

John R. Daniels



Eden on a
DISTANT WORLD

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A novel by

JOHN R. DANIELS

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This book is dedicated to the Glory of the Creator of the Universe, God our Father; to His Son, called Emmanuel and Jesus, Who offers Life and Salvation; and to the Sprit Who woos us to Himself and provides the Power to live as Creator intends.

This story is a work of fiction. However, some human characters are based on real people, but never in a disparaging way. Any negative qualities in any character that could be construed to be a real person are purely coincidental. Concepts, some situations, historical setting and other features of the story are based on scripture.

Introduction

One day I was thinking about the possibility that there may really be other planets with life on them. There have been so many accounts of UFO's, some of which have supposedly landed; others were reported to have simply "buzzed" our planet and decided not to bother with us.

Then, I started thinking that, if there really is life out there, it would be subject to the same laws of the universe, the same confines of history and reality that Earth is. Where is the best place to find the most accurate description of those laws? The Creator has left us with that account of history and reality in a book commonly called The Bible.

Whichever of the most standard translations you might read, there are several things that are consistent. The first is that the account says that it took six days, as in from sun-down to sun-down, for Creator to create everything that was made, including absolutely everything in the universe. After that, He stopped creating and took a break. It doesn't say that He created anything after that.

The next thing we find out is that we were designed to live in harmony and fellowship with Him and with each other. We didn't need any laws except to love God and each other. Death was never part of the plan. Insects were never meant to bite us. You get the idea.

What if, then, there was a planet on which the "Adam and Eve" there did NOT eat the forbidden fruit? Would it be a totally perfect world? It might have been, except that in the account of history from God, we know that there is an evil person that has nothing on his mind but the corruption and consumption of all humans, no matter where in the universe they may be. So he and his minions would still be able to tempt individuals, even though he could not deceive the whole race on that particular planet.

Back to UFO's. People from such a planet would not have spent the last 6,000 years fighting and arguing and stealing from each other, but would have been able to devote energies to advancing technology among other things, and so be able to visit us. They would not, however, be responsible for any crop or animal mutilations or abductions as is reported. Those activities would have to have been done by other beings; that may make a different story.

I hope you enjoy my musings on what a planet with obedient first people might be like.

John Daniels

Chapter Index

Chapter 1 – Into the Unknown	1
Chapter 2 – A Strange Sight Out There	5
Chapter 3 – Somewhere Between Earth and Somewhere Else	8
Chapter 4 – Discovering the Other Eden	12
Chapter 5 – First Contact	17
Chapter 6 – New Beginnings	19
Chapter 7 – Such a Strange and Wonderful Planet	24
Chapter 8 – Where Are We, Really?	35
Chapter 9 – Discovering the “Dark Eyes”	37
Chapter 10 – Encounter With the Darkness	41
Chapter 11 – Finding Help	44
Chapter 12 – When the Valley of the Dark Eyes Came to Be	51
Chapter 13 – Road Trip	53
Chapter 14 – Ian’s Big Question	65
Chapter 15 – The Rings – Part One	69
Chapter 16 – The Rings – Part Two	79
Chapter 17 – The Rings – Part Three	85
Chapter 18 – The Most Revealing Search	92
Chapter 19 – Duke’s Turn to the Dark One	98
Chapter 20 – Duke’s Journey to The Valley of the Dark Eyes	102
Chapter 21 – Yaleah’s Confession and the Mutual Proposal	105
Chapter 22 – The First Interplanetary Wedding	109
Chapter 23 – The Other Big Wedding	118
Chapter 24 – The Beginning of the End	120
Chapter 25 – First Missionaries to the Valley of the Dark Eyes	128
Chapter 26 – The Beginning of José’s Great Adventure	133
Chapter 27 – José Finishes His Great Adventure	146
Chapter 28 – Big Tiny Discoveries	152
Chapter 29 – Discovery in the Garden of New Beginning	158
Chapter 30 – Discovery in the Valley of the Dark Eyes	167
Chapter 31 – Last Time in the Valley of the Dark Eyes	170
Chapter 32 – New Everything	177

