"What?" Our always inquisitive young Davy asked, moving a step closer.

"I'd like to buy us all a cold drink over at the cafe."

Davy and I looked up at Tommy who gave the tiniest nod. We agreed. If Jeff really wanted to do something that generous, we'd accept it.

"That sounds great," Tommy said. "It's a scorcher today for this late in August."

We had our drink and talked together for over an hour. Jeff had found another girl friend - she was seventeen and he thought that was somehow stupendous. At that news, Tommy began smiling and continued to smile for hours to come. At a little before five, Jeff said he had to leave. He wanted to walk his Mom home. This was grocery shopping day, and he didn't want her to have to carry them in the heat. A bit out of character, Tommy shook Jeff's hand as he got up to leave.

We hurried on our way and were soon back at the grove where we had left the ponies. Just in case anyone might see us, we slipped into our breech clouts and became the Sons.

"I might as well tell you now," Tommy said, as we mounted up and started toward home.

"Tell us what?" Davy asked.

"I know who the Friend of the Sons is."

"It's Jeff, isn't it?" I said. "So that's why you shook his hand?"

"Sure is," Tommy replied. "Isn't that about the best payment we could have ever received!"

Davy and I agreed. Good old Jeff! He'd really turned

his life around. We were all so proud of him.

As we topped a hill, we unexpectedly met Gramps in his wagon. His two mules were sauntering along at a very easy pace. He had spotted us so we couldn't very well ignore him. It was the first time we had met him as the Sons of Inu. We galloped up beside him.

"Good afternoon, Sir," Tommy said. "It's a pretty hot afternoon to be out here in the full sun, isn't it?"

"The heat never bothers me. It gets to Jessie and Marion more than it does me."

Jessie and Marion were his mules and we knew that as the Taylors but not as the Sons. Davy saved us.

"And where are Jessie and Marion, today, Sir?" he asked, looking around as if bewildered.

Gramps smiled and shook his head.

"You boys are really good, you know. You and I have to talk one of these days soon. There are some things about Maude and me you need to know, and I need to tell you some things I know about you."

Davy continued playing dumb. "Maude?" he asked.

Gramps leaned over close to Davy, and, barely above a whisper, said, "Yes, Maude. You know, the lady who makes those great doughnuts and fixes wonderful picnics."

He winked so all of us could see. There was no disputing it that time. None of us knew what to say. Gramps obviously knew our secret. Of course, he couldn't prove it. I suppose we looked alarmed because his next comment was:

"No need to be worried about a single thing, boys. I tell you what. Why don't you find the Taylor boys and tell them to drop over to my place for supper tomorrow night. Seven o'clock sharp! Will you do that for me?"

"Sure," Davy answered. "We're going by their camp anyway."

"I'd invite you boys, too, but I assume you will be busy."

"Yes, Sir. Busy is exactly what we will be, Sir!" I stammered, sounding like some kind of dope. You'd think I'd learn to let silver-tongued Davy do the talking for us!

Gramps loosened the reins and gave them a gentle flick. Jessie and Marion once again began plodding along the path toward the cabin. We were confused and worried and a

bit mystified by that conversation. We continued on our way. There was a lot to think about before that next evening. We were due a nice long swim and we took it!

\* \* \*

After supper, there was some research I wanted to do in the Chamber of Knowledge. Tommy worked outside with his rope and Davy was re-reading Treasure Island - our all-time favorite adventure book. There was something I had run across somewhere on one of the story pillars I needed to locate. In my mind, I couldn't place it for sure. It seemed very important. I walked up and down the rows of huge stones, hoping something would catch my attention.

Then, there it was! That face. I knew I had seen it somewhere else. I re-read the pictographs on the pillar. It seemed that at the time Inu offered immortality to his tribe, there were several who actually did take him up on it. Gramps had left out that part of the legend. The story on the pillar stopped, of course, at the time Inu banished himself into the spirit world, so I couldn't find out what had happened to those four particular tribesmen.

Satisfied with what I had learned, I rejoined my brothers. I practiced with my bow until dark. My brothers had a surprise waiting for them during our sharing. I went inside and baked a batch of raspberry stick bread treats. We were all extra hungry that night.

\* \* \*

As unusual as it sounds, Tommy was already up and standing in the waterfall when I woke up. It wasn't that I was late arising - Tommy was early!

"Hey, what gives big brother?" I asked, joining him in the cool, invigorating stream of water.

"Couldn't sleep. I tossed all night."

"Sarah," I asked, an impish grin on my face?

"No, well not mostly, anyway," Tommy said, smiling. "That picture you found won't let me alone."

