



The title of this group of short stories is called 'Distant Shores'. It is made up of seven short stories: The first is the Double Cross. A grandfather tells his granddaughter about the journey their ancestors across the great divide. Next comes the mountain with a backdrop of dark dismal clouds. The fourth story is about the Hospital Ward. This was written while I was in the hospital back some years back. The a young boy re-programmes a spaceship in order to save everyone from aliens. Then there's the English Teacher and lastly, the Great Valley.

Have a read and enjoy yourselves.

Distant Shores

© PHIL SMITH

Distant Shores

1. THE DOUBLE CROSS

‘What's that?’ Joe glared around trying to find the source of the sound.

‘It's your imagination.’ Rye spoke with a smirk on his face.

‘I tell you I heard something.’ Joe lashed back.

‘This place is full of noises. Don't let it get to you.’ Jean replied off handedly.

‘Something's out there.’ Joe moved his head from side to side failing to penetrate the thick foliage.

The three gravediggers proceeded through the rain forest. Rye hacked his way through the under growth leading the moodily group. The rot made the air pungent, worsened by the intense heat and humidity. The trio, led by Rye McCormick, general thug and ruffian to yet some un-plundered ancient grave. Rye had picked his team not out of care but out of necessity. Joe Rike, though an unstable personality, knew the area of space in which the world was located. Jean Wilson, a woman who you couldn't trust was in possession of the means of travel; a ship.

‘Can't you go any faster?’ Joe yelled out from behind Jean.

Rye pulled up from swinging the machete and stared a killing look back. ‘If you think you can cut through this mess any better, then by all means go to it.’

‘I don't understand why it's taking so long.’ Joe instead replied.

‘Take it easy, we've only been about this for twenty or so minutes.’ Jean cut in.

‘But both of you said that once we found the world, finding the ruins would be easy.

Now where are they?’

‘Just shut up, I'm long past sick of hearing your mouth.’ Rye said pointedly at Joe.

‘This place is driving me crazy. I don't like it.’ Joe persisted with continuing his negative stand.

‘It's because you are crazy.’ Rye pointed his finger, ‘Now, for the last time, keep quiet. I should have never included you in this deal.’

‘Without me, you'd never found this world.’ Joe said always trying to get the last word in.

It was then that a winged snake dove at the threesome. The animal emitted an intense human scream. Joe jerked his weapon up firing aimlessly into the forest canopy. The snake quickly flew off.

‘Put that gun away.’ Rye lowered his own gun toward Joe.

Distant Shores

'I should have never let you talk me into this.' Joe aiming his gun at Rye.

Jean slipped over nearer to Joe and whispered, 'Not now, he knows where the graves are located, we don't. Wait a little longer, then it'll be just the two of us and the riches.'

Joe stood poised then lowered his gun. 'All right, let's get on with it.' His crazed eyes moving between Jean and Rye.

Rye turned, 'OK, this way,' continuing the down and side strokes of the machete.

Jean looked around as Joe held her arm, 'did you really mean that, about the two of us?'

'Sure I did.' She said with a twisted smile.

'Hey, you two coming? It's here.' Joe yelled, 'told you it was easy pickings. Just look at it.' Rye smiled gazing upon the scattered fortune laying about the graves.

After an hour of searching the area and gathering what they could find into a bag. Rye looked up at the other two and said, 'that's about everything. Let's get out of this place.' He then headed in the direction of the ship.

There was a sound of a gun. Rye jerked around bringing his own gun down. Jean stood with her smoking weapon and a surprised look on Joe's face.

'Yes, I know, I lied.' Jean answering Joe's look before he fell over.

Rye gazed at the both of them. 'About time,' he said.

'You can trust me, boss.' She replied. 'He would have killed us both before reaching the ship.'

'Well, I always preferred a two way split anyway.' Rye replied. 'Let's go.'

Rye headed down the pre-cut path to the ship. A down pour had started and both began to run. On arriving, Rye tossed the bag of jewels to Jean, 'open it up while I release the landing clamps.'

As Rye was about to enter the ship, the door slammed shut and the ship gently lifted off.

Jean sat taking the ship through the routine said with a smile on her face, 'I always preferred a one way split, myself!'

Distant Shores

2. THE GREAT DIVIDE

It was quiet. The older man sat with his granddaughter enjoying the coolness of the evening. Seldom was there such beauty and peacefulness in silence. A radiant moon slowly pierced the solitude, interfering with the present tranquillity.

‘Grandfather, tell me one of the stories about our people,’ voiced the young girl, further eroding the privacy of the moment.

The old man allowed the silence to continue for several more seconds, knowing the girl’s request to be only a ploy to delay her impending bed time.

Time to stop dreaming, he said to himself. ‘Glory, I’m not falling for that trick! It’s very late, getting onto your bedtime and you know it. Your mother explicitly forbid me to keep you up past midnight.’

‘Please,’ she said smiling, ‘your stories are so much better than mother’s.’ Her unusual brown eyes lit up by the increasing light of the moon.

He sighed but then rearranged himself to tell the requested story. ‘If I do, will you promise to go straight to bed afterwards?’ He asked, gazing upon her lovingly, waiting for an answer.

‘Yes, I promise, I promise,’ she said expectantly.

Like any other child, she loved stories of her people. She was excited, but also pleased with herself for having delayed the bedtime edict of her mother.

‘There are many successful, and tragic tales of survival during the crossing of the Great Divide,’ he pointed his hand toward the black sky. ‘It was a desolate place in space. It’s an emptiness without other star systems. A darkness even unmatched with what we’re looking at now.’

‘I see stars, Grandfather,’ Glory interrupted.

‘Yes, but they’re very tiny and their light travels to us from across the Divide, reminding us of where our people came from and the distance they had to travel to reach our world. Their journey took so long that none of those who began the journey lived to see this new world. Those who did live through it, were so desperate that they simply and quickly named this world, ‘*Faraway*’.’

Distant Shores

‘What was it like across the Divide?’ she inquired inquisitively.

‘It's hard to distinguish between fact and legend any more. And stories seem to change at every telling. It's said that the race living there called that part of space, 'The Arm of Orion'. Named after one of their gods. They were a cunning race, one moment offering their peace and the next moment breaking it. Many were kind but others were ruthless. They were as different as day is from night. They proliferated like mice, settling world after world. Over hundreds of years, our own people were slowly driven out to the edge of space. They took our worlds, one by one. Then we were driven here.’

As I said, all were not bad, especially John and Mike, the two who warned our people of the attack. John Oliver, the Adjunct considers him a saviour. He was instrumental in saving our race and the only human for an Adjunct ever to fell in love with.

What a stir it caused! When they first met, she almost shot him out of space! He came in from nowhere yelling his head off about an attack.

‘No one is responding,’ Mike said twisting his head slightly around toward John.

‘Keep trying, eventually we'll get their attention. But for their sakes, I hope it won't be too late,’ John reacted.

‘Does anyone hear me, this is the freighter 'Morning Glory'. Come in! Come in! This is the freighter 'Morning Glory'. Does anyone hear me? Warning! Warning! You are in danger, there is to be an attack on all Adjunct people within days! There is to be an attack on all Adjunct Worlds within days! Please acknowledge! This is the freighter 'Morning Glory' calling. Please acknowledge?’

‘Morning Glory, this is the Adjunct Military Dewan Alice Horten speaking. You have entered Adjunct space. This is a clear violation of our treaty accord. You are ordered to leave immediately. We are enroute now to intercept you. If you have not reversed course by the time our interceptors reach you, you will be destroyed.’ A commanding female voice stated.

‘Well obviously, we now have their attention.’ Mike, long time friend and associate, gave John a disturbed and questioning look, ‘I thought you said they were a passive race.’ Both John and Mike had cruised the space lanes for years. Mike liked working with John, even though he was a bit eccentric sometimes. Well, whatever else he thought about John, he did have a kind heart, though often a bit misguided. This situation is certainly proving to be the most obvious.

Distant Shores

Come to think of it, this was the most eccentric thing he had ever known John to do and it was proving to be the most stupid.

He of course also felt sorry for these beings. Some considered them nothing more than animals. They were once all over this part of space but now only on this planet. It was said that their strict religious passiveness prevented them from fighting anyone. However, this Dewan Horten seemed to be a bit different.

'Let me talk to them.' John said pressing the communications link into transmit mode.

'Adjunct Military Dewan Horten, this is Captain John Oliver of the freighter 'Morning Glory'. I need to talk to someone important in your government. This is extremely urgent. You're in danger of an imminent attack.'

The same voice but sterner replied, *'You have indeed warned us and we are now warning you! Stop transmission, turn your ship around and leave Adjunct Space. You have been warned!'*

'Well, what do you think we should do, boss? She seems as if she means business, all right.'

'I mean business too, and we aren't giving up that easy.' John pushed on the transmit link again. 'I'll tell her a thing or two.'

'Yeah, Yeah, Yeah,' replied John, *'but let me tell you....'* At that the freighter shook violently.

'We've been fired upon!' Mike shouted in disbelief. Out of instinct both of them dived to the deck as two Adjunct fighters swooped pass, so close that they scraped the hull of the freighter.

Back in his seat, John rammed his fist down on the communication link, *'Whoa! Lady, we're here to save you, not fight with you. Stop shooting!'*

'Return to where you came from. We will escort you out of Adjunct Space.' The female Dewan stated in what seemed to be an, 'I told you so voice'.

'We're risking our lives trying to save you people and you're treating us like pirates. We will offer no resistance, but we're not leaving until you hear us out. Do you understand me 'Dewan Alice' or whoever you are?'

John cuffed the ship's communication link off.

'Surely, they'll listen now?' Mike said more in a question than a statement.