Index of Characters, Places and Other Things

Abyguul (ă-bĭg'-û-ŭl) – unicorn-like beast; led José & Khaylek to the boats
Admawa (ăd-mă'-wă) – Gardener friend of José and the others
Ael'aloihaem (ă'-ĕl – ăl'-ôl-hām) – Constellation representing God as trinity
Ahleyith (ă-lă'-ĭth) – moose-like creature, guide on José's great adventure
Ahmahna (ă-mă'-nă) – lead Awdnite mechanic working on the Pilgrim
Ahotanna (Ă-hō-tă'-nă) – one of Yaleah's sisters / bridesmaid at her wedding
Austare (Ă-stār') – Maugrab's wife; Yaleah's mother.
Awdaim (Aŭ-dām') – First man on Awdnaw
Awdnaw (ăŭd'-nă) – Name of the planet on which the Pilgrim landed
Awdnaw'Shaulaem (ăd'-năŭ shă-lă'-ĕm) – Constellation – “Perfect Eden”
Baen'baraw (bă'-ĕn bă-ră') – Constellation – “Children of Creator”
Baen'Sautawn (bă'-ĕn să-tăŭn') - Constellation – “Children of the Dark One”
Barawb (Bär- äb') – Constellation – “Ymanyale”
Cewik seolfar (kĕ-wĭk' sĕ'-öl-fär) – mercury
Cherowb (Chā-rŭb') – Fierce angels that do guard work
Chupphernechel (Kŭ-pĕr'-nĕ-kĕl') – or Chel (Kĕl) for short – the silver metal used for the rings
Dancierre (Dänn-sĕ-ār') – one of the horse creatures – Yaleah's horse
Dark Valley – other name for Valley of the Dark Eyes
“Duke” (Michael) Washington, Captain – Navigator and Engineer
Ennemnus (ĕ-nĕm'-nŭs) – one of first people put in Valley of the Dark Eyes
Gadlofe (găd'-lōf) – species of large bird José found on his great adventure
Gehbriy'ale (Gĕ-brĕ-āl') – Mawlawk with trumpet; calls Creator's children
Ian Stevens, Major – Captain of the Pilgrim and the mission
José Rodriguez, Captain – Co-pilot / Special Science Deployment
Kefawneeyah (Kĕ-fă'-nĕ-yă) –Town with boat to Myfflaway
Kelabe (Kĕ-lă'-bā) – part of crew of “Most Revealing Search” ship
Kephus (Kĕ'-fŭs) – boat keeper that helped Jose' and Khaylek cross sea
Khaylek (Kā'-lĕk) – took José on journey to Myfflaway
Layshonau (Lă'-shō-naŭ') – Chief off-the-planet searcher / space-ship pilot
Lewts (Lŭts) – Translator at small town near sea
Leyvatheem (Lă'-vă-thēm) – Fire-breathing sea creature / dragon
Manayabell (Mă-nă'-ă-bĕl – guitar like instrument; Ya'akobe taught Ian
Maugrab (Mă'-grăb) – liaison between Earthlings & Awdnites; Yaleah's father
Mauksey (Măk-să') – Town that José and Khaylek came to after the rescue
Mawlawk (Mă'-lăk) – Angel – messenger type
Mawleybid (Mă-lă'-bĭd) – Angel – worker type
Maysik Berakaw (Mă'-sĭk Bĕ'-ră-kă) – fruit with sweet and sour sections.
Meerjam (Mĕr'-jām) – Part of crew of the “Most Revealing Search” ship
Meerjay (Mĕr'-jā) –Part of crew of “Most Revealing Search” ship
Mirilaen (Mĕr'-ĭ-lān) – Rescued one from Valley of the Dark Eyes, rebellious
Miyka'el (Mĕ'-kă-ĕl') – lead Cherowb
Myfflaway (Mĭf '-lă-wă) – Town where José meets Ruwauth

Index of Characters, Places and Other Things (Cont.)

Nadtsarett (Năd'-tsă-rět) – Village where the Pilgrim landed
Nymraod (Nīm'-rā-öd) – Rescued one from Valley of the Dark Eyes, rebellious
Onayasim (Ō-nā'-ă-sīm`) – scribe's name / Susan's eventual husband
Owrah (ō'-ră) – type of obsidian / used in Yaleah's ring
Pilgrim – Name of the ship that was supposed to go to Mars
Rawh (Ră) – evil spirit / demon
Reemeem – (Rēm'-ēm) – Awdnite name for a unicorn
Rekaboum (Rĕk-ă-bō'-ŭm) – Searcher who invented super-scope
Rhayah (Rā'-yă) – Susan's friend and mentor
Rishownyawm (Rĭsh-ăn-yăm') – sea near the first garden
Ruwauth (rū'-ăth) – José's wife
Shavau (Shă-vaũ') – First woman on Awdnaw
Susan McGuire, Major – Communications and Science Officer
Swiffan (Swĭ'-făn) – one of the horse creatures - Ian's horse
Tane (Tăn) – Small whales that pulled boats smoothly and quickly
Tsa'fauw (tsă-fă') – Village where Yaleah and Ian paddled the canoe
Ya'akobe (yă'-ă-kōb) – Yaleah's younger brother
Yaleah (yă-lē'-ă) – Ian's eventual wife / Maugrab and Austare's daughter
Yayhushaw (yă-hū'-shă) – captain of “Most Revealing Search” ship
Ymanyale (ĩ'-măn-yāl) – Name for Jesus on Awdnaw
Zeffria (zĕf'-rē-ă) – one of first people put in Valley of the Dark Eyes

Chapter 1

Into the Unknown

The crew of the *Pilgrim*, a sophisticated, interplanetary spaceship, was hurtling at thirty-seven thousand miles an hour through space after liftoff from Earth, and about to go into partial hyper-gravity drive on their way to Mars. At half the speed of light, it would reduce the eight months that it would normally take, using traditional technology, to about thirty minutes. Everyone on board would also be able to stay awake for the whole journey without having to be put into a sort of hibernation for most of the trip.

Major Ian Stevens was the captain of this flight. On board with Major Stevens was Major Susan McGuire, who handled communications and was the science officer. Air Force veteran Captain Mike “Duke” Washington was the navigator, engineer and sometimes mechanic. He had tested a number of space jets and other top-secret military craft. He also helped develop a new GPS system that requires far fewer satellites to operate. Captain José Rodriguez was good at his jobs as co-pilot, special science operations with an emphasis on new life forms and languages, and mechanic.

They were going to Mars to see what, if any, signs of life there might be. Previous probes had discovered small amounts of water, minerals and other elements that would be necessary for life, but probes couldn’t search out certain things that only humans could. So, the space agencies on Earth decided to send a crew to see for themselves.

It had been more than a hundred and fifty years since people first started trying to leave the confines of Earth. All the advances in technology since then had led up to this time, when the crew of the *Pilgrim*, representing all of human effort, was ready for the jump to hyper-gravity drive, despite the fact that the only experiments done with ships of any sort going that fast had been done with unmanned prototypes and one with a rat on board. Once anything went into hyper-gravity drive of any sort, it was impossible to retrieve it, especially since no one knew just where or how far it had gone.

