

STRANGE PLACE

by Erica Turrigianni

"Look, Jacob, how long are you going to keep pretending that we're not lost? Ever since that solar flare caught us off guard and damaged the navigational system, we've been lost. Our supplies are running low. We need to find a planet, set down, determine our location and restock our ship. The trip from Earth to Makor was suppose to be a ONE day trip, Jacob. It's been NINE! We need to get everyone off this ship, let them stretch their legs, and give us a chance to get our bearings."

Jacob sighed, "I know you're right. I just didn't want anyone to panic."

"People are already panicking. If we run out of food and water, goodbye panic, hello mutiny. I'll go tell everyone that we are going to set down as soon as we find a suitable planet."

"Wait, Hallen. Help me search for a planet first. It will go better with them if we have a definite plan."

"Look, Jacob. There in grid 0917. What do you think?"

"0917? I've already looked there." Jacob slid his chair next to Hallen's and looked at the red dot now blinking. "It looks great. I guess I missed it. The stress must be getting to me. I'll set a course, you go inform the passengers."

"Wait a minute. What do we know about this planet?"

"How do we know it's safe? I have my children with me."

"I'd rather take my chances on land than stay cooped up in here any longer."

"Everyone, I understand your concerns, really I do. But at this point we don't have much of a choice. We're running low on supplies and this planet appears to have what we need. A breathable atmosphere, water, plants and wildlife. Now, if any of you don't feel comfortable leaving the ship when we land," Hallen directed this toward Mrs. Holly and her two children. "You are welcome to stay aboard. But it would be useful if the rest of us divided into teams to scout the area."

Just then Jacob's voice came over the intercom "We are getting ready to enter the planet's atmosphere. Please take your seats. Thank you."

"I should go assist him. We're going to find our way home very soon." Hallen encouraged.

As soon as he left the room they all began taking their seats and chatting. Mr. Vaughn

complained loudly, "I don't know about the rest of you but I'm demanding my money back!"

Mrs. Holly was busily applying her childrens' safety restraints.

George and Lila Finley sat side by side holding hands just as they had through much of their 45 years of marriage.

The shy Mr. Dashing stared longingly at Mrs. Holly. She was a widow, after all, and he thought she was beautiful. Although when most people looked at Mrs. Holly they saw that her cheekbones were a little too high which caused her cheeks to sink in a little too deeply. And because of her protruding chin her lips seemed to be drawn into a continuous pucker. But to Mr. Dashing she was perfection itself. Her children had obviously inherited their father's looks, and although very well behaved, were still what most people would describe as ordinary. But to Mr. Dashing they too were beautiful. He had always loved children.

Miss Isabela d'Cotur who had prattled endlessly since their departure for Makor sat stiffly in her chair. She seemed to be frightened of spacecraft landings and this to everyones delight had frozen her tongue.

Eventually a nervous energy filled the room as everyone anticipated landing. After several minutes of silence someone said, "Something's wrong. Even a smooth entry has some turbulence. We haven't had any. Something's wrong I'm telling you."

"Shut up! We are all very much aware of the situation. We don't need you scaring us more than we already are."

At the front of the room a door swooshed opened and the two brother's entered. A moment of confusion could be seen on all faces, "What are you both doing here? Who's landing the ship?"

"We've already landed."

The passenger's looked at each other in wonder, "But we didn't feel anything."

"I know, I don't understand it either. It was the easiest landing in my career. When we entered the atmosphere it was as if the ship was gently lowered to the ground. There was simply no resistance."

"Are you sure it's safe?"

"Don't worry, Mrs. Holly, I'll stay with you." This was Mr. Dashing of course.

He had been waiting for an opportunity to be closer to her and this seemed the ideal moment. Mrs. Holly smiled, "I never thought I'd be escorted by a Dashing man." She blushed deeply, "I'm sorry that was terrible. You probably hear things like that all of the time."

“Not as often as you might think.” His smile widened as he looked at her. Her face reddened even more. Not wanting to embarrass her further, he forced his eyes from her and focused on her kids instead. “Come children, why don’t one of you hold my hand and the other hold your mother’s that way we can all stay together.”

A loud creaking noise was heard and all attention was turned to the side entrance where the large hatch door was being opened. Beautiful bright sunlight began to flood the room and one by one 30 of the 40 passengers stepped out into it. The nervous tension that each had felt over the last nine days began to melt away. “What a beautiful place.” There were foothills to the left and to the right a valley seemed to stretch endlessly before them. There were a few scattered trees and an occasional cluster of them. Hallen guessed that the clusters were probably closest to a fresh water supply. Tall golden grass waved in a gentle breeze and although most of it was waist high it was very easy to walk through. After a few moments Jacob called everyone together. “Ok, why don’t we split into three groups? That should give us enough protection, if needed, and yet allow us to search a large portion of this valley. Hallen, why don’t you check the trees, I’ll take a group up the hill, and Mr. Dashing would you lead a group toward that green area? Let’s meet back here in one hour. Good luck.”