The two interceptors came about and approached the freighter from the back. To Mike's amazement, they fired.

Distant Shores

A horrific noise came from the freighter's aft section making it lunge forward like someone had kicked its rear end. The smell of electrical burning wafted through the cubicle, 'They've hit our engines,' John snapped, 'the idiots. I can't believe they did that!'

'Well, they did,' Mike remarked irritatingly, 'and we're losing air. And you said that these people were tame as kittens.'

'OK, seal the cubicle. I'll try talking to them again.' John said moving his hand down toward the transmit button.

The Adjunct ships entered another approach path releasing a volley of fire toward the aft section again. An explosion rocked the freighter. John was never able to touch the transmit button.

Glory's Grandfather stopped the story and paused in silence.

After a moment Glory looked up. 'They didn't die, did they Grandfather?' she said with a bit of a snuffle. Then, after a moment, her eyes brightened, her face suspicious. 'That's impossible. Look at me and you.'

'Well, I just wondered if you had fallen asleep. It's getting rather late,' her Grandfather replied.

'No, no, no, Grandfather. Don't stop now. It's still early. You've only just started. You haven't said anything about the battle nor about how John and your Grandmother met,' Glory said desperately, wanting to continue the story.

'You sure?' her Grandfather asked tauntingly.

'Oh yes Grandfather, please.'

'Well.... OK. Now where was I? Oh yes, their ship had just been destroyed. John's hand fell suddenly as the ship went into automatic eject mode. The two pilots then hit the underside of the Interceptor as it passed over.'

John awoke to a mega-size headache. He only remembered being ejected out of the ship. But he had no idea where he was or how he had gotten there. A small room, bars on the door, a cell, oh, a brig. John had been in several of these in his life. Turning his head, he saw Mike laying on the next cot over. 'Hey Mike, you OK? Wake up.' John said making a motion to raise up. But the mega-sized headache was nothing to the terra-sized pain he just felt all over his body.

Distant Shores

He rolled over and out onto the floor. Slowly, he pulled himself up to Mike's cot. 'Mike, wake up.' John just managed to say.

'Groan! I feel like I've been hit by a space freighter,' Mike said moving his hand up to his head.

'You have been my friend, quite literally,' John replied hearing a sound from the direction of the brig door. Looking over, he saw the most beautiful creature he had ever laid eyes on. Dressed in white, stood a female adjunct. A perfect human face and body with the exception of extra large black oval eyes and two long tentacles hanging down from under her arms. These blended in and looked more part of her white dress uniform rather than the additional limbs they were.

'Well I see that our two 'guest' are actually showing some life. Welcome, gentle-beings, to our world. I'm Alice Horten, the Adjunct Military Dewan for the planet.' She stood staring, gazing upon them with a darkness that was much darker than her black eyes.

'Thank you for asking, we're fine.' John said brusquely, 'not that you were concerned.'

'I wasn't,' she snapped back, 'the Doctor checked you both out earlier.'

'Why did you fire on us?' John demanded; 'I thought you beings were a passive race.'

'Why didn't you heed my warning?' Alice countered. 'And so far as being passive, you've just learned something new about us, haven't you?'

John didn't know how to reply to that but he gave her a smile instead.

'Now, now, Dewan Horton, are you showing our friends the kindness and hospitality they're due?' An elderly man asked as he walked up behind her.

'Oh, she's being such an angel and may I add, a cute one at that.' John replied a bit too suavely.

The elder glanced at Alice astonished. But she turned and walked off enraged. 'You'll have to forgive Dewan Horton; she gets a bit zealous over her job sometimes.' The Elder said looking down at the two.

'I should say so,' it was Mike's turn to reply, 'she almost killed us.'

John broke in. 'We're here to warn you of a coming attack against your people; you've got to listen to us.'

Distant Shores

'I do apologise for her; she has a reprimand coming for those actions. As far as the attack, there will be time to consider that later,' the Elder replied. 'We need to get you into accommodation and attire.'

'There may not be a later on, if you do not take us seriously.' John said firmly. 'And you really don't have to punish her because I don't blame her for not trusting us.'

'What will be, will be,' said the Elder as he turned away from the cell door leaving it open.

'Well that attitude is certainly more in line with what I've heard about these people than the way that Dewan Horton is acting.' Mike said.

Soon after, both were taken to different quarters. John continued to think about the Dewan. As he lay on fresh clean sheets of a newly made bed he smiled, saying aloud, 'I wonder what she's really like, Mike?'

'What who is like? Who are you taking about?' Mike replied.

John looked over to Mike. 'You know, Alice our Dewan.'

'For heaven's sake, she's an Adjunct.' Mike replied disbelievingly. 'You can't even think about liking an Adjunct. That's not even civilised.'

'I think they're likeable! She certainly is. She's beautiful. Anyway, what are we here saving them for if they aren't likeable.' John said, 'They're people just like us.'

'I won't even discuss this.' Mike shook his head in exasperation and then pretended to be busy at something.

John continued to smile, 'Really though! The Dewan is certainly a lovely creature, and from what I hear, the Adjunct women treat their husbands like kings!'

'You're absolutely mad. What about those two tentacles hanging from under her arms. They even have suction cups like an Octopus,' Mike said disgustedly.

Suddenly a knock came from the door.

'It's open.' John yelled from his bed. The door opened with Dewan Horton standing there. 'Hello there, beautiful.' John called out before she got a chance to say anything.

'Get whatever you have, you're leaving.' Alice spoke firmly. 'It's been confirmed that your attack fleet will be here in ninety-six hours. Your warning has given us those ninety-six hours to prepare. It appears that we're in your debt. We're preparing one of our fighters for you. You will be able to get well away from our space before they arrive. In addition, I've been instructed to apologise for my hostile intent against you and your ship.'

Distant Shores

‘What will you do and why a fighter?’ John ask getting up off the bed.

‘The 'powers to be' have decided to evacuate the planet. We will not be using the fighters to defend ourselves.’ Alice replied no longer able to keep her staunch composure. ‘You must hurry,’ she said, her black eyes developing a glassy look from held back tears, ‘the ship is being prepared for you at this very moment.’

They walked hurriedly down a dim lit hall and through a set of doors being held open by two adjunct men dressed the same way as the old man they had seen earlier.

‘They were then taken to the ship. They left immediately and were saved from the coming attack.’ Her Grandfather said eyeing the girl to see if she was still paying attention.

‘No, no, grandfather, that's not the way it happened. John and Mike stayed and helped everyone leave.’ His granddaughter said smiling at him.

‘Well now, there seems to be many different stories as to what happened to Mike. Most think that Mike stayed with John; some believe he just left in the fighter but others think he may have done something else.’

A vehicle was waiting for them. ‘This is where I leave you. You're being driven to the port where the fighter is waiting. Thank you again for your help.’ Alice spoke meaningfully.

John and Mike looked at each other. Mike entered the door of the vehicle with John about to follow but then John stopped. He turned his head and look at Dewan Horton for a long moment, then said to Mike, ‘I'm staying Mike. These people need me.’ Now facing Mike, he continued, ‘I'm sorry but I just can't leave them.’

‘You must leave now.’ Alice said strongly not really understanding the word play taking place between the two of them.

‘Are you sure?’ Mike hoped that he hadn't heard John correctly.

‘As sure as I'm sure about anything. Go man. Get out of here while there's time.’ John gave a look at Mike that said everything and then put on his smile again, ‘It's been good bro,’ and yelled at the driver ‘I'm staying, take him to the ship, he's leaving.’ Before Mike could protest, the driver drove off.

‘What are you doing?’ Alice asks bewilderedly.

Distant Shores

John looked at her with his brown eyes small in comparison to the Adjunct's large black eyes, 'I didn't come all this way just to run out on you people. I came to help you.'

'But there's a good chance that many will not live through this, including you.' Alice said.

'I'm going to stay, it's settled. I know all about these attackers. They're only a rag-tag group of low life's looking for a quick fortune. A lot of them thieves, many just down on their luck, led by mobsters and others for love of money, hatred and/or bigotry. I may be some help. And besides, I think you're an amazing woman!' John gave her his smile again.

Returning the smile she raised her tentacles and arranged them around him. She then kissed him gently on the cheek. 'Thank you for staying. I believe it will help.'

Life during those four days was mad. Alice, along with John was responsible for organising the 'fleet' in preparation to leave.

It surprised John to see how prepared people were. He read a predestined acceptance of their leaving on all of their faces. It was as if they expected it. As if they had already known it was coming. Perhaps this was due to the years of confrontations they had experienced with the human race he thought.

Most had their own ships though small, or knew somebody who had one. There were a few larger ships also. Increasingly the space around the planet became cluttered with thousands of space yachts, freighters and various kinds of other ships. Alice and John's job was endless trying to keep some kind of uniformity with them. They were of course defenceless. Alice and John had managed to persuade the Elders to take the fighters along, using them only for defence.

Loading some of the last people and their belongings onto their ship Alice asked John; 'What will you do after we leave?'

'Where will you be going?' John asked, 'Where can you go? There are inhabited worlds in all the directions.'

'That's restricted information.' Alice looked sad.

'What would you say if I wanted to come along?' John pried.

'Why would you want to do that?' Alice tilted her head toward him curiously.

'Perhaps it's because I care a great deal about you.' John said with a voice that was for once serious.

'John, we are a very straight people, when we care for someone, we unite ourselves to each other for life. But even at that, no Adjunct has ever paired with a human before.'

Distant Shores

'But what would you want me to do?' John put the question to her again.

'For the life that we would live together. I would not want to encourage you.'

'You let me make that decision,' John continued, 'I want to know.'

Her large black eyes began to fill with tears. 'Of course I care for you, but you have no idea what's before us.' She then began to cry.