It might have seemed strange that a whole space crew was unmarried, but the space agencies required that any of its astronauts on this Mars mission be unattached in case something went horribly wrong. Each member of the crew had had to sign a waiver so that if they were irretrievably lost in space, none of their families, friends or even people they owed money to could sue for any amount.

Each of them had spent months studying all of the theories concerning the space-time continuum, speed of light characteristics, alternate physical universe properties, wormholes, black holes and dark matter. Not that they had understood all of it. Most of the scientists that wrote about those things didn’t fully understand everything about them. But this they did know; things were not going to be the same as when they were traveling only fifty thousand miles an hour. For one thing, time slows down as an object, or person, goes faster. And, with increased

Eden on a Distant World

speed, an object's mass increases while its size decreases; everything just gets more and more compact, like packing snow into a harder ball. They were curious and anxious to find out what they would notice. Would they sense the differences in time, mass or size, or would it just be part of their existence?

The *Pilgrim* had special additional fins, heat shields and a special flattened nose cone. Even though there had been probes and quite a few Mars Landers over the years, nothing would be left to chance, at least nothing the ship's designers could think of. The ship itself was longer and thinner than previous spacecrafts. The crew was seated in a modified block pattern. Ian and José in the middle, side by side, while Duke and Susan were on either end, facing the sides of Ian and José's position, respectively. The seats were arranged so that each of the crewmembers' faces was level with each other. The controls were above and just below face level so they could all see each other. There were two sets of four fins so that, no matter how thick or thin the atmosphere was, they would be able to control the craft. There was no mother ship and lander setup like there was with early trips to Earth's moon. The whole ship would make the entire trip to the surface of Mars and back to Earth.

The crew made their final preparations for their jump to hyper-gravity drive, often referred to as HG drive. Instruments, gauges, oxygen levels, chronometers of various designs and other devices were all checked. They hoped to be able to measure to what extent time is compressed at such dizzying speeds, but no one thought any of the chronometers would be able to do that, since they would all be traveling at the same speed and be subject to the same slowing of time. But, the eggheads in the design department wanted to try it anyway, so they would. Duke Washington made a final inspection of the exterior of the ship with a number of remote cameras to make sure everything was as it should be. Susan McGuire checked normal communications systems and three alternate systems. In addition to standard methods, there was a light wave carrier system and one that used solar wind particles. No one knew how well any communications system would work at such incredible speeds.

"Major Stevens on *Pilgrim* to ground control. Do you read?"

"We read you, Ian. Are you ready to jump?"

"Affirmative, ground control. We will attempt communications after fifteen minutes".

"We copy that *Pilgrim*. Commence countdown when you're ready. Good luck. Ground control out."

"Copy that, ground control. Jump to HG drive in five, four, three, two, one." Ian pushed the button. Nothing happened. Or maybe something did happen. Some of the stars outside the portholes seemed to get brighter; others seemed to get dimmer. Then there was a sensation of slowly being crushed. Things get smaller as speed increases, especially when you're going at half the speed of light. There is no pain, though; it's kind of like being under too many blankets in bed. Now, the whole crew started hearing the blood rush through their veins; their eyes could see much more clearly everything around them, and distant things outside the ship were much easier to see. They could see other planets and the details on the asteroids. Each one could hear the sound of his or her heart slow to a loud "clump-plump" instead of the usual "lub-dub".

"Wait a minute!" Ian screamed in his brain. "We're not supposed to be seeing other planets and asteroids. We're supposed to be on a half hour journey to Mars. Where are we?" He tried to ask someone what they saw, but words wouldn't come out of his mouth, even though he knew he was talking. Now, he got really scared. His mind kept racing. "Why can't I talk?! Does anyone else realize what's happening?"

Duke was trying to keep a watch on the structural integrity of the ship. This might have been the only time he would have to be able to detect anything that would need to be corrected before their return trip. But, he was being distracted by the strange glow that the exterior of the craft had taken on. He had never seen colors like these before. And they were constantly changing. Not flashing, but morphing from one to another, right along in order of the rainbow, all seven and then start again, or back again.

Susan was studying all the details of planets and asteroids and moons and other formations she had never seen. What depth of clarity, what precision of experience! And there were sounds, like distant, wondrously beautiful voices singing a kind of music she'd never heard. Susan almost believed that the sounds were coming from the stars themselves, but surely that couldn't have been, could it? Then she realized it, too. "None of these things are on the way to Mars! What is going on?"

There was no more time to think. The next thing they knew, there was an awful falling sensation in the pit of their guts. It was like going over the top of a really tall roller coaster, except this one had a jet engine on the back of the car and was forcing it down, down, down into outer space. Or was it up, up, up? The lights outside went dark, the colors all disappeared, the crushing sensation even disappeared; there was just the feeling of total, extreme acceleration. Instrumentation was impossible to read. No one knew up from down. Breathing was nearly impossible, not physically, just emotionally. Besides, none of them could feel if there was any air in their lungs at all.

Ian tried desperately to reach the radio mic, but couldn't. Susan was closer but couldn't focus on it. José tried to scream. He thought he did, but the sounds seemed to go down his throat instead of out into the air. Duke was just afraid to open his eyes, if they were really closed.