It turned out Hallen had guessed correctly about the water and now everyone in his group was filling small containers of cool water from a brook to take back to the others.

“You know what would be good right now?” One woman asked as she replaced the lid to her container. “A great big juicy apple. The kind my Grandma used to have in her backyard.” She smiled at the memory.

Seeing that the man beside her had turned pale, she asked, “What’s the matter?” She turned in the direction of his stare to see what had frightened him and saw an apple tree full of juicy red apples. The woman laughed, “What a coincidence!” She was standing and dusting off her clothes but the man still hadn’t moved. Concerned she knelt down beside him, “What’s the matter? Are you okay?”

He turned to look at her, “That apple tree wasn’t there before.”

Confused she said, “What do you mean?”

“I mean it wasn’t there before!”

“Don’t be silly. Of course it was there. Look at it. It’s branches look like they’re almost ready to break, it’s so full of apples. That doesn’t happen overnight. You just didn’t see it before.”

The man took the woman’s wrist in his hands, “That tree was not there. That’s the way we came from the ship. Do you think we all didn’t see it?!” Doubt began to creep into the woman’s thoughts. “Look,” the man pointed, “the grass is trampled down where we all

came through. The path is right there beside that tree. That apple tree was not there when we arrived here!"

Later after returning to the ship they heard similar stories from the other two scouting parties. One young man upon reaching the green area commented on how it would be a perfect place to play a game of cat's pitch and how he hadn't played in years. The words had barely left his mouth when someone else in the group found the necessary ball and net to play the game. A couple of bird enthusiast mentioned how they had always wanted to see the elusive wadu bird. And then one went screeching across the sky. It was very strange. There were several speculations but none of them could be proven. Although Jacob thought it unlikely, he liked Mrs. Holly's son, Brailey's, idea the best. "We've all heard of wishing wells... Maybe this is a wishing planet?"

Hallen pulled his brother aside, "Jacob, this is a strange place. We need to find a way to get home."

"I agree. So far nothing has been malevolent but I think it's imperative we attempt to concentrate our thoughts on our duty or the welfare of our fellow travellers." Hallen thought that he had heard something similar to this before but he couldn't remember where.

Jacob continued, "When we were on the hill we saw a house and a road. Maybe we can get some answers and assistance."

"A house?! Our sensors didn't show any humanoids living on this planet!"

"Well, like you said this is a strange place."

"I'll say one thing for this planet. It certainly is lovely." No one could disagree with this statement. They were all walking together in the direction of the house. The individual passengers were starting to pair off into smaller groups. Friendships were forming and love interests too. After placing a couple of younger men in the front of the line Jacob and Hallen brought up the rear making sure no one got left behind. Keeping his voice lowered so no one else could hear Jacob asked his brother, "Hallen, did you notice how Mr. Finley jumped over that little creek we passed awhile back?"

"Yeah, so?"

"When he boarded, he could barely walk. He alternated his weight between his cane and Mrs. Finley and his breathing was bad. Now, look at him. No wheezing, no cane! It's like he's 20 again." Jacob looked at the older couple "Well, 40. Anyway, he's gotten healthier." Hallen didn't say anything he just nodded. This planet was too strange for words.

Just then they heard someone calling from ahead, "Hello, strangers. Welcome." As

Jacob and Hallen caught up with the rest of the group they could see a man dressed in unusual clothing waving them toward him. He had a large hat on his head and a huge toothy grin on his face. "Well, strangers, you don't look like you hail from these parts. Can I assist you with anything? I have vegetables fresh from the vine here in the garden if you're hungry and cold refreshing water from the stream if you're thirsty?"

"Thank you sir. We are hungry."

"Help yourselves."

Different members of the party began to eat while Jacob chatted with the man. "Can you tell me where we are?"

"Surely, you're on Lansing Farm. I'm Lansing."

"But where are we?" The man looked confused so Jacob asked, "What planet are we on?"

The man still looked confused but finally answered "Mister, I don't understand your strange word 'planet'. But you're on Lansing Farm."

Now Jacob looked confused. How did this man not understand the word planet? But before he was able to ask anything else Mrs. Holly spoke, "Oh, I could live here for the rest of my life."