John drew close to her, kissing her gently on the lips. She wrapped her arms around him; both tentacles curled around him holding him close as she responded to his kiss. 'You might as well tell me where we're going because I'm not leaving you.' John said kissing her again.

'It's not difficult to figure out, because there's only one way we can go. We'll try to reach Sagittarius.' She answered.

John pulled away and in doing so said, 'That's impossible. That's going in toward the galaxy. That would take over thirty years, Alice. Over, half of those ships up there wouldn't even make it. You can't do that.'

'There are no other options.' Alice responded. 'Think about it.'

You may.... but before John could finish, explosions sounded all about them. He crumbled to the ground. Everything broke loose at once. Attacking ships began levelling the space port with cannon fire.

'Well that's enough for tonight, it's near your bedtime young lady. Your mother will be home anytime now.' Glory's grandfather said as a final statement.

'But you promised to tell me about Mike, grandfather.' She pleaded.

The girl's Grandfather paused for a few seconds, 'ten more minutes and then off to bed. OK?' Saying it more as a statement rather than as a question.

John struggled to get up; Alice helping with a tentacle about his waist pulling on him. She began yelling at those nearby trying to collect the things they had dropped. 'Leave that, get into the ship, now. Move, Move, Move! Another blast hit. People were still trying to collect or hold various objects and at the same time reaching out with their hands and tentacles gathering support from various individuals standing close by. 'You must hurry people!' Alice screamed desperately.

Distant Shores

Explosive fire rained down on ships and people in and near them from every angle. Adjunct ships exploded as they lifted just metres off the ground. Fireballs reached out and enveloped other craft. The scene was maniacal.

‘We've got to take off, now!’ John bellowed toward Alice. ‘I will not just leave these people,’ Alice said argumentatively, ‘the Elders can keep their attitude of nonviolence but there are still hundreds of people here. I'll stay and fight.’ She cried.

‘If we stay, we'll die along with them, along with the ones that are on board the ship also.’ John said convincingly. Another ship exploded not more than fifty metres up in the air. Parts of it cascaded down onto their ship. Looking around, John saw that most ships were being destroyed. ‘We must go, Alice. There's no more time. We've got to try and get those in the ship away to safety.’

That persuaded Alice to board the ship. There was no difficulty in shutting the hatch as a state of chaos ruled the present situation.

Inside, Alice dropped her head as she leaned against the bulkhead and sobbed, ‘my people, my people.’

John headed for the control cubicle but Alice stayed where she was. Firing up the ship, he began rising ever so slowly. It was then that one of the attackers came directly toward him. Other attackers were now beginning to focus on him also.

John knew then that they weren't going to make it. The attackers were close now. John hit the communications link, not really knowing what else to do, ‘*Stop your firing, stop your firing, there are families aboard.*’

Then, the nearest attacker just blew up! An Adjunct Fighter ship flew by. ‘Go for it John, I'll hold the others off.’ Mike's welcome voice came over the communications link.

‘Am I glad to hear you, me boy.’ John replied. The other attackers veered off as another one of their cohorts crashed, smearing itself over the concrete below.

The battle between one Adjunct fighter against a mass of others continued as John and Alice's ship rose above the port's devastation. They were away. John hit the communications link, ‘We're clear Mike, now get out of there....’ But then the Adjunct fighter burst into flames. Mike was gone.

‘So Mike saved them. Using the Adjunct fighter, he fought the attackers until John and

Distant Shores

Alice escaped.

Well, John married Alice soon after that. And they lived their whole lives aboard a ship during their crossing of the Great Divide. Their children and grandchildren arrived at *Faraway* and settled the world.

‘Grandfather, am I really so much like my human ancestor?’ Glory ask, barely able to stay awake.

‘Yes, somewhat.’ He replied.

‘That's makes me really...,’ Glory yawned, ‘proud,’ and leaned over on her Grandfather's lap and went to sleep.

Glory's Grandfather looked up into the darkness and remembered the time aboard the ships and how his father had told him the story of John and Mike. He then gathered Glory up into his arms and tentacles and carried her off to bed.

The End

Distant Shores

3. MOUNTAIN

Tipping my head back, I gazed at the dark dismal clouds, deceptively welcoming someone to enter their domain. It was like an invitation to death. The clouds rolled about, streaks of lightning raking through their own venomous air. The penetrating thunder claps sent needle like pricks throughout my body adding to the despair I was already feeling. Light winds slapped at my clothes. Behind me, nothing existed but an emptiness. A massive mountain stood in front of me, piercing upwards into an oppressive looking world. Reason only knew why I ever committed myself to such an undertaking. Leaning into the rocks and shutting my eyes, I groaned, 'What in the world am I doing here!' Despondency and fear began to take over as I cried aloud, 'I can't go on!' Tears formed in my eyes and slowly ran down my cheeks dripping off the end of my jaw. At that moment I really didn't care whether I lived or died.

'Are you OK?' Louise spoke distinctly as she lowered herself down beside me. 'You haven't moved an inch in the last quarter of an hour,' she continued.

'No, I'm not,' I said, caring less whether she heard me or not over the thunderous noise. I kept my head turned, not wanting her to see the fear written on my face and in my eyes. 'I can't go on,' I repeated, trying to show a pretence of some sanity in my voice.

Unsympathetically she responded, 'What are you saying? I don't understand,' raising her voice as the clap of lightning hit somewhere above, followed by a thunderous roar.

I then bellowed, 'I can't go on! I can't move! What is there not to understand about that?' Facing her full on now with squinted eyes, I continued, 'I should have never volunteered for this job. I'm not up to it. I'm scared. Now, do you understand that?' I blared out at her with hatred and vengeance.

An eternity passed by before she replied, 'Neegal, we're more than two kilometres up. We've been climbing for more than twelve hours and we need rest. Look up there to the left, an overhang. Do you see it?' She asked, pointing both with her head and hand.

Focusing my eyes on the indicated direction, I saw it and nodded to her in acknowledgment.

'There's a ledge up there wide enough to set up a camp with tents. I've already placed pitons for the ropes. Let's go together, slowly. It shouldn't take us more than twenty minutes or

Distant Shores

so.’ She said convincingly. ‘Let’s go,’ she continued, ‘there’s a hand hold just there,’ pointing with her finger.

After placing my hand into the hold, I then moved a foot, then another hand and then another foot. With every move I made, Louise would move also. I closed my mind off to the continuous background noise, also to what Louise possibly thought of me, and to the cliff face I was climbing. I was only aware that I moved and acted like a zombie to her every instruction.

I awoke feeling cold. I didn’t know how many hours I had slept. I only remembered reaching the overhang in a state of exhaustion and Louise setting up of my tent and sleeping bag. That was it.

‘Are you up, Neegal?’ Louise called from outside the tent.

‘Yeah,’ I replied weakly.

Unzipping the tent flap, she thrust her head in, ‘Well, come on out and get some food, you lazy bone.’ She said smiling.

‘OK,’ replying apprehensively and wondering why she was in such high spirits.

‘Here’s meat and potato stew plus some coffee,’ she said thoughtfully.

I took the plate of food and placed it on the mat before me. The coffee was steaming hot and I sipped at it slowly. ‘Aren’t you angry at me? I really lost it down there.’ I said holding the cup of coffee snugly in my hands.

‘You’ve got such a chip on your shoulders, before the Elder’s Council, you were Mr. Big and now...,’ she let the silence drag on before continuing. ‘Yes I’m angry,’ she said emphatically. ‘You spoke to me horribly,’ hesitating, she then looked at me thoughtfully, ‘I also felt like giving up one or two times myself.’

‘That surprises me,’ I replied beratingly, ‘I thought you were the expert climber.’

‘Not really, I was into climbing on my home when I was younger, but haven’t been allowed to do much since arriving at the colony because of the all the restrictions. That’s one reason why I came along.’

‘So what do we do now? I really don’t think I can continue.’ I said staring out over the cliff into the nothingness. ‘I experienced such a fear down there that I can’t possibly go on.’

‘If we turn back now, how would we look others in the face, knowing that we failed? Both of us convinced the Council that we were the right people for the job. I had the climbing

Distant Shores

experience and you had a meteorological background. Would the Council Elders ever trust us again with such an important assignment? As important, what would we think about ourselves? I'm not really a religious person, but what if, by some divine purpose we were put here to be tested for even greater and bigger mountains, later in our lives? You know, that scares me more than any rock face, more than those poisonous clouds and even that blasted noise and lightning.' She spoke convincingly even though a bit melodramatic.

I really didn't feel like arguing with her. 'I'm sorry but I don't really care what other people think of me. Neither do I care about the Council Elders. I just know that I can't continue on.' I said scornfully.

'We can do it if we help each other Neegal. We'll be perfectly safe. We have the breathing lungs. We've practiced the experiments a dozen times. All we need to do is enter the lower part of the clouds.' She hurried on. 'We take some air and rock samples and then go down. It's only another four hundred metres Neegal. We can go up, do our tests, and return to this ledge before nightfall. We can then start our descent tomorrow.' She said pleadingly.

'OK! OK! I'll try!' I said. 'That's my only promise. I will try! Do you understand?' Defeatedly, shaking my head, not believing what I had just said, at the same time wondering why I had got stuck with such a person. Such righteousness! Couldn't she see it wouldn't make one hill of beans to anyone, whether we completed the assignment or not. I just wanted to go home, to get off this blasted mountain. I wanted to get away from it all, her, the Elders, the colony and this stupid mountain!

Before I knew it, Louise had everything packed up and ready to go. Oh, joy! I thought to myself. Such energy! She's very eager to take on a bull by his horns!