"Yeah. I know," I said.

We were silent and just looked out over our precious valley. The ponies were again playing their usual game of morning chase. The goats had come close to the cave so they could soon be milked. The stream flowed along ever so

peacefully. The trees swayed a bit in the morning breeze. The taller grass looked like green waves as the breeze parted its blades into rippling furrows.

"It is a paradise here, you know!" Tommy said after a while. "I'd sure hate to lose it."

"Lose it?" I said as a question. "What do you mean, lose it?"

"Oh, I was just thinking maybe we are getting to be closer friends with folks around here than we should. Someday they may snoop themselves right into our valley.

"You mean like Jeff, for one?" I asked.

"Yeah, and others." Tommy was silent again.

I didn't press him. There was more silence.

"Ever want to jump off from up here and down into the pool below?" Tommy asked me after a bit.

"I've thought about it. It's a good forty feet and the pool isn't all that deep. You'd probably kill yourself," I said.

"But we can't die, little brother. I was wondering what would happen, like if I dived off head first and bashed in my head and broke my neck. Somehow it would just heal up like our cuts and bruises do, right?"

"I suppose so. We haven't ever had a really bad casualty, so I guess that hasn't been tested."

We thought some more. Davy joined us, stretching and yawning, like he always did for the first few minutes after he awoke each morning. I turned toward him to say hi. Then I heard it. It was the wildest scream I'd ever heard: "G u r o n a m o-o-o-o-o!" Tommy had jumped feet first off the ledge and into the pond below.

Davy was more startled than I, since he hadn't been in on the previous discussion.

"The idiot!" I said out loud.

"Hey, he'll be fine. Remember, we can't get hurt," Davy said, trying to calm me down.

I leaned far over the ledge to get a look below. I couldn't see Tommy anywhere in the pool. "Oh no!" I said out loud. "The dunce even missed the pool!"

Davy laid down on his stomach and stretched out as far as he dared. About that time we saw Tommy's head bob up out of the pond, soon followed by a waving thumbs up and an

ear busting, "Yahoo!!" He was safe and sound just like he was supposed to be, although it was still hard for me to believe.

"Nice going!" Davy called down to Tommy. "Here I come!"

Before I could grab onto one of his flailing legs, over the edge he slid, turning it into a beautiful swan dive, and hitting the water right next to Tommy. Soon his smiling face reappeared, also. Now, of course, it was supposed to be my turn. They looked up expectantly. I wasn't ready to try it yet, so I didn't. My brothers didn't coax. It was my decision. It was ok.

My mind told me I would be fine. My imagination told me I'd end up in fifteen different pieces. I guessed I was still scared. I had really thought I was over that. At any rate, I was eager to get down to the pool and hear about my brothers' experiences. I scrambled down the hill to be with them.

In my hurry, I stumbled and fell - rolling and thumping against the rocks, head over heels and right into the pool. I had taken enough of a beating to kill ten men. I watched my cuts and bruises heal before my very eyes. In sixty seconds I was as good as new. Strangest of all, the beating my body and taken on the way down hadn't hurt me one bit, even as it was occurring.

"Convinced now, big/little brother," they said in unison.

I know I must have grinned, a very sheepish grin.

"Guess so!" I had to admit.

We stayed in the little pool and let the waterfall pour over us for quite some time. We talked about the upcoming major event of the day - heck, of the century - supper at Gramps' place.

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## **CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: The mystery revealed**

We didn't know whether to run and get it over with, or to hang back put it off. We were sure that Gramps knew the Taylor boys and the Sons of Inu were the same three lads. What was he going to do with that knowledge?

Presently, the cabin came into view on the hillside below us. Light from the kerosene lights shone as yellow beacons from its windows. A thin wisp of white smoke curled from the large stone chimney at the far end of the house. The evening air was more quickly chilled, now that September had arrived. We looked forward to the warmth of the fireplace inside.

Gramps and Maude had kept to a simple life. They could have had electricity and a phone and television and a vehicle. They chose not to. They could have had a fine new home built with all the conveniences of the time. They were happy with what they had.

Considering all the time we had spent at their home, we had actually learned very little about them. Maude was good at getting us to do the talking - no major task when Davy was around. Mostly we talked about ideas, and books and World affairs. Gramps was a history buff, like Tommy, so they got on famously. Maude enjoyed showing me how to cook camp meals and other unheard of, though delicious, dishes, using the strange native vegetables and herbs that grew in that area.

I had the idea that the conversation that evening would be quite different from usual. We arrived at the porch.