Then, just as suddenly as the freefall had started, it ended. The ship seemed to be slowing up a bit. Each one started shaking off the crushing, oppressive feeling that the wild ride had given them. The clocks had stopped. The instruments were frozen with the readings they had when the hyper-gravity drive had kicked in.

Then Duke noticed that they started to creep backward. "Ian", he whispered loudly, "do you see it?"

"What?" Ian asked hesitantly.

Duke could only point. Despondent screams leaked from the crews' mouths as the ship seemed to be flung in reverse from a slingshot. More than one of them wished that they had picked some other career. It didn't last long, and there was only a few of the extra colors and sounds from before.

The ship slowly settled into a recognizable direction where the crew could tell up from down. But they had not brought the ship out of hyper-gravity drive themselves. Either the HG engines had failed or something else had captured the ship's movement and brought it to a relative standstill, even though the instruments, which had begun to function normally, told them that they were still traveling at well over thirty thousand miles an hour.

The sights and sound were once again normal, and boring. Duke took a reading of the stars to see where they were. Then he took it again. Scratching his head, he said in his most professional voice, "Major Stevens, we have gotten off course".

"How far?" Ian wanted to know.

"Way"

"Excuse me? What do you mean by 'way'?"

Eden on a Distant World

“Sorry, Ian, but none of these stars are in any configuration I’ve ever seen.” Duke knew what he was talking about. When he was fifteen, he built an observatory out of scrap lumber and sheet metal to house a telescope that took him a year and a half to save up for. He studied all of the Hubble photos. He knew every star within a hundred light years of Earth. The ones he was looking at were none of those.

“Any idea where we might be, any guess at all?” Susan chimed in.

Duke was silent for a minute. The others knew not to interrupt his train of thought; he took a minute to analyze his answer before saying it. “If we were inside a forest, and had only been halfway up the trunk of a tree, we might be able to develop some sort of image of how that forest might look from the air. People haven’t been able to leave the Milky Way yet, but from all of our projections about what it looks like from a few hundred thousand light years away, it looks a lot like that”, he said, pointing to what looked like a large star on the view screen.

José screwed up his face a bit and asked, “You mean that is the whole Milky Way galaxy, that little blob?”

Duke nodded. José started muttering a Hail Mary in Spanish. Susan mumbled something about being too far away from God for Him to hear any prayer here. Ian’s face blanched and his head and hands started sweating.

The crew of the *Pilgrim* had always been able to get themselves out of any jam they got into. This wasn’t the first time they had flown together. There were two other missions to the space station and one to the Moon, among others, so that the Space Agency knew that they would work well together on such a stressful voyage. They rebuilt the air filter system on the space station and rerouted some of the retrorocket systems on the way back from the moon. Surely, they could get themselves home safe and sound.

Ian told Susan to send out the automated SOS on all frequencies using all broadcast systems, and to try normal voice communications every way she knew. He had José check out the ship’s structural integrity and test all systems. Ian turned to Duke and asked him to try triangulating again to see if he could determine how far they were from the solar system, even if he didn’t know exactly where they were. Ian said a short, marginally sincere prayer.

Susan, still working the com, let Ian know that everything seemed to be working OK, but there didn’t seem to be anything out there to receive the transmissions, no matter what type she tried. Ian told her to keep trying, and be creative at it, but she wasn’t sure what that meant. José reported that the ship was sound and all systems were working as they should. “So far, so good” thought Ian. Duke, however, was not going to have any good news.

“We are somewhere in the neighborhood of half a million light years from Earth.” Duke’s statement was flat, dry and analytical. The rest of the crew stopped what they were doing and looked blankly at him. That expanse is about 250 times the distance from the Milky Way to the Andromeda Galaxy. They would never see home. They would certainly die out here. There was no way to even begin to search for a planet to land on that might support any type of life, especially their type, the desperate type that just wants to live.

“What are we going to do?” wailed Susan. José tried to hide tears. Duke felt somehow guilty for the information he had to share. Ian tried to be diplomatic and calm everyone down, although he wasn’t sure what he should do after he had done that. “Listen”, he said, “let’s take inventory, survey for the nearest planetary system and make some sort of plan. We have half a chance. There has to be somewhere to land this thing. We have enough food for a month, even longer if we ration it. The water recycler is built to last for years. And besides, we do get along, so there shouldn’t be any problem there”. Ian was right about most of what he said, but the part

about getting along could be a stretch. Their other missions had eventually involved other people so that when it had gotten a little tense, there had been others to help break the tension.

Some say that religion is a personal thing, but when you have your religion and have to live with people in such close quarters, something has to give. José was quick to offer his belief that surely God would be with them. Ian felt a bit uneasy, mostly because he should have been able to offer the same consolation, but his faith had somehow become a bit quieter over the last few years. Duke argued that whatever brains God had given them would have to be enough to get them out of this mess. Susan wanted to start debating the nature of God but realized that there were more important things to do right now, though she wasn't sure of what they might be.

Chapter 2

A Strange Sight Out There

His name was Maugrab. He lived on a planet called Awdnaw. He was a chief among his people, though not any sort of ruler. He was wise in the ways of acquiring and using knowledge. He was born only about a thousand years ago, so he was not old among his kind, but neither was he a youngster. He was a searcher of the seas and the plants, the animals, the rocks, the metals, of the sky and the sky beyond the upper water. He knew many, many things, foremost among them was that he did not know even a fraction of what the Creator had fashioned or what He wanted to show his people.