"If you feel that way about it, miss, there's another farm just down that path. You can see the house from here." The farmer pointed off to his right. "The man that lived there before was a city man. He decided he didn't like all of this peace and quiet and went back to the city. But before he left he gave me the deed to his farm. He said that if I should find anyone who would like to have their own place that I should give it to them." The man reached into one of his pockets and pulled out a piece of paper. "Would you like to have it?"

Mrs. Holly's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. "I never imagined I could own anything so beautiful! Is this a safe place to raise children?"

"Yes, ma'am, as safe as can be."

"Maybe this is a wishing planet! Mr. Dashing, will you consider being my partner?"

Now Mr. Dashing believed in the wishing planet. too. "I would love to."

"Come, children," she called "Let's go see our new home!" They headed down the path that the man had pointed to earlier. Mr. Dashing turned, "Hallen, we'll stay here until you find a way home."

"Oh," Mrs. Holly replied. "We are home."

Hallen started to protest. They didn't need to be splitting up like this.

But another passenger stopped him. "Hallen, Jacob, if I could have a word with you for a moment? Boys, I recognize that man's attire, and the architecture. It places him in the Earth's European 14th century!"

Jacob was startled, "Do you mean we've time travelled?"

The man shrugged his shoulders, "All I'm saying is that I recognize the time period where that farmer belongs. That's why he didn't understand the word planet. There's only one world to him. Let the others go. They're blissfully unaware. When we find a way home we can come back for them."

Hallen wasn't certain about leaving anyone behind but the man was right. Why frighten them when there was no need.

After explaining to the farmer that they were lost and trying to find a way home, he told them of a ship that could take them to a nearby town. "Maybe you can find a way from there."

The group continued walking until they topped a hill and saw a magnificent seashore with a wooden sailing vessel docked in the harbor. Men were loading wooden crates, produce, and animals. When they asked the Captain about the fare, they were told there was none. The desire to travel was all that was necessary.

While they traveled Jacob noticed Mr. Vaughn standing away from the group. He had his hands cupped in front of him and his eyes closed. When he opened them he looked disgusted. "What are you doing?"

The man smiled, "Well, everyone else is getting their wish. I thought I would try for a sack full of money."

The strangest thing occurred at their destination, everything changed. When they stepped off the boat they were no longer in a harbor but on a steam engine platform. And, although, they knew that they had just been on a boat it now appeared that they had been on the train. Bewildered and confused the group of passengers just stood there not knowing what to do until the man that had first suggested time travel herded them off the platform and toward a set of benches. "Everyone, I know that this planet is confusing but let's just keep to..."

"What happened? One minute we were on a boat surrounded by crystal clear water and the next we're in a city getting off of...I don't know what that thing is!"

The train's whistle blew at that exact moment and everyone in the group jumped. "It's called a steam locomotive. It was a mode of transportation on Earth around the late 19th century."

"Are you a history professor?"

Hallen spoke up, "Everyone, please stay calm. I believe if we work together we can still find our way home."

"I want to go back. I want to go back to the countryside. I liked it there. I don't even know why I came here with the rest of you."

Jacob saw several people in the group nodding their agreement.

"Do you think that if we get back on that locomotive thing it will take us back there?"

No one had an answer.

After a moment someone said, "I'm willing to try it."

"And I'll go too," the professor volunteered. "That way, if it works I can come back and tell the rest of you."

Jacob wanted to protest, he wanted to keep everyone together, but he had already left Mrs. Holly and her children behind. He needed to know if they could get back to them when they found a way home. So he nodded his agreement.

"If I'm not back in one hour then go on without me."

A man yelled "all aboard" and the young man and the professor stepped onto the train. The steam engine began to roll and soon was out of sight. The remaining passengers huddled close to the benches. No one straying more than a few feet from the others. The sights and sounds of this place were strange. Hallen figured he could adjust to them but having a ship turn into a locomotive? That had him shaken. After 45 minutes they heard the sound of a train whistle in the distance and soon they could see the engine pulling the train into the station. Steam filled the whole area and as soon as it cleared they saw the professor standing on the platform smiling brightly.

"What was it like, Professor?"

"The same as before except this time when we stepped off the train onto the platform, everything turned back. The dock, the ship, the country! It's all there."

Just hearing this made Hallen sigh with relief. It obviously made the others feel better too for they started wandering around exploring this new place.

"Why, look at this Mother...what a charming bookstore."

"You know we always dreamed of owning our own, didn't we, Father?" The Finley's had indeed found a lovely old bookstore with large store front windows. "Mother, look at those books. They're all new and first editions of *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*! This has to be around 1877!" Just then the proprietor approached the window and put up a sign. It read, **For Want**

For Want? Whatever does that mean?" A woman walking down the street overheard the question and stopped to explain. "It means that anyone who wants the bookstore

can have it.”