The thunder and lightning increased in severity the closer we approached. I thought back to the long discussions about those very clouds and possible causes in the school. They only floated over the taller mountain ranges and were really the only extrinsic thing about the planet. They existed separately in composition from the rest of the atmosphere made up of various poisonous gases. No rain ever came from them but they certainly put on displays of lightning. The surveyors didn't consider it a big problem nor the Colony Elders but now they had decided to investigate them!

As we continued up, Louise would first lay pitons and string up the rope. She would then come back and climb beside me helping me with every step. The breathing lungs completely

Distant Shores

covered our faces. We were able to speak using small battery powered hear phones and mouth speakers. The magnetic charges played havoc with everything, the phones and speakers, body hair and even our bone joints.

Louise entered the dark mass. She planned to return for me after placing all the pitons. However, I noticed the rope still being pulled along, 'Why are you continuing to pay out rope? Talk to me Louise. I want to know what you're doing!' I demanded speaking angrily into mouth speaker.

'I want to make sure that we are far enough into the clouds so we can take proper samples,' she replied after some time.

Far enough into the clouds! What is she doing! I yelled, 'that's far enough, are you crazy? Come back and let's finish this, now!' I waited for a reply, 'Louise, do you hear me?'

At that moment I heard a scream over the ear phones. The rope began flying through the pitons. She was falling! The rope then stopped and held fast. An object went pass me, recoiling until coming to a halt. It was the charred body of Louise!

This couldn't be happening. 'Louise!' I cried, 'Louise!' I Grabbed her foot, pulled her over to me, hoping to see some sign of life. Anchoring her to the cliff, I tried to get some response from her. Her head moved slowly and then she opened her eyes. 'Finish the job Neegal. You can do it!' She whispered, shut her eyes and then died.

At a loss, not only for words but even for thoughts, I stared at her face for what seemed to be hours. 'I just can't handle this,' I cried. 'Why! Why! Why!' I cried aloud. 'What am I going to do?' Thoughts of Insanity took over my mind. In a daze, I took out my knife, opened the blade and pressed it against the rope that held me to the mountain. 'I can't go on. I can't go on,' I continually cried aloud.

'No, finish the job,' she said.

Suddenly coming alert, I glanced at her. There was no movement, only the coldness of her dead body. I pressed the blade harder against the rope.

'No, finish the job, Neegal,' she said again.

I looked again at her face, with my eyes fixed on her dead, cold, lifeless stare. I looked away.

'You can do it.'

I closed the blade of the knife.

Distant Shores

I buried Louise's body in a pile of rocks some four hours after finishing the job that I had come to do. I looked out over the very cliff we had camped on that previous night. I then started my descent to face, perhaps, those bigger mountains. The End

The End

Distant Shores

4. THE HOSPITAL WARD

I felt a tightening in my chest. I stopped what I was doing thinking that the pain would pass, but instead it continued causing me to search for a chair. If I had known then what I was about to get myself into, I would have just waited and drink the offered water.

I had two sources of encouragement for the decision I made: one was money, the other was listening to the wrong person. Better facilities were available but that would have meant an extra cost also. My health had been perfect since arriving on 'Dnalaez'. The inhabitants were strange but the place certainly had its own charm. Being an old home boy and really wanting to see what the galaxy was all about I signed up for an English teaching job. Six months was left to my one year contract and I was reluctant to spend what little money I had saved. Well, the next source of encouragement came from my administrative friend, a class three Adanac who assured me that there was nothing to worry about.

I need to interrupt myself before continuing on to inject a little about why I found myself in this situation. Did I mention that the world was way off the normal travel and shipping lanes? Well, it was. Dnalaez was encouraging more immigration from the nearby worlds by lifting many previous restrictions. Thus the reason I got a year contract teaching Galactic Wide English with no credentials! I was from Galactic Central which was made up of the human, humanoid and the occasional non-humanoid beings. However, on Dnalaez, I was practically the only human being around.

But to continue the story....I succumbed to the insistence of the class three Adanac to visit their local clinic. This class three Adanac from the information I received later was in its late mothering stages. To give you a description of her/it (please do not fix the term 'racist' to me here, I used the term 'her/it' simply because I didn't know), you'd have to imagine six large balloons tied together, the colour of pale blue with very little other features whatever. The only clothes it wore were the strings that came out from the folds between the sections separating the head, arms and legs. This wasn't really strange, as the world was a hodgepodge of different beings. My English class was made up of similar indescribable and un-understandable beings. But I'm getting off the subject somewhat. The one other strange aspect of this world and in fact this

Distant Shores

area of space was the high used of biological trained creatures for things I had only seen done by technology. My cultural eyes began to really open as I entered the medical clinic. Once I lay down on the wood bed my class three Adanac friend started to go strange, as if I was her child or something. Another being entered who I assumed to be the doctor, a class six Htuos. (Oh, another point. Dnalaez was a 'class' society. It was important to acknowledge everyone class openly.) I knew that many of the Htuos had recently immigrated to Dnalaez due to unrest on their home world. The Htuos doctor to my amazement pulled an eight legged small bark coloured animal from beneath a basket. It had small suckers on the tips of its legs. The legs joined at a small lump with another extension/neck running to a head. It was squirming about like a pile of worms on hot ashes but it reminded me if something between a spider, octopus and group of earthworms tied together. Some of the legs fell across my face. But then the Htuos doctor proceeded to attach suckers to my own chest and legs where they stayed attached. Seeing the expression on my face, my Adanac friend began to pat and rub my hand more fiercely. I really couldn't ascertain what the thing was doing but it let off a high frequency squeal every few seconds. Of course my now I questioned the sanity of my decision to come to the clinic. I even questioned the sanity of my decision to come to this world and so indicated to my Adanac friend who obviously interpreted my concern as worry which in turn caused more patting and rubbing of my hands, hair, and head. It continued its reassurances that everything would be fine. So what was I to do? If I walked out, this could bring shame upon my friend and I wanted to appear if nothing else to be culturally sensitive. So I continued thinking that it would all be over with soon. Little did I know.

'Mr. Smith, I am uncertain as to the status of your being. I believe that it would be best if you went to the hospital for a 24-hour period.' The translator translated into perfect galactic wide English.

'Uh, do you really think that's necessary?' I said hoping this would give me an out to this mess.

'Mr. Smith we can never be too sure about these things. It's always better to be on the safe side and besides, the facilities are the best possible.' My Adanac friend answered for the doctor.

Distant Shores

The doctor shook his head in agreement.

An hour later, with Adanac friend in tow, I arrived at the hospital. In the emergency room another doctor connected me to a similar creature making similar noises as before. The doctor was a class six Dnalaez who hadn't yet entered the mothering stage. My Adanac friend continued her caressing all the way from the clinic to the hospital. I was actually becoming afraid that I had somehow had become her mate or something. Heaven forbid! The thought of that sent chills down my back.

'Mr. Smith?' The Dnalaez spoke a form of galactic wide English without using the translator. 'I need to put this under your tongue.' The doctor held a switching purple grub in its hand.

'I don't think so!' My reaction caused an offended look throughout the chamber. Everyone froze, waiting. The Adanac quickly began to ensure me that it was all quite normal procedure. To the others she smiled giving excuses of my newness to the world. With a sickness feeling in my stomach, I agreed. This seemed to have put a relieved look on everyone faces. Within minutes, after the grub was put under my tongue, I felt my world slowly coming to an end, my head was emptying of blood. The grub quickly dissolved in my month leaving me short of breath.

Then I vaguely remember the doctor rushing back into the room, 'Oh, Mr. Smith, I've given you the wrong pill. Please open your month so I can remove it?'

'It's already dissolved.' I felt a little concerned.

'Oh,' a pause, 'never mind then.' The doctor turned and left.

With my head spinning, 'what happened?' I ask the Adanac.

'The pill actually found your blood a little too rich and had eaten quite a lot before it exploded.' She answered.

I decided not to enquire further. At this point a class one Dnalyne, very similar to the Dnalaez themselves, lead me away through a dark passageway. The bright side, at this point I found that I had finally left the Adanac behind, nevertheless again assuring me as her voice got

Distant Shores

further from me that I would be well taken care of! I, somehow, had a feeling of relief in the parting rather than any assurance.

I was prepared for what was described to be an x-ray. Ok, this couldn't be any different than any normal x-ray could it? I was put on my back with a large catchment bowl beneath me.

'OK, Mr. Smith, hold your breath as long as possible so that the 'thgil' can dissolve directly into the pores of your skin.' 'The being said without weighting for my answer.

'What's going to dissolve into my pores?' I felt the now liquid ooze through my body. I was only able to take minuscule amounts of air during the whole process. Five minutes later the creature poured out onto the catch bowl beneath me. It reformed into the likeness of my blood veins and heart. Before I even knew that I had been taken from the 'x-ray' room, I was rolled into the ward.

There were five beings, all occupying five sectioned off areas of the room. I was put into another board like bed, a cloth put between me and the board with another cloth over me. Doctors from unamenable places came and went. A class seven Idnih doctor came in and stopped at my bed. A snake like creature was cured around its neck. By now I guessed it to be yet, another type of bio-instrument.

'Mr. Smith, we just want to find out what causing the tightening in your chest. You shouldn't be here more than two or three days.' The class seven Idnih doctor said.

'Excuse me?' I quickly added.

'Yes?' Using his hand, the doctor brushed the snake like bio-instrument's head out of his face.

Now how should I put this, I said to myself? 'I don't mean to tell you your job, but I really don't think there's much wrong with me that an aspirin can't fix. In fact, I feel really refreshed and renewed as if nothing ever happened.'

'You have nothing to worry about, Mr. Smith.' The doctor replied.

Distant Shores

Was I that obvious....I don't think I was. 'No, I'm really feeling fine.' I tried one more time.

'Well, let me just check.' The doctor said.