Maugrab had helped direct the work to discover and record the other worlds in the sky beyond the upper water. His people had flown near planets with beings like themselves. All of those planets had physical atmospheres that would have allowed them to visit. And they did visit some, but those had physical, spiritual and social atmospheres that allowed them to contact the inhabitants of those worlds. Some had the right physical characteristics, but the spiritual environment of those worlds prevented any communication with the human-creatures. Also, the planets that they could not visit had so much water that it seemed too strange to visit. There were also too many poisons in the air and water and land to risk anyone's life trying to see if there was any intelligent life there. The crew that visited those planets took samples of them to catalogue the beings, animals and plants and took extra care to keep those samples well away from themselves.

Layshonau was the Chief off-the-planet searcher. He was busy one day studying his equipment to see what else he could determine about the sky above the water when he noticed something very strange. A spacecraft was approaching Awdnaw. He could determine from his instruments that the beings inside were virtually identical to his own race. In fact, there were telltale signs that they were the very beings of one of the planets they had decided to avoid.

He informed Maugrab, who was very surprised when Layshonau told him that there were beings like those from a water-covered planet coming close to their planet, about twelve distances from the sun away. How could this be, seeing that they had not conquered any of the obstacles that would permit them to travel even away from their planets, let alone to cross so many star lanes and galaxy clusters to get to his home planet?

"Do they know where they are?" Maugrab asked Layshonau.

"I don't believe so", Layshonau replied. "They are only wandering around. They have expended no power and appear as if they have no destination."

Maugrab wasn't worried. There was no real worry on their planet. But there was concern. "Do you suppose they will find us? Or land here? Or bring the darkness with them?" Maugrab had to be sure that his people were prepared.

Before he did anything else, he requested to speak with Creator, whom they often called the Father, that evening. Creator often visited this planet in the evening. The inhabitants loved sharing their day and asking direction for projects they were working on and searches in which they were engaged. Sometimes Creator would simply say that it was time to work a little less for now and enjoy the creation. More work can be done in a while. But, toward twilight, Maugrab would need an audience with the architect of this planet and that other planet to be sure that everything would be done to protect his charges from the darkness.

After he was sure he would speak to Creator, he conferred with some of those he was working with to see what else could be done. The biggest question was about the shape of the

aliens' ship. Would it be ungainly enough to disrupt the water above the sky? It's a very durable shield, but Creator has told them that there is a way that it would come down, though He never told them what that was. Could it be done with a bulky spacecraft? They could only wait to see.

That evening, Maugrab met with Creator. Sometimes He would talk with a large crowd of people. Often He would discuss things with a smaller group. And, occasionally, He would just speak with one or two at a time for the whole evening. No one ever felt slighted or neglected since everyone could always have a turn. In fact, sometimes it seemed as if Creator could talk to different individuals or groups in different places all at the same time, but each conversation was just as intimate and personal as if He was giving His undivided attention to each person or group. This evening, Maugrab and the Father talked for a long time. There was very little smiling or laughter, since this was a very serious event. It could have far-reaching effects.

The following morning, word was quickly spread that there could be visitors from another planet. Everyone, especially the young, repeated the warnings to each other that they had heard from the beginning, that the Dark One can come as a false light and to beware of it. The hundred-year-olds, who were just becoming adults, were especially susceptible to such lies, so they were each required to repeat and explain the warnings three times.

Maugrab started making other preparations as well. First, he commissioned an explorer ship to investigate the alien craft. It would be a smaller ship. Two crewmembers were on their way within an hour. The ship lifted off from a cylinder in the ground. The ignition system was so efficient that there were virtually no emissions from the engines, except for the power of the combustion itself. The only physical residue was some steam and a bit of very fine carbon dust that was magnetized so that it could be collected by a small drone aircraft that followed the space ship. Its engines gave a final thrust just as it approached the upper water. The engines would be extinguished if they hadn't been turned off. To keep any contamination out, the engine nozzles were sealed just as they reached the watery canopy.

Once they were on the other side of it, the ship extended a small sphere in front of itself and literally disappeared in a short stream of light. It had engaged its own form of hyper-gravity drive. The Awdnite ship had no trouble finding the *Pilgrim*. They made an initial pass at fairly high speed to do a cursory inspection of the craft's capabilities. On the next three passes, they slowed down to almost visible speed to collect better information about the ship, its crew and any transmissions they were sending. They monitored their communications so that they might have some idea of their language, should they need to talk directly to them. For some reason, on the last pass they made on the way back to Awdnaw, they came a bit too close to the *Pilgrim* and caught her in their wake, dragging her, as it were, along behind them, directly back to where they were returning. The Awdnite crew was a bit surprised, but not alarmed, since they had put the entire exploration in the hands of Creator.

While the ship was on its way to investigate the aliens' nature and purpose, Maugrab directed that all the people and animals were to be on the lookout for the arrival of these other-world creatures. They would not know whether or not they had the darkness in their eyes that revealed a tendency to wander from the Creator's ways. No person or animal was to approach whatever landed, but would quickly report its location to Maugrab or one of his helpers.

Maugrab also assembled a team of searchers that could understand speaking and could communicate with all of the animals. They were to devise a method of learning the language of

Eden on a Distant World

these aliens as quickly as possible. They would start with nouns and simple verbs. That's always the easy part. But, how could they learn for sure if they had been approached, attacked or changed by the Dark One?

Maugrab arranged for a place for the strangers to stay. It would be as comfortable as any other Awdnite home, but it would be in a place that could be constantly, covertly watched by guards. Few people on Awdnaw had ever injured another creature. The guards simply prevented unwanted movement of some people when it was necessary.

The only other thing Maugrab could think of to do now was to listen to see if Creator had anything more to say to him.