“Can have it? What will the current owner do?”

“Oh, he’s probably already found some other for want place.”

“For want? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Everything’s done that way here,” the woman said matter of factly and she continued on down the street.

Mr. Finley smiled at Mrs. Finley and as though they could read each other’s minds they walked hand in hand into the bookstore.

“Well, 1877 is not where I belong.”

“I like it.”

After taking a vote, 9 of the passengers decided to go back to the country while 8 decided to stay in 1877. Hallen, Jacob, the Professor, Mr. Vaughn, and Isabela d’Cotur were still determined to find their way home and wanted to continue exploring. So they took the northbound train.

Stepping off the steam locomotive, they saw that it had now turned into some sort of underground train system and they were surrounded by hundreds of people. Hallen found himself actually thankful that their group was smaller. They would never have been able to keep together in this throng. The crowd began to move toward a flight of stairs and they were carried along with it. At the top they were thrown into even more chaos. There were people everywhere, strange four wheeled vehicles that made a horrible "honking" sound filled the street, and the buildings were the tallest Jacob had ever seen.

Jacob felt the noise to be unbearable but Mr. Vaughn seemed to have stepped into his element. He kept saying to himself, “Money, money, look at all the money that could be made here.”

Just then a yellow vehicle pulled to a stop in front of them. The man operating it shouted out, “Need a cab?” Before anyone could ask what a *cab* was Mr. Vaughn opened the vehicle’s door and got into it. The others glanced at one another and quickly did the same.

“Where to?”

“Where’s the money made in this town?”

“Money? That’d be Wallstreet.”

“Then to Wall street,” Mr. Vaughn said confidently. The operator nodded and the

vehicle began to move.

“Well, Professor, any idea where we are this time?”

“Oh, yes! This is New York City. And judging by the tall buildings called skyscrapers, the automobiles, and the people I’d say it’s the early 21st Century!”

Upon reaching Wall street the driver stopped in front of a place called the New York Stock Exchange. He turned to Mr. Vaughn and asked for money. Mr. Vaughn handed the man a business card, “Here you go. Keep this and when I am rich you contact me. You can be my personal driver.”

“Your chauffeur? Thanks Mister.” The man beamed with delight as if being a chauffeur was his dream come true.

A look that said, “what is this strange place?” passed between Jacob and Hallen.

Mr. Vaughn turned to those seated in the back of the cab, “Gentlemen and lady. This is where I leave you. Ever since I was a child I have felt that wonderful things were coming my way and I believe this is the place where those things are going to happen. I wish you good luck on your journey home.” He then turned to the driver and asked, “Would you take my friends wherever they want to go?”

“Sure, thing. And thanks once again.”

Mr. Vaughn nodded to them all and raised a hand, “Goodbye.”

Jacob shook his head. He couldn’t understand how anyone could be happy in this noisy, overcrowded city but Mr. Vaughn certainly seemed it. “This is a strange place.”

The four remaining travelers decided that they would rather continue their journey homeward than to stay in New York so they tried explaining their situation to the cab driver hoping he could help. The man whistled, “Sounds like you’re from some sort of Sci-fi show, like Star Trek.”

“Star Trek?”

“What kinda world you livin’ in that you don’t know Star Trek?” There were blank stares all around. “You can travel anywhere from JFK airport.”

Hallen looked to the others at see if they agreed before he said, “Can you take us there?”

Stepping off the airplane they now found themselves on a boulevard, the *crude flying machine* was now a fancy horse drawn carriage.

As they walked along the streets they were in awe of the magnificent, ancient buildings. The history professor was indeed impressed, “That baroque design places that building

in Earth's early 1700s. Yet it looks as if it was built yesterday!"

Jacob leaned close to his brother and whispered, "Hallen, how are these things possible?" Hallen simply shook his head. He subtly nodded his head toward the other side of the street indicating he wanted Jacob to look in that direction. Jacob saw a man and a woman whispering and looking at Isabela d'Cotur. Puzzled, but curious, Jacob then made a slow sweep of the area. Everyone he saw seemed to be staring at Isabela. It was as if they had spotted someone they recognized but didn't know personally. Just then Isabela screamed. Jacob turned quickly to see what had happened. She was standing in front of a large dress shop, her hands clasped to her mouth with delight. Jacob was relieved and annoyed. *Here we are stranded in this bizarre world trying to find our way home and this woman screams over a dress!* The shopkeeper came out of the store and curtsied deeply to her, "Madam, I am delighted to see that you like one of my dresses. It is a huge honor to have a d'Cotur visit my humble shop. Please, madam, come inside and I can assist you with anything you desire." Flattered Isabela started to enter the shop but she stopped, "Oh, but I have no money."