Gramps had seen us coming. Like usual, he was at the door to greet us with a warm smile and hugs all around. Maude was finishing things at the kitchen stove. I went to offer her my help while Tommy and Davy followed Gramps and took seats near the fireplace.

Presently, dinner was served. It was a wonderful meal, as usual. The menu was different from anything we had eaten before. She served it in primitive looking clay dishes. We had never actually seen them before, but knew of them from the Inu pictographs. The tablecloth was different from usual, also. It was woven of thick strands of goat hair, died brilliant colors. As the meal progressed it became obvious that we were having the Inu Love Feast, about which we had studied in the Chamber of Knowledge.

Gramps spoke: "Ima cona una Inu verby usha. That means, 'May the love and protection of Inu abide in you throughout eternity'," he said.

When we didn't look at all surprised, he smiled.

"You lads seem to be ahead of me."

Davy couldn't contain himself any longer.

"We saw your picture on a pillar of knowledge. We figure you and Maude are the older couple who accepted Inu's offer of immortality."

Gramps looked lovingly over at Maude. He reached out and gently placed his hand on hers.

"And here we thought we were the ones who knew the big secret," he said, still smiling. "I am Gramsu, and this is my wife of two hundred and forty-six wonder filled years, Madsee. We can't begin to tell you of the joy we felt that first day when you asked to sell the silver disk to us. We knew at that moment the promise of Inu had been fulfilled. The Sons of Inu had arrived. Soon the World was to begin being a better place."

"I wept for a week," Maude said. "In fact, every time I see you, I shed a tear or two of greatest happiness. Yesterday when Gramps was telling me that he had actually seen you as the Sons of Inu, even he had tears on his cheek. We have waited here for you to come for so long."

There was a brief silence. Somewhat humorously, we all looked at Davy as if to say, 'What? You're not talking?'

Then Tommy broke the hush that had swept over us.

"The honor in all of this is ours. To meet and know and be friends with genuine Inu people is more than we could have ever hoped for."

Davy had, by then, recovered his voice: "Yeah. I mean you are real, and we, well we are imitations I guess you'd say."

"Oh no!" Gramps said, almost sternly. "You are the Sons of Inu, created by him and from him. You are who you used to be and yet much, much more. You each contain his blood, his flesh, his powers, and his wondrous mind. Even you, Tripp," he said looking directly into my eyes, "are no more merely who you once were. Inu is in you, a part of you, body and soul."

We knew all of that, but actually hearing it for the first time, gave us a rush that was unbelievably remarkable. We looked at each other and couldn't contain our Taylor grins.

"You were the keepers of the Chamber of Knowledge, is that correct?" I asked.

"Yes, that was our greatest honor, Tripp. Knowledge is the cornerstone of the Inu way of life. We believe that given access to the proper information, all problems can be handled, all ills can be cured, and all delights can be experienced."

At that point Davy's mind took a left turn: "Do we have to eat?" he asked, almost humorously.

"What? You mean dinner, this evening?" Maude asked.

"Oh no. I wouldn't miss this. It is fantastic! I mean in order to keep on living forever, do we have to eat?"

Gramps smiled and responded: "If you stopped eating, you would not die, but at some point, your body would go into a state much like hibernation. It would awaken again, once nourishment was provided."

"As long as I already took us off the subject," Davy said, grinning, "how can Sarah be your granddaughter?"

This time it was Maude who spoke:

"Sarah is our great great-grandchild - well, many, many times great grandchild. We had a son before the gift was received. He chose not to accept immortality, and moved out into the foreigner's world."

"So, she knows about you two, then," Davy continued.

"Yes. The eldest child in each generation is given the secret. Sarah is the eldest."

"Does she know about us?" Tommy asked, suddenly very interested.

"No," Maude answered. "It is only our own secret that we share."

There was more silence. Finally, Gramps spoke:

"This is a doubly special occasion, tonight, boys. Not only is it our Inu Love Feast with you three wonderful lads, but it is also Maude's birthday."

Davy began to speak and Tommy clapped a hand over his mouth.

"That's all right. Let him ask my age. I'm not ashamed to say that today I am two hundred and sixty years old."

I could see Tommy doing some quick figuring in his head.

"Fourteen," I said to him. "They were fourteen when they were married."

"That's right." Gramps said, again patting his Maude's hand. "That was the age to marry in our Tribe."

Tommy smiled that special smile he only wore when thinking about girls. We all noticed it at once, and broke into chuckles, which soon became full blown belly laughs.

"What did I miss?" Tommy asked. "What's so funny?"

"I'll explain later," I said, as I finally got control of myself.

After the laughter died down, and two portions of dessert had been enjoyed, Tommy spoke:

"Well, we weren't really prepared for Maude's birthday, but we do have something we think she'll really like. It will take us fifteen or twenty minutes to go get it for her."