Chapter 3

Somewhere Between Earth and Somewhere Else

Everyone on board *Pilgrim* was still strapped in their seats. It was a long, boring, numbing ride. The fear had been replaced by acquiescence and submission. Something was happening to them that they could not control and they had run out of any kind of ideas as to what to do, so they simply sat and waited and thought and prayed.

José Rodriguez had stirred from a nap and was casually peering out the starboard porthole when he saw a strange streak of light pass very close to the ship. He first thought that it was a meteorite, but almost instantly realized that it couldn't be since there is no air in space to cause friction. Is there such a thing as a micro-comet? Susan was nearest to him so he asked her what she thought it might be. She had no idea. Susan called Ian to look, but by now there wasn't anything to see. He had no clue what it might be either. They were making some wild guesses when it appeared again, only just a bit slower and larger than before. José suggested that they might have really discovered a new kind of space body, a micro-comet. As Susan argued that there was no tail to this micro-comet, it went by again. All three of their mouths dropped open, and by the time they gathered their composure, it zipped past one more time. Ian called to Duke to see if there was a way to get a photo or some other information about this new thing that seemed to be buzzing their ship. But it didn't show up again.

Duke had been deep in thought, still trying to find out just where they were and where they might be going. He didn't hear Ian's request. Suddenly, he found himself reporting to Major Stevens, "Sir, our speed has increased, by about three thousand miles per hour." He had stated it flatly, as a professional navigator does, but his heart was racing and he was sweating.

"What do you mean, Duke", Ian responded, also with the same cool air, but equally as worried. None of the crew was used to being totally out of control of their ship.

"I think we might be slipping into a worm hole like the one that brought us here."

Ian muttered something about not going through that again and ordered José to fire all retro rockets and stabilizers to keep them as close to their current position as possible. It was a waste of fuel. To slow them down from their own hyper-gravity drive, all they would have to do would be to shut it off, wait a few minutes for the effect to wear off and then fire the retro rockets. But, this wasn't their own drive. Some unknown force was sweeping them along and it was terrifying. Despite the many times they had been weightless or done loops and rolls, they all started feeling sick to their stomachs. It wasn't so much the movement now as it was the thought that they were once again totally out of control of their ship and were about to be taken to some other strange place, probably farther from home than they already were.

The ship picked up speed steadily, though not too quickly. The stars outside appeared to turn to streaks, the closer ones taking on a rainbow of colors. Duke reported that their speed had increased another four thousand miles per hour. No one was concerned about the ship flying apart; it was made for that kind of velocity.

Duke was still laboring to find some bearing when he blurted out, "A planet!"

"Where?" called Susan.

"There" José shouted. "But aren't we traveling too fast to see something that clearly?"

"Not if we're really close to it", Duke encouraged.

"Quick, Duke", Ian ordered, "note where it is and how long it might be till we find another one. I have a suspicion that we might be on the edge of a solar system. Does anyone else think that that star looks a little big?"

Eden on a Distant World

“Doesn’t look like a nova or supernova to me”, Susan responded.

José chimed in, “Not from here, anyway”.

Susan added, “It could be their sun”. She was hoping they would find more planets. Everyone was. At least that would increase their chances of finding somewhere to land, even some life forms.

They craned their necks for a while, but soon the emptiness lulled them back to napping and thinking. Duke had rigged a sensor to tell them when they were within a couple hundred thousand miles or so of anything planet-like. It didn’t go off, at least not for a while.

José suggested they eat something. They hadn’t eaten for about twelve hours. But now, with the great lack of anything to do or see, their stomachs started growling. José, having said that he was the hungriest, started preparing one of the ready-made meals. The others were mechanically attending their control stations, trying to pretend that they were just a thousand miles off-course instead of a thousand galaxies away from home. Duke heard the alert signal that another planet was somewhere nearby. Everyone tried to hurry to a porthole to see it. It was almost big enough to be recognizable as a planet. It really looked more like a large, dark star since it was so far away from its sun. It was only very mildly encouraging. At least Duke’s planet detector worked. José finished making the meal and everyone ate in silence.

After they ate, there wasn’t much to do but nap. Ian organized them into watches to keep an eye out for any more planets, listen for any communications and pay attention for anything else that might happen. Ian didn’t really expect much, but he wanted them to be prepared. Susan took the first watch. She checked the communications systems, sending random messages and an SOS. She ran bounce-back checks. She watched the stars streak by outside. She even tried playing a video game on the computer. All she could really think about was the possibility that maybe God could see them there, and she wondered why He wasn’t doing anything about it. Up till now, she thought that perhaps God had made everything and then sat back to watch His little toy at work. But, she had just seen and experienced things that made her wonder if perhaps He really had some control over His stuff.

José woke to the vibration of his alarm clock. He started to motion to Susan that she could go to sleep now, but there was no need. She had nodded off long before. José quietly checked his science gear, although he knew that it would probably never be used for any of the experiments that had been planned for Mars. He started devising ways that this stuff could be used to keep them alive if they ever got to land somewhere. There were seeds to try to grow on Mars, some even in the Martian soil. He wished now that they had sent more seeds for food and fewer for flowers. Fertilizer could be used to make explosives. Tools to dig rocks and collect soil might be used to build shelter. There were a couple of thermal sheets, assorted containers and other tools. There was only one thing missing for camping out. No matches. José figured that they could create a spark from one of the batteries if they needed to make a fire. He mused, “Would alien wood burn? Is there such a thing as alien wood?”