"Madam!! Your money is no good here. Why, truly, just to have a d'Cotur enter my establishment! It makes my dreams come true!"

"Well, if it will satisfy a dream. I shall." The two ladies disappeared into the shop.

Hallen shook his head again but this time not in wonder but disgust. "Oh, well. At least, it will give us a quiet minute to find someone who might help us get home."

"A minute? That woman isn't coming out of that place for hours."

"That's probably true. There's a cafe over there. Let's see if we can trade on being Miss d'Cotur's "escorts" for some lunch." Hallen said this in jest but once again to their amazement it worked. During their meal the conversation stayed pretty much on topic, what is this place and how do we get home until the owner approached them cautiously, "Gentlemen, I hope I don't offend you with my presumptuousness but Madam d'Cotur? Where has she been all these years?"

Noticing an opportunity Hallen asked "Where was she supposed to be?"

The owner straightened as a man who is an expert on a topic might. "Some say she was abducted, but no demands were ever made, some say she eloped, but I believe that she decided to travel under an assumed name and simply leave her fame behind for awhile."

The three men seated at the table looked at each other. Not knowing exactly what to say to this news. Hallen decided it would be best to just agree with the man.

The owner beamed with delight. "I knew it. I knew I was right."

The owner turned and walked away, leaving the three men to stare at each other in amazement. Eventually, one of them said, "What is this place?"

Upon leaving the cafe they saw a gilded baroque carriage with four white horses stop in front of the dress shop. A man with a powdered wig descended and prestigiously entered the shop. Although they hastened their pace the men were unable to reach Isabela before she exited the shop and was assisted into the carriage. The Professor yelled, "Isabela."

She saw them coming and said, "Gentleman! have you heard the news? It seems I am a long lost Dutchess. Isn't it wonderful?! This man is taking me to check the status of my estate. So, I will not be joining you any further. I'm sure I will be quite happy here." She paused ever so slightly, "Gentlemen, don't be rude. Aren't you going to comment on my gown? Isn't it lovely? It's made of the finest silk and it fits me perfectly. This dress simply accentuates the perfect curve of my tummy and hips." Mercifully the driver cracked the whip and the carriage began to roll. " Well, Ta ta, gentlemen. "

Dumbfounded the men watched the carriage roll down the street, the wind carrying her voice back to them until the carriage disappeared around the corner.

They were still staring when Jacob said, "Wouldn't you know that she would be the next to last passenger to leave our group?"

This caused the other two men to laugh. As their laughter quieted the professor said, "Actually, Isabela was your last passenger."

All mirth ended. "What do you mean she was our last passenger? What about you?" The brothers waited for a response.

The professor turned to face each of them as he said their names "Jacob, Hallen, now that it is just the two of you and you are still determined to make your way home I can tell you the truth. I didn't book passage on your ship. I joined you when it was affected by the solar flare."

"At the solar flare?! How could you do that?"

The man spread his hands out, "As you've already seen. We have different rules here."

"Who are you? And Where Are We?"

"My name is Alan Viscar. I'm a citizen of Earth, just like you. And this..." the man spread his hands out once again, "is heaven."

Alan quickly explained that the solar flare didn't just disrupt their navigation but caused their small ship to explode.

"Neither you nor any of your passengers knew what happened and none of you survived."

As he explained Jacob and Hallen began to realize what he was telling them was the truth, "Why didn't you just tell us this from the beginning?"

“Well, there are rules... even here. You see, most people don't realize that they've died. They just continue living. There's a little confusion at first, of course. Just like you having to land on a strange planet, and the odd things that kept occurring, but then they come upon a place that they love with all their heart and they can't imagine living anywhere else. But there are a handful, myself, included that have to be told. Otherwise, we would never have settled and become content...always searching for home.”

There was a pause as the two men absorbed this, “What happens now?”

“Well, you get to choose. You can travel to see if you find a place that suits you, the odds are high, this is heaven after all,” Alan smiled. “Or you can do what I do. Be a greeter and help others along the way to finding their paradise. I'll leave the two of you now. If you ever need me just use these.” He handed them both a small remote like object, “It's a little perk for us knowers. Just push the button and I'll know where to find you.”

“Should we go back to our ship, *The Handbasket*, and guide the others?”

“Don't worry about them. They have another guide.”

He headed back toward the boulevard. When he was about half way there he turned to them with a crooked smile on his face, “And boys, you were right. This is a Strange Place.”