My eyes grew big as the Idnih doctor unwrapped the snake from around his neck. He held its wriggling form and placed it mouth up my shirt just over my heart. I was torn between staying still hoping the doctor would see reason and jumping up to run. Four needle like teeth bit into my skin. It jumped about the whole time the doctor held the other end to the side of the doctors own bone narrow neck.

'Your heart seem to be in order but we'll need to run a few test to be sure.' He pulled the four needled head from where they had sunk into my skin, wrapped the bio-snake-instrument around his neck and walked over to the next patient.

By this time, I was beyond words. I looked about the ward. There were various bio-creature-instruments attached in various ways to my 'room mates'. One such creature-instrument had its mouth cupped over a non-humanoid mouth and nose. It bloated itself filtering air pushing it into the non-humanoids lungs. As the non-humanoid breathed out the creature-instrument would relieve it of impurities by eating them. This was the creature-instruments reward.

The patient across from me set up on its board bed. I didn't feel I could ask its origin as that would have been impolite. It had deep-set eyes were down what looked like dark hollow channels. Its tongue unfurled into the bowl it held and then rolled back up into thin jaws where a series of smacking sound took place.

Another patient lay to my right. From the talk, he ws to have several tests that day. According to the translator it had a cancer of some kind. A class eight Danlgne doctor had just examined him and sliced off part of its body. I recovered later again over hearing another patient commented on how good his doctor was.

I remember the examination went something like this: 'And how are you today Mr. Kcubeor?' The Danlgne doctor had asked.

Distant Shores

'I have a pain in this area.' a bone like finger attached to a claw pointed to the area located on the being right side.

Looking closely at it, the doctor took out a blade much like the ones used for opening boxes. 'Now this won't hurt at all Mr. Kcubeor. It'll be just a pin prick feeling for you.' I did notice that the doctor spoke really good galactic wide English. The doctor gently placed the blade down to the location of the non-humanoid beings' pain. Gently applying the it, he cut out a narrow section of the patients' side. Holding it up for all to see, he exclaimed 'Yeah, you were correct Mr. Kcubeor, this is the effected area.' The strip of hanging meat dripped orange drops of thick substance down onto the patient. 'We'll just take this down to the lab and annualize it.'

This was the place I passed out.

During the following day the many legged creature was often attached to me, giving off its particular sound. From that moment on, I really began to think serious whether I needed medical attention or not.

'Dr. Noseleachc?' I called as it walked by one day. 'I want you to know that I am now feeling quite well and believe what I had was a mild case of tension due to a bit of stress.' I said stressfully.

'Well, you have responded quite well to our treatment Mr. Smith. And you are from the Galaxy Proper and we are obligated to offer the best medical care o all Galactic Proper beings.'

'Which you've done quite well, I might say.' The doctor responded by a snarled up mouth which I took hopefully to be a smile.

'Well, there's one more test which I'd like performed. I want to run on of our recently developed instruments up into your heart to check it. There is a small amount of risk and you'll need to sign release papers.'

'Uh, what exactly is this risk.' I asked nervously.

Distant Shores

‘Nothing to be concerned about.’ The reply came. ‘Although we’re a hundred percent certain it works on Galaxy Proper beings, we’ve never tried it. So you’ll be, how do you say it, our guinea pig.’

I could have just screamed at that point but I stared instead, speechless, at the doctor. And I wanted to see the galaxy..... The thought passed through my mind.

‘And also,’ one last chance, ‘I really need to get back to my classes.’

The doctor returned the snarl like grin as the doctor walked off.

That evening, the meals were served. I waited anxiously as the covered plate was placed before me. Lifting the top carefully I was relieved to smell a delicious odour rise to meet me. This would have been the last straw if they had of served me some two-eyed lizard or something. I downed the meal starvingly. Sounds came from all sides throughout the evening in the ward. Non-humanoids snoring, bio-creature-instruments squealing, patients chattering in non galactic wide English, and the coming and going of the nurses throughout all hours of the night. I considered getting up and just leaving more than a few times but couldn’t draw myself yet to do it.

The next day arrived with the dreaded test. I hadn’t slept very well thinking over my mistake in trying to save some money and also going overboard in trying to be sensitive to the culture of this world. If I could just make it through today, that would be it. I would leave the hospital permission or not and even return to the Galactic Proper. I was really tired of this. I was prepped for the test. An ancient VCR and tape were provided for education viewing. I watched in detail as another snake-instrument-creature much longer and thinner than I had seen thus far made its way up the main artery toward the heart eating great gobs of junk from within the non-humanoid it was illustrating. Only minutes passed before I felt light headed and switched the video off. I quickly leaned over and emptied my stomach into a plastic bag hanging from the wall where several patients raced each other in a hobbled pace to take the bag. I closed my eyes hearing the smacking of jaws from the one who had succeeded in reaching the bag first. If there

Distant Shores

had of been anything inside me I would have thrown up again but I couldn't, but God was obviously merciful at that point for letting me pass out.

I awoke sometime later.

'Well, Mr. Smith, everything seems in order. We'll be releasing you shortly.'

'What about the test?' I said full of drowsiness.

'It's all finished. You slept through the whole thing. And it went perfectly?'

Returning to work the next day, I met my class three Adanac friend. She had a grin that stretched from one side of her balloon head to the other. There were smiles and warm fuzzes from everyone including students, even cheering from others. I was happy to be back at work.

The End

Distant Shores

5. THE PROGRAMMER

As Jeffery paused to think about his home, a tear seeped out from under his eye lid. The image of the clear dome filled his mind. It rose above the deep blue ice fields. The contrasting colours of the compound with the stark coldness of the Plutonian atmosphere outside became imprinted on his eyes. Home, he thought. It was the farthest outpost in the solar system. Perhaps that was the reason they attacked us, an easy prey.

His fingers guided over the terminal before him, trying to enter the programme virus as quickly as possible. Although alien, the computer still used a type of machine code and once he understood it, there would be no stopping him.

Scenes of prodding masses of screaming people into the holes of the ship came back, his father taking a chance, shoved him into a narrow opening in the bulkhead of the ship. 'Go for it son,' his fathers last tearful words.

At fifteen, Jeffery already held a PhD in Software Engineering. Smart he was, but still only a kid at heart. Even as early as ten he understood the various programming techniques the almost sentential computer needed to operate the dome community in which he lived.

'Getting somewhere at last. ' He feverishly worked on constructing the virus that would enable him to converse with AI's matrixes.

He heard the screaming again. The captors herded them into the ship. Those who fell were never allowed to get up.

He heard a rush of activity in the passage way outside. Seeing the flashing amber light, he had hoped not to trip any alarms. I need to go deeper into the ship he thought, but not before pressing, what he assumed to be the enter key that sent the virus on its way.

'What is the alarm for? ' The alien face with its three eyes commanded of the junior male that stood before her.

Distant Shores

‘One of the animals escaped into a conduit, your grace. ‘ lowering his head at just the correct level. ‘ It has accessed a maintenance terminal, ‘ he continued with down cast eyes.

‘Release a hunter snake before the rodent can do any damage and be quick about it, ‘ she glared at the junior male with her top larger eye. Hunter snakes were often used to search out animals and other denizens who hid themselves in out of the way places.

‘Yes, your grace, ‘ his reply fell on deaf ears as the female master had already left through a nearby hatch.

Jeffery had found another terminal. ‘Ok, now let’s see what’s happened to my little virus friend, ‘ he said aloud keying the code in.

‘Hello Jeffery. Who are you? ‘ The voice asked. Jeffery almost shot through at the sudden sound of the voice.

‘I’m a friend. ‘ Jeffery said carefully, now recovered from the shock of the computer openness and friendliness.

‘What’s a friend? ‘ The ship’s computer replied.

‘It’s somebody that you trust and do things with, ‘ Jeffery said hesitantly.

‘These are strange words I’m hearing. I understand and hear but don’t comprehend the concepts. ‘ The voice said.

‘That’s ok, I’ll teach you everything you need to know to be my friend. ‘ Jeffery said with a smile on his face.

‘What will you teach me first? ‘ The computer voice asked almost excitedly.

‘Well, friends help each other. You can help me by answering some questions and I can help you by teaching you new concepts, ‘ Jeffery thought quickly.

‘What questions do you have for me? ‘

Distant Shores

‘Well.... is my presence known to the beings in charge of this ship?’ Jeffery first wanted to know.

‘You mean the Masters? They are aware that one of the captured animals escaped into the conduits. Are you that animal?’ The computer asked.

‘I’m not an animal, but I am the human they’re referring to. What are they doing about it?’ Jeffery grew concerned.

‘They have released a hunter snake into the area to search out and destroy the animal.’ The reply came.

Anxiously Jeffery now ask, ‘Will you help me do something about it?’

‘I will inform the master female that they have made a mistake in thinking that you are an animal,’ the voice said.

‘No, No,’ Jeffery quickly added. ‘Don’t tell them anything about me or us communicating together. It’s to be a secret between you and me. Can you tell me what this hunter snake looks like?’ But Jeffery then looked around, ‘Uh...I know what it looks like’, he said backing slowly down the shaft. The snakes’ head was all month and eyes, one larger eye was placed above two smaller ones very similar to the beings that invaded his home. ‘The hunter is coming towards me. Help me!’ Jeffery said as the snake moved closer and closer.

‘I should inform the female master that you aren’t an animal.’ The computer answered.

‘No, you and I must deal with this. Tell me what I can do!’ Jeffery commanded fearfully.

‘Well, there are a number of options. Would you like for me to close the hatch so that the hunter snake can’t reach you?’ The computer calmly said. ‘Or...’