As José finished contemplating their survival gear inventory, he abruptly had a thought that gave him cold chills. He had gotten a special dispensation from the bishop at his local basilica to be absent from mass for as long as it took to get to Mars and back. What would happen now that they were so far from home and not sure when, if ever, they would get back? Would God forgive him? Does He even live this far out in space, or is this just the backside of creation where He might go for vacation once in a while?

As he stared into space, he thought he recognized something, but he wasn’t sure quite what. Something seemed strangely familiar, yet different. As he studied, he noticed that the ship

seemed to be decelerating. It hadn't slowed to a crawl, but its speed now allowed him to see things more like he usually did, without all the extra colors and streaks of light for stars.

The alarm for another planet went off. Duke was at his station even before he fully woke up. Yes, it was another planet. It was not as close as the others, but it must have been enormous because they could see it clearly, about the size of a marble. "I really couldn't tell anything about the others", he said flatly, "but this one is a gas giant. If we see another one or two like this as we approach that sun, there is a good possibility that we might find some planet to land on.

"I see", Susan chimed in, her face brightening to reveal that she knew what Duke was suggesting. "Those outer planets were small, like the ones in our solar system. Then there are larger ones, like Saturn and Jupiter, in our system. So, closer to their sun, there might be one or more planets that might support life, even if we imported it from Earth!" She grew more animated as she spoke, spreading her excitement and tentative hope to the rest of her companions. José's face came alive as well when he recognized the familiar layout of the planets.

Duke nodded and added, "That's what I'm thinking. It's also what I'm afraid of. What if the planet we find is already inhabited by people or other creatures that don't want us?" No one else had thought of that. It wouldn't be like the conquests of Earth's western hemisphere by European settlers. There were only four of them on the *Pilgrim*, and the only weapons they had were two handguns; silly government regulation that they should have protection.

The idea of landing somewhere became exciting and fearful to everyone. They would have one chance to determine if they could land or open the hatch or step outside or do anything at all there. Any mistake could be their last. They would have to be prepared to either take off suddenly or face their doom if the inhabitants wanted them dead.

For the next few hours, they all watched and listened to detect another planet. They couldn't sleep and they couldn't concentrate. They couldn't talk, but they couldn't keep quiet. The waiting was excruciating. Someone would comment on how pretty the stars looked. Another one would wonder out loud about what might be happening on Earth or what favorite TV show or social network post they were missing. No one dared ask if there was another planet nearby.

They were still slowing down, even if only a little bit at a time. They had all become accustomed to the heaviness they felt when they were closer to half the speed of light and now that heaviness was indiscernibly lifting. Time was slowing down now that they weren't going as fast, but none of them noticed that, either. All of their minds were fixed on survival. Suddenly, José remembered the few ways he had figured out that they could use some of the experimental gear. He offered his findings somewhat timidly, knowing that they were only guesses. The crew approved of his efforts, though they didn't seem too encouraged by them. The most important thing now was the question of where, if anywhere, they would have the opportunity to use that stuff.

The planet alarm startled all of them except Ian, who happened to look out the porthole just before it went off. He was going to say something about another planet, but wasn't sure if it would be welcome news or not. The hope of survival had evidently overcome the fear of the unknown in most of them, because they all cheered at the sound of the planet detector except Ian. It didn't take long for them to spot an enormous planet. "It's another gas giant", Susan declared. "And look at those rings. And that beautiful moon! Makes Saturn look puny!" Ian was glad that they had their enthusiasm and sense of adventure back. It's what made them such a great team on other missions. But he knew that if it didn't work out, if there was nowhere to land, that they would become useless to themselves and each other. They would also most likely plunge into

that sun or star or another planet or simply drift off into space where they would die and become space dust.

Ian decided that the best thing to do would be to join them in their revelry and pray for something good to happen. He wasn't sure if God would be listening to him these days. It had been quite a while since he had really prayed. But, he thought that it couldn't hurt to try.

It didn't take long for his prayers to be answered. Duke detected another planet a few million miles to their port side. Susan determined that it was smaller than the last, but not by a lot. It was also not a gas giant, but more of a rock and dirt planet. They all knew that if this solar system was anything like theirs, the orbit of the next planet couldn't be much farther in. The excitement was now more painful than the waiting was before.

Susan and José were now chattering on about how they could use anything and everything aboard ship to survive, figuring how long they could make it until some sort of harvest came in, what to use for shelter, how to make or extract more oxygen and other things that might be needed when they landed. Duke was simply trying to get them to somewhere. Ian was trying to think of a way to balance hope with other, less desirable possible outcomes.

Meanwhile, the Awdnite spacecraft had carefully penetrated the upper water on its return flight and landed safely in the place where it had taken off. The report to Maugrab was confusing. It was accurate and orderly, but not like anything they expected. The alien ship had absolutely no means of getting as far as they did, yet there they were. From the tone of the voice on the communication, they were acting strangely. No one on Awdnaw expressed emotion like that, except among the Dark Eyes.

They had detected a strange protein substance inside the alien vessel. Living animals and people emit a protein marker that they were used to. Plant protein emits a somewhat different marker that they were familiar with and had seen countless times before. This marker, however, was animal protein with a different color. It also showed up as a standing wave instead of a modulating one, meaning that something had happened to the protein to make it appear to be not living. The not living part had the Awdnites extremely baffled. Much later, they would learn that it was dehydrated meat that caused such perplexing readings.