Davy and I gave Tommy a totally puzzled look. What was he thinking about? He reached out and we touched palms. The lights went on in our heads. It would be the most fantastic present she had ever received!

"I'll help Maude clean up here, then, if you boys have things to do," Gramps said.

We scooted out the door and took off on a fast trot toward home. Tommy picked up Davy and carried him on his

shoulders the final half mile. Then, in another ten minutes we were back at the cabin. We stood about ten yards from the porch. The flaming golds and reds of the sunset were at our back. The lighting was perfect for our purpose.

Tommy called to Maude. She opened the door and, upon seeing us there, put her apron to her face, catching her tears of joy. There we stood, arms folded, the Sons of Inu, complete from our beautiful feathers to our buckskin boots. Tommy was in the middle. I was on his left and Davy to his right. She came right out to where we were and, in turn, gave us each a kiss and a long and loving hug. It made me remember Mom's hugs from when I had been a little boy.

We went back inside and talked late into the night. At last we had found our family. We weren't going to be alone into eternity after all. If Dad could have only known, he would have been so happy for us. Perhaps, through all of his discoveries, he had known. I wanted to believe that he had. Life was going to be good!

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## **Epilogue: The morning after**

I hadn't been able to shut off my mind and get to sleep the night before. I probably hadn't fallen asleep until after four in the morning. So, when I first opened my eyes that next day, I wasn't really surprised to see that the sun was nearly straight over head. It felt like I had been asleep forever. I yawned and stretched out to my full length. I just lay there on my back for a few more moments watching the tumbling water play with the light.

I turned my head to look into the center of the room. Tommy and Davy weren't there. In fact, their beds weren't even there. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. Looking to the back of the cave, I saw there were no buckskin garments hanging on the line. There was no light coming in through a window in the rear of the cave. It was dark and I was all alone.

Could my wonderful new life have really just been a dream? It must have been. I lay back down on my back and tears welled up in my eyes and trickled down my cheeks and into my pillow. Though still only half awake, I felt that this was the saddest moment in my entire life.

Then, I heard something I couldn't immediately identify. It was faint and muffled. It sounded like whispered giggling outside the cave. I sat up again and cocked my head to listen. I dried my face with the backs of my hands. What had been the darkest moment I'd ever known, was soon to become the brightest.

"Happy birthday to us! Happy birthday to us! Happy birthday Sons of Inu! Happy birthday to us!"

What in blazes, I thought to myself! The song was way off key, way too loud and grating, and made the hair stand up on the back of my neck, yet it was the most beautiful song I had ever heard. Around the corner from the path, birthday cake in hand, came a smiling Tommy and Davy - well, Tokoeka and Davada, actually. At the top of their well-meaning lungs, they were singing a second awful chorus of the happy birthday song.

They broke into hysterical laughter and sat down in front of me.

"Happy one year birthday, brother Trippano," Tommy said.

"Even though it's a little late, we thought it deserved a celebration," Davy chimed in.

"You guys had me scared out of my wits. Why did you move all the stuff out?"

"Oh, that. We thought the place needed a good cleaning up before Gramps and Maude arrive for our party," Tommy explained.

"Our party?" I said in surprise.

"Yeah. We're throwing ourselves a birthday party, and decided to make it a surprise for you, seeing you are the original, so to speak."

"Why is it so dark in here?" I asked, still trying to clear the cobwebs away.

"We put a blanket over the window so when Gramps and Maude first come in they won't be able to see anything. Then we will whip off the blanket, flood the place with light, and they can see how beautiful it is again," Tommy went on.

"Maude baked the cake," Davy added. "Tommy went down to get it earlier this morning. We've been waiting and waiting for you to wake up!"

"You guys are something else, you know that?" I said. "For a few moments, there, I thought ..."

"Hey, Tripp," Tommy broke in, sitting beside me with his arm around my shoulders. "We didn't mean to alarm you. I guess we just didn't think ahead to how it would seem when you woke up with everything gone. We're really sorry about that. Believe me, we're never, ever going to leave you, brother."

"All's well that ends well, Dad used to say. I guess this is what he meant," I said.

"They'll be here any minute and we still need to bring everything back inside," Davy said. "You get your garments on, Tripp, while Tommy and I'll get back to work."

Alone again for just a moment, I looked around our cave. There was no doubt about it. I was the luckiest boy in the World. I had my loving new family, my grand new friends, and my wonderful new mission in life. A guy just couldn't ever ask for more than that!

THE END (or, perhaps, just the beginning!)