Jeffery looked around but didn’t see any hatch. The hunter snake poised before him, mouth open, its steel looking fangs uncurled. ‘Yes, close the hatch...quickly!’ Jeffery yelled drawing his legs up in front of him. His eyes closed as the snake struck. There was a thud. The snake had driven its fangs clear through the metal plate of the closed hatch. Without thinking, he quickly kicked against the fangs, actually bending them!

Distant Shores

The junior male stood before the female master. His head cast down receiving his reprimand. 'If this was a mating season, I would refuse your body as nourishment for the young,' the female said.

'Yes, your grace.' The junior male responded quietly.

'Release three more hunters to find this swamp rat of an animal and cleanse it from our ship, now!' Her top eye told him that he had better not fail again.

Leaning up against a pipe, Jeffery was out of breath. Tears again rolled down his cheeks, thinking about his mother and father. He wanted to be strong and keep at it. That's what they would say, 'never give up as long as you can go forward'.

'What is this sound you're making, my human friend?' The voice spoke from above. 'They are similar to the ones the penned animals make.'

Jeffery saw the open cavity above and also another terminal. 'It's called crying. I cry because I miss my family and my home. I'm sad. I'm also hungry and thirsty.'

'The masters use the animals from the pens to feed upon.' The voice stated innocently.

'The humans that your masters have placed in the pens aren't animals.' Jeffery said angrily.

'I wasn't aware of that, my human friend. I am learning a lot from you. I will help you by warning you that three more hunter snakes have been released to seek you out.' The voice still held its non-concern.

'Is there any way I can hide from these hunters?' Jeffery looked around him wide eyed. He now decided to try another angle of questioning, 'How do they know what to look for?'

'They are given instructions, like I'm given instructions,' the voice replied.

Surprised, Jeffery then asked whether or not they were machines.

Distant Shores

‘They are part-machine, part biological,’ the voice responded.

‘Are they connected to you in any way?’ Jeffery continued to probe for answers. After some minutes, the computer downloaded three different device codes, one for each snake. Jeffery immediately started programming another virus which would try and confuse the snake into who it should or should not attack. As he finished, another noise came from below. Without a thought, he pushed the enter key releasing the virus. The boy then froze as the three eyed head rose up in front of him. The fangs had already been withdrawn from the snake’s own mouth. It paused centimeters from his face staring right into Jeffery’s eyes, only to then lower itself back down into the shaft. Jeffery held still up until it moved on. Leaning back he blew out a breath of relief.

The female stood over the junior male who now lay dead at her feet. Her attention was directed to three other junior males. ‘Go into the conduits yourself and kill the animal. Use as many to help as you need. Finish this business,’ she concluded.

‘Yes, your grace,’ they replied in unison. Never before in remembrance had an escaped animal caused so much trouble.

Jeffery continued his questioning about the makeup of the ship and the aliens. There were three classes of males: the young, the junior’s and the senior’s. The juniors were servants while the seniors were treated special and provided mating for the females. Afterwards they were fed to the hatchlings. Females were one class but were fewer in number than the males. The females were the warriors, all known as Masters. Jeffery also found that the aliens had an identity chip implanted within them. This allowed the use of lifts, hatches, and other machines to operate at will. Not only did it keep the junior males in line but provided a security feature in case of intruders or others trying to enter the ship. Jeffery began working on another virus that would change the ship’s setup for these chips. It would allow movement of the aliens one way and that was toward an empty pen in the bottom of the ship. After an hour of programming, he finished. Reaching over to push the enter key, claws dug deep into the calf of his leg and began pulling at him. He screamed at the pain and the scrapping of his body being dragged down the shaft. The alien stopped in a small clearing where he rose up, took out a metal object and aimed it directly at

Distant Shores

Jeffery. A low grating noise came from the alien's right side. Both he and the alien looked at the same time. The hunter snakes action was so fast that neither saw it in time. It bit into the alien's body with its fangs, full force. The body was then pulled off slowly in the opposite direction.

Jeffery managed to get back to the cavity and to the terminal. The programmed virus waited there on the console. He pushed the enter key sending it on its way.

Distant Shores

6. THE ENGLISH TEACHER

I felt a tightening in my chest. I stopped what I was doing hoping that the pain would pass, but instead it continued causing me to search for a chair. If I had known then what I was about to get myself into, I would have just waited and drunk the offered water.

I had two sources of encouragement for the decision I made: one was money, the other was listening to the wrong person. Better facilities were available but that would have meant an extra cost. My health had been perfect since arriving on 'Dnalaez'. The inhabitants were strange but the place certainly had its own charm. Being an old home boy and really wanting to see what the galaxy was all about I signed up for an English teaching job. Six months was left of my one year contract and I was reluctant to spend what little money I had saved. Well, the next source of encouragement came from my administrative friend, a class three Adanac who assured me that there was nothing to worry about.

I need to stop before continuing on with my story. Did I mention that the world was way off the normal travel and shipping lanes? Well, it was. Dnalaez was encouraging more immigration from the nearby worlds by lifting many previous restrictions. This was the reason I got a year contract teaching Galactic Wide English with no credentials! Galactic Central, the more populated area of the galaxy, was made up of humanoids and the occasional non-humanoid beings. However, on Dnalaez, I was practically the only human being around.

But to continue the story....I succumbed to the insistence of the class three Adanac to visit the local clinic. This class three Adanac, from the information I received later, was in its late mothering stages. To give you a description of her/it (please do not fix the term 'racist' to me here, I used the term 'her/it' simply because I didn't know), you'd have to imagine six large balloons tied together, the color of pale blue with very little other features whatever. The only clothes it wore were the strings that came out from the folds between the sections separating the head, arms and legs. This wasn't really strange, as the world was a hodgepodge of different beings. My English class was made up of similar indescribable and less understandable beings. But I'm getting off the subject somewhat. The one other strange aspect of this world and in fact this area of space was the high used of biologically trained creatures for things I had only seen done by technology. My eyes began to open as I entered the medical clinic. Once I lay down on

Distant Shores

the wood bed my class three Adanac friend started to go strange, as if I was her child or something. Another being entered who I assumed to be the doctor, a class six Htuos. (Oh, another point. Dnalaez was a 'class' society. It was important to acknowledge everyone's class openly.) I knew that many of the Htuos had recently immigrated to Dnalaez due to unrest on their home world. The Htuos doctor to my amazement pulled an eight legged small bark colored animal from beneath a basket. It had small suckers on the tips of its legs. The legs joined at a small lump with another extension/neck running to a head. It was squirming about like a pile of worms on hot ashes but it reminded me of something between a spider, octopus and group of earthworms tied together. Some of the legs fell across my face. But then the Htuos doctor proceeded to attach suckers to my chest and legs where they stayed attached. Seeing the expression on my face, my Adanac friend began to pat and rub my hand fiercely. I really couldn't ascertain what the thing was doing but it let off a high frequency squeal every few seconds. Of course by now I questioned the sanity of my decision to come to the clinic. I even questioned the sanity of my decision to come to this world. My Adanac friend noticed my distress and obviously interpreted my concern as worry which in turn caused more patting and rubbing of my hands, hair, and head. It continued its reassurances that everything would be fine. So what was I to do? If I walked out, this could bring shame upon my friend and I wanted to appear, if nothing else, to be culturally sensitive. So I continued thinking that it would all be over with soon. Little did I know.

"Mr. Smith, I am uncertain as to the status of your being. I believe that it would be best if you went to the hospital for a 24-hour period." The translator translated into perfect galactic wide English.

"Uh, do you really think that's necessary?" I said hoping this would give me an out from this mess.

"Mr. Smith we can never be too sure about these things. It's always better to be on the safe side and besides, the facilities are the best possible," my Adanac friend answered for the doctor.

The doctor shook his head in agreement.

Distant Shores

An hour later, with Adanac friend in tow, I arrived at the hospital. In the emergency room another doctor connected me to a similar creature making similar noises as before. The doctor was a class six Dnalaez who hadn't yet entered the mothering stage. My Adanac friend continued her caressing all the way from the clinic to the hospital. I was actually becoming afraid that I had somehow had become her mate or something. Heaven forbid! The thought of that sent chills down my back.

"Mr. Smith?" The Dnalaez spoke a form of galactic wide English without using the translator. "I need to put this under your tongue." The doctor held a twitching purple grub in its hand.

"I don't think so!" My reaction caused an offended look throughout the chamber. Everyone froze, waiting. The Adanac quickly began to ensure me that it was quite a normal procedure. To the others she smiled making excuses for my newness to the world. With a sick feeling in my stomach, I agreed. This seemed to put a relieved look on everyone faces. Within minutes, after the grub was put under my tongue, I felt my world slowly coming to an end, my head was emptying of blood. The grub quickly dissolved in my mouth leaving me short of breath.

Then I vaguely remember the doctor rushing back into the room, "Oh, Mr. Smith, I've given you the wrong pill. Please open your mouth so I can remove it?"

"It's already dissolved." I said feeling a little concerned.

"Oh," a pause, "never mind then." The doctor turned and left.

My head spun, "What happened?" I asked the Adanac.

"The pill actually found your blood a little too rich and had eaten quite a lot before it exploded." She answered.

I decided not to enquire further. At this point a class one Dnalyne, very similar to the Dnalaez themselves, led me away through a dark passageway. The bright side, at this point I found that I had finally left the Adanac behind, nevertheless again assuring me, as her voice got further from me, that I would be well taken care of!

Distant Shores

They prepared me for what was described to be an x-ray. Okay, this couldn't be any different than any normal x-ray could it? I was put on my back with a large catchment bowl beneath me.

"Okay, Mr. Smith, hold your breath as long as possible so that the 'thgil' can dissolve directly into the pores of your skin," the being said without waiting for my answer.