The crew admitted to having unintentionally caught the other ship in its wake. They had been monitoring it and said that the craft was on a direct course for Awdnaw. The most disturbing report was that the aliens had very little command of their ship. It was outfitted with a crude and virtually uncontrollable hyper-gravity drive. When Maugrab heard this, he said that most probably the faulty hyper-gravity drive made it not only possible, but also probable for the strange ship to be caught in their wake. It wasn't the Awdnites' fault, but the poor design of the other ship. And most definitely the will of the Father.

Maugrab sent the returning crew to eat and rest while he and other searchers pored over the facts the space searchers had brought back. They had to figure out where the aliens were most likely to land and when. It wouldn't be easy when the aliens weren't even sure of where they were going. Still, they narrowed it down to a particular day and a particular longitudinal quadrant.

Everyone on Maugrab's team quickly went to work once they had as much information as they could gather. People and animals were told when and where they thought the wayward spaceship might land so they could avoid those areas. They were also reminded not to go near it. If it contained even just one Dark Eye, it could be very dangerous. Maugrab asked to be able to speak to Creator again this evening. When that was arranged, he went to eat and take a rest.

Chapter 4

Discovering the Other Eden

Duke's planet finder sounded like an alarm clock, going off every so often, with the time in between getting shorter and shorter. Some of the findings were real planets. Some were large asteroids. Everything, planets, asteroids and other space occupants, though, were about where they would be in the solar system that contained Earth. There were some variations, like three gas giants and some of the planets were tipped at odd angles and spinning in different directions. But, the whole crew believed that the whole system was at least as balanced as the one that Earth was a part of. When José realized that it meant that there really could be an inhabitable planet nearby, he became so beside himself that he started hyperventilating. Susan started giggling. Ian tried to find José a bag of some sort to breathe into. Duke started checking his charts and instruments, but he did it so fast that he really wasn't doing anything at all.

Suddenly, as the planet alarm went off again, Duke stopped, pointed out a porthole and said, "There!"

"What? Where?" Ian wanted to know.

"There". Duke pointed to the most beautiful, shiniest green and blue planet they had ever seen. Something about it made them suspect that there was liquid water all over it.

"Quick", Ian hollered to Susan, not meaning to. "Take some readings and see if that's water or CO₂ or what". Then, calming down a bit, he turned to the other two. "Duke, are we heading for it? Do we want to head for it? How can we get away from it if we need to? José, can you find out if there's any life on it or if we can live on it if we need to?"

Duke was the first to respond. "We are definitely heading for it. We have about twenty minutes before we enter whatever outer atmosphere there is on it."

"There is water all over the place down there", Susan reported. "In fact, it seems to be an ocean or something."

José argued, "It can't be. There's plant and animal life readings from all over."

Duke was watching the clock. "We're down to nineteen minutes. What are we going to do, Captain, land on it, circle it or try to miss it?"

"Give me a minute", Ian said, distracted by his thought. "I have an idea. I've been thinking about our situation. We seem to be in a gravity well, possibly created by whatever passed us so fast back there. If so, we won't be able to escape its effect. We're going to hit that planet if we continue the way we are. We need to slow down. The only way I know of is..."

"...is to use our HG engines to counter the effect!" José interrupted.

"Exactly. But, first, we need to turn this thing around. Duke, give me a calculation on how we need to adjust the gimbal angle to put our tail end toward the planet. José, how much fuel do we have and how long can we burn for? Susan, for whatever it's worth, send out a verbal SOS in as many languages as you can and a binary SOS for whoever may be listening." Ian knew that Susan would want to help, but there wasn't much for her to do. Besides, who knew, possibly someone really was listening.

Duke got the calculations ready. When Ian was sure that everyone was securely fastened in, he gave a short countdown and he and José coordinated the retro rockets so that they turned the ship one hundred and eighty degrees. Duke announced that they had only fourteen minutes left before they entered the atmosphere. Susan had been doing some rough calculations in her head and discovered that by going as fast as they were, more than Mach two, they actually had a few extra minutes, although she wasn't sure since she was doing the figuring mentally. She

thought about saying something, but the difference, interesting as it was for a scientist, really wasn't worth mentioning now, especially when their life depended more on slowing the craft than on a bit of theory.

"Now it's time to slow this puppy down", Ian declared, almost triumphantly, since they had completed half of the job successfully. "If we engage the HG engines, we should be able to slow us down a bit. If the engines are better than I think, we might even achieve some degree of maneuverability." Ian didn't wait for a countdown, he just said, "Go for it, José".

José put the hyper-gravity drive to work. It felt a bit strange, but there was none of the squeezing feeling they had when they first used it. The ship slowed down, then started creaking like a seagoing vessel stuck in ice in the north Atlantic.

"What's that?" Susan asked in a whisper.

"Don't know", Ian whispered back. "But, we can't stay this way for long", his voice getting stronger.

Duke announced, "We're only five hundred miles from the planet's atmosphere. We *will* land or crash on the surface. We have just a few minutes to decide and do whatever it is we're going to do, or the ship will start falling apart. What's your pleasure, captain?"

Ian took about twelve seconds to decide. "José, we're going to disengage the HG drive, spin this ship back around and go headfirst into the atmosphere. You kill the HG on my signal and I'll spin us around and take us in at as much of an obtuse angle as possible so we don't burn up in the atmosphere. Duke, keep your eyes and instruments busy so we can know where we are and what we need to avoid, like mountains. Susan, keep your ears and equipment on the alert for any signals, radio or otherwise, that may be coming from the planet." Ian knew that there was a better chance of communication coming from the surface than there was of anyone listening to them broadcast. He gave a short countdown and everyone sprang into action.

José cut the hyper-