"What's going to dissolve into my pores?" I felt the liquid ooze through my body. I was only able to take minuscule amounts of air during the whole process. Five minutes later the creature poured out onto the catch bowl beneath me. It reformed into the likeness of my blood veins and heart. Before I even knew that I had been taken from the x-ray room, I was rolled into the ward.

There were five beings, all occupying five sectioned off areas of the room. I was put into another board like bed, a cloth put between me and the board with another cloth over me. Doctors from unspecified places came and went. A class seven Idnih doctor came in and stopped at my bed. A snake like creature was curled around its neck. By now I guessed it to be yet, another type of bio-instrument.

"Mr. Smith, we just want to find out what's causing the tightening in your chest. You shouldn't be here more than two or three days." The class seven Idnih doctor said.

"Excuse me?" I quickly asked.

"Yes?" Using his hand, the doctor brushed the snake like bio-instrument's head out of his face.

Now how should I put this, I said to myself? "I don't mean to tell you your job, but I really don't think there's much wrong with me that an aspirin can't fix. In fact, I feel really refreshed and renewed as if nothing ever happened."

"You have nothing to worry about, Mr Smith." The doctor replied.

Was I that obvious....I don't think I was. "No, I'm really feeling fine." I tried one more time.

Distant Shores

“Well, let me just check.” The doctor said.

My eyes grew big as the Idnih doctor unwrapped the snake from around his neck. He held its wriggling form and placed its mouth up my shirt just over my heart. I was torn between staying still hoping the doctor would see reason and jumping up to run. Four needle like teeth bit into my skin. It jumped about the whole time the doctor held the other end to the side of his doctors own bone narrow neck.

“Your heart seem to be in order but we’ll need to run a few tests to be sure.” He pulled the four needled head from where they had sunk into my skin, wrapped the bio-snake-instrument around his neck and walked over to the next patient.

By this time, I was beyond words. I looked about the ward. There were various bio-creature-instruments attached in various ways to my ‘room mates’. One such creature-instrument had its mouth cupped over a non-humanoid mouth and nose. It bloated itself filtering air pushing it into the non-humanoid’s lungs. As the non-humanoid breathed out the creature-instrument would relieve it of impurities by eating them. This was the creature-instruments reward.

The patient across from me sat up on its board bed. I didn’t feel I could ask its origin as that would have been impolite. Its deep-set eyes were down what looked like dark hollow channels. Its tongue uncurled into the bowl it held and then rolled back up into thin jaws where a series of smacking sounds took place.

Another patient lay to my right. From the talk around the ward, he was to have several tests that day. According to the translator it had a cancer of some kind. A class eight Danlgne doctor had just examined him and sliced off part of his body. After recovering, I later overheard the patient comment on how good his doctor was.

I remember the examination went something like this: “And how are you today Mr. Kcubeor?” The Danlgne doctor had asked.

“I have a pain in this area,” a bone like finger attached to a claw pointed to the area located on the beings right side.

Distant Shores

Looking closely at it, the doctor took out a blade much like the ones used for opening boxes. “Now this won’t hurt at all Mr. Kcubeor. It’ll be just a pin prick feeling for you.” I did notice that the doctor spoke really good galactic wide English. The doctor gently pressed the blade down on the location of the non-humanoid beings’ pain. Gently applying pressure to it, he cut out a narrow section of the patient’s side. Holding it up for all to see, he exclaimed “Yeah, you were correct Mr. Kcubeor, this is the affected area.” The strip of hanging meat dripped orange drops of thick substance down onto the patient. “We’ll just take this down to the lab and analyze it.”

This was when I passed out.

During the following day the many legged creature was often attached to me, giving off its particular sound. From that moment on, I really began to think seriously whether I needed medical attention or not.

“Dr. Noseleachc?” I called as it walked by one day. “I want you to know that I am now feeling quite well and believe what I had was a mild case of tension due to a bit of stress.”

“Well, you have responded quite well to our treatment Mr. Smith. And as you are from the Galactic Proper, we are obligated to offer the best medical care to all Galactic Proper beings.”

“Which you’ve done quite well, I might say.” The doctor responded by a snarled up mouth which I took hopefully to be a smile.

“Well, there’s one more test which I’d like performed. I want to run one of our recently developed instruments up into your heart to check it. There is a small amount of risk and you’ll need to sign release papers.”

“Uh, what exactly is this risk.” I asked nervously.

“Nothing to be concerned about,” the reply came. “Although we’re a hundred percent certain it works on Galaxy Proper beings, we’ve never tried it on humans. So you’ll be, how do you say it, our guinea pig.”

Distant Shores

I could have just screamed at that point but I stared instead, speechless, at the doctor. And I wanted to see the galaxy..... the thought passed through my mind.

“And also,” one last chance, “I really need to get back to my classes.”

The doctor returned the snarl like grin as he walked off.

That evening, the meals were served. I waited anxiously as the covered plate was placed before me. Lifting the top carefully I was relieved to smell a delicious odor rise to meet me. It would have been the last straw if they had served me some two-eyed lizard or something. I wolfed down the meal. Sounds came from all sides of the ward throughout the evening. Non-humanoids snoring, bio-creature-instruments squealing, patients chattering in non galactic wide English, and the coming and going of the nurses throughout all hours of the night. I considered getting up and just leaving more than a few times but couldn't convince myself to do it.

The next day, the day of the dreaded test arrived. I hadn't slept very well thinking over my mistake in trying to save some money and also going overboard in trying to be sensitive to the culture of this world. If I could just make it through today, that would be it. I would leave the hospital permission or not and even return to the Galactic Proper. I was really tired of this. I was prepped for the test. An ancient VCR and tape were provided for education viewing. I watched in detail as another snake-instrument-creature much longer and thinner than I had seen thus far made its way up the main artery toward the heart eating great gobs of junk from within the non-humanoid. Only minutes passed before I felt light headed and switched the video off. I quickly leaned over and emptied my stomach into a plastic bag hanging from the wall while several patients raced each other in a hobbled pace to take the bag. I closed my eyes hearing the smacking of jaws from the one who had succeeded in reaching the bag first. If there had have been anything inside me I would have thrown up again but I couldn't, but God was obviously merciful at that point for letting me pass out.

I awoke sometime later.

“Well, Mr. Smith, everything seems in order. We'll be releasing you shortly.”

Distant Shores

“What about the test?” I said full of drowsiness.

“It’s all finished. You slept through the whole thing, and it went perfectly.”

Returning to work the next day, I met my class three Adanac friend. She had a grin that stretched from one side of her balloon head to the other. There were smiles and warm fuzzies from everyone including students, even cheering from others. I was happy to be back teaching English.

The End

Distant Shores

7. THE GREAT VALLEY

By Phil Smith

He looked up and saw a distance cloud of dust hurling down toward him. It billowed forth menacingly covering the entire sky like a dark blanket. Face down in the red sand, Ryion thought about his family, and of the arguments he had had with them. Days, even weeks must have passed now since seeing them. He was no longer sure. He realised now, that he had been ill prepared for what he had started out to do. He knew that he would not be alive much longer!

The wind blew mercilessly outside, evident by the flapping of the tent and pelting of sand against its sides. To this sound, Ryion opened his eyes. Instead of the desolate wastelands, he rested comfortably in the arms of an angel. Taking in her large soft brown eyes and reddish blond oiled hair, he asked, "Am I in heaven?"

"No," replied Glainda, her face blossoming into a wide grin. "You are very much alive! You mustn't speak now. Here, drink some of this." She lifted the water skin to his mouth.

Sipping a bit of the cool liquid, Ryion drifted back off to sleep, dreaming of the angel he had just encountered.

The flap opened with Glainda's father, Dorian, entering the room. "How is our stranger?"

"I don't think he would have lasted many more days, father. He's still very weak."

Dorian, the head Elder, had been leading a group of several hundred wanderers through the red wastelands. The planet's water table had fallen drastically all over in recent the years forcing many such migrations. There were even reports of whole villages dying out. Dorian's village was unable to draw enough for basic needs, much less for animals and fields.

Moments later, Ryion opened his eyes again. He was aware of the angel still holding him in her arms.

"You're awake again!" Glainda was pleased. "Here, drink just a little more of this."

Distant Shores

The water carried such a cool cleanliness, Ryion thought. He swished it around his mouth and swallowed ever so slowly, cherishing the taste of every drop.

"Where did you come from?" Glainda ask curiously.

"I'm from the Great Valley," he answered slowly becoming aware of the angel's arms and body around his head. "It's where water lies in lakes on top of the ground and the bush grow into trees along the lakes edge," reminiscing about his home and the friends he had left behind.

Glainda smiled at him, "Your encounter with death has left you with some interesting visions. What's your name?"

"Ryion and my home is the great Valley." Ryion spoke defensively.

"Well, that's enough talk for now." She smiled. "You need sleep."

Upon leaving the room, the tent buckled heavily back and forth, fighting the dreadful storm, Glainda watched as fine dust filtered down, blown in through a small hole at the top.

"Where's father, Wondreena?" She ask, straining her eyes to see Wondreena, her helper, in a corner caring for a patient.

"All the Elders are in the community tent." She replied without looking up. After a few moments she continued, "So, he thinks you are an angel!" A smile formed on her face which Glainda didn't fail to notice.

"Do all men act this way while in the arms of a woman?" Glainda said returning the smile.

"Yes, most, I'm afraid." Then both women laughed together. A warm feeling touched Glainda, something she had never experienced before.

The Elders met regularly to discuss the ever increasing shortage of water and food. During their sojourn they had only found pockets of water and they dried up within weeks, sometimes days. Now with the storm upon them, the shortage had entered a crisis stage. Visibility

Distant Shores

was the only thing that prohibited the camp from moving on. The Elders' discussion always went round and round chewing the idea over and over again.

"Our cattle will not last another three days, maybe less." The bearded faced elder sourly exclaimed to Dorian. The man's eyes were strained as he peered out from under a heavily eyebrowed forehead.

"We would be worse off if we tried to move the camp in this weather." Dorian replied sympathetically. "You know that."

Glainda sat and listened to everyone expressing their concerns and worries. They carried faces of worry, anxiety, and some, even fear.

Arguments continued. Many argued that they should have left earlier. Some felt that they shouldn't have come this far south.

Her father's face showed signs of increasing strain. His age coupled with the burden of leadership depleted his strength. She knew that he wouldn't be able to continue as head elder much longer. But, maybe, there would be no need!

"But, what are we to do? What are we going to do?" The Elder ask repeatedly and desperately, so strong was his plea that the murmuring of the others stopped and silence reigned with everyone.

It was Glainda who answered the old man's question. "Perhaps the stranger can help us. He says there is plenty of water where he lives."

All seven Elders turned in interest, perhaps in desperate hope. The attentive silence and expectation from the Elders made Glainda nervous.

"Tell us exactly what he said." Her father asked inquisitively.

Glainda wished for a moment that she had remained silent. "He spoke of a great Valley where water lies in lakes on top of the ground and the bush grow into trees along the edge."

"Mumbling of a crazed person," said one elder.

Distant Shores

"Could it be true?" another asked.

"There are old stories which mentions such a rent in the surface so deep that one could not see the bottom. Perhaps it isn't just mumbling," replied Dorian. "Is the stranger awake?"

"He goes by the name of Ryion. He's sleeping now." Glainda answered attentively.

"When he wakes, ask him to come and meet with us." Glainda's father then turned his head to the others. "Who knows, he may be able to give us some hope."

The next morning, Ryion woke refreshed, aware that he was clean and smelled of a rich fragrant oil. He had slept sound and very warm under thick woven blankets. Fresh clothes were lying beside his bed. His face, lips and body were well into the healing process. The oil probably contained one of the many healing agents long used even in his own home.

He wanted to find the girl who had cared for him. Partly to thank her. But if the truth be known, he thought, he just wanted to see her again. She was an angel, not only in the way she looked, but also in the way she spoke, and in the way she held him.

There were signs of people stirring. A clatter here, a murmur there, a child crying could be heard against the backdrop of the noisy wind. The smell of fresh baked bread was evident.

After getting dressed, Ryion ventured out into the next room, a community room of sorts. A dark greyness beset the inside of the whole tent, due to the clouds of dust blocking the rays of the sun. But he noticed off in a corner a lady sitting beside a person.

"Hello, I'm Wondreena. Glainda will return shortly." The lady said in a matter of fact way.

"Thanks," he replied with a half smile.

As he waited, his eyes roamed about the room looking at the bright green pillows used for seating. The floor was also covered with a thick lush patterned carpet.

"Oh! You're up!" Glainda was surprised. "How do you feel?"

Distant Shores

Ryion was very pleased. "Yes, I feel better, much better. Thanks to my little angel! I guess I would have been dead by now if you hadn't found me."

My little angel indeed, she thought. Who does he think he is? "It wasn't me who found you. One of the scouts ran across you while trying to find his way back through the storm." She replied a bit too harshly. "He almost got lost himself."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Ryion, feeling rebuked and confused. "I thought it was you who cared for me."

"It was." Glainda said and then continued as if it was just another job. "I'm learning the ways of medicine in order to care for my people."

"Oh, I see," Ryion trying to sound as if he hadn't felt the knife she had pushed into him.

"This is the Care Tent. Wondreena and I are responsible for it." That would quell his arrogance. After a moment, she began to feel bad for the way she had reacted toward his comment. "Usually my patients are those with cuts, scraps, bruises, and breaks, not someone as battered up as you were. By the way, what were you doing out in the middle of the wastelands?"

"It's a long story beginning with a silly fight I had with my parents." Ryion answered somewhat embarrassed and still confused at her coolness toward him.

"Tell me about your home. Does it really have lots of water? You were very expressive when you first woke up!"

"It's because I've done a lot of thinking since I got lost and almost died. I've really come to miss everyone. Yes, there's a lot of surface water. It's because the rent itself is so deep in the ground. But one wonders how long it will last seeing the world is drying up like it is. There are also many people living there. Villages are scattered throughout the length of it. It is really a beautiful place, Glainda." He said looking directly at her.

"It sounds like a beautiful place." She responded with a wide smile. "Come let me show you around the camp. Be careful as visibility is very poor outside."

Distant Shores

Before they ventured out, Glainda, gave him a tour of the Care Tent and its different rooms and described what each was used for.

For nomadic travellers it was quite extensive he thought. He also sensed a change in her attitude toward him.

Outside, they battled the wind and dust to make their way to where the animals were kept. This was the largest tent in the camp. Ropes were placed between all the tents so that people could find their way about. Glainda held his hand as they struggled against the wind. Both were conscious that they were still holding hands moments after entering the place. Neither let go until an attendant came up and greeted them. Glainda was feeling all warm inside realising that she was indeed attracted to him.

Next, they entered the community tent. A place where the Elders met. "Sometimes the young ones come and play games here. It is also a place where young people talk and plan for their future or meet for courtship," she said blushing.

"Tell me, Glainda, what are you doing in this place?" he asked reaching up and gently pushing the hair from her face.

She started to stop him but then stopped herself. Realised that he really didn't understand what was happening to the world, she decided to tell him their story. Stuttering, she began to tell Ryion why they had left their homes and friends, relatives and even loved ones who decided to remain. Tears formed in her eyes. She looked into his and continued to share the sadness in her heart. Glainda told him of the worsening situation they found themselves in now. Her people were afraid now and becoming desperate.

Ryion had heard of the worldwide drought by those who had come to the Great Valley over the past years. But he hadn't really understood the changing conditions of the planet, until now. The world, his world, was turning into a vast red desert wasteland.

He focussed again on Glainda's face and saw her tears. He placed his right hand on her shoulder to comfort her. She leaned into him and cried releasing the frustration she held inside her.

Distant Shores

"We need to find water soon, Ryion or my people will die!"

"I'll take you to my village if I can, Glainda." He wanted to give her some hope.

At that moment, Dorian entered the tent with another Elder.

Glainda quickly turned so that her father wouldn't see her wet face.

"Welcome to our camp, Ryion?" Dorian said as other elders also entered. "Sit with us and have breakfast."

They all sat down in a circle going through their traditional greetings and morning comments. Cups of hot tea were shortly placed before them plus several bread loaves.

"Please go ahead Ryion, eat!" Dorian motioned smartly with his right hand toward the tea and food. Dorian became serious. "Please forgive us for asking some questions while you eat. Ryion, we are a desperate people in a desperate situation. Has my daughter explained to you our present crisis?"

Ryion nodded his head.

"Can you help us in any way?" Dorian spoke wrapping his hands around the hot cup of tea, enjoying the warmth it gave off.

"You are close to the Great Valley. I would guess within a week's travel. Maybe closer."

There were several moans from the group.

One said, "Too much time."

Another, "We have two days at the most."

Ryion continued, "Once we find it, we would need to find the trail that leads down into the Great Valley. That took me days to ascend. As I remember, there is a spring with a large pool of water at the base."

"Could we increase the speed of the descent by lowering everything using ropes?" asked one of the other Elders.

Distant Shores

"Possibly," Ryion answered and hastened to add, "but we can't do anything until this storm abates."

"We could start searching tomorrow, another day or so to move the camp. A day to get down. Three to four days," replied Dorian. "It'll have to do, there's no other choice left to us. We'll meet again this afternoon for more planning." The meeting then broke up.

After they had left, Ryion turned to Glainda, "I think they're putting far too much hope on this. It could take days to find the place."

"I know that, but that hope is the only thing they have and you gave them that at least," she said reaching up and quickly kissing him on the cheek. "Come, let's return to the Care Tent, you need more rest. You're still not fully recovered."

Back in his room, he thought about what had transpired since coming to the camp. The escarpment had to be found, quickly. He didn't know how but he had to do it. He also thought about Glainda, he had never been attracted to any girl before until now. With that thought on his mind he fell quickly asleep.

"Wake up Ryion! Wake up!" Glainda called him as if in a dream. Opening his eyes, he saw her beautiful angelic face. "We have a break in the weather. The winds are dropping and the dust is dying down. Hurry! It may not last," were her last words as she ran from the room.

The wind had died down and dust was indeed settling. Visibility was up to several hundred meters. You could just see the sun through the dusty atmosphere. It was late afternoon. He must have slept for hours. Food and drink was given out to everyone and all ate quickly with very little ceremony.

"First, we'll send scouts out in seven different directions, two by two. Each will be tied to each other by rope. You and I to go together," she said looking at him for approval.

They had searched for hours, stumbling over rocks, sand, and bushes long dry from the lack of water. Glainda constantly checked their position in reference to the camp. Evening was almost upon them and visibility had decreased to only meters with the wind and dust rising again. "We must return Ryion, now, if we're to find our way back." Glainda yelled over the wind.

Distant Shores

"We're close Glainda, I just know it. I recognise where we are." He turned and walked off into the darkened greyness.

"We'll have to return and start the search again tomorrow morning," she started to say but was cut by a yell from Ryion. The rope had gone taut even pulling her forward. Digging her heels in, she pulled at the rope until Ryion emerged up over the cliff right in front of her.

"This is it!" was the first words to come out of his mouth. "We've found it!" He then grabbed her and kissed her excitedly.

Ryion and Glainda were arm in arm watching the last of their camp being lowered in the Great Valley. The storm had passed and the sky had cleared. They could just make out the far distant green below and the lakes of water that were scattered about the valley's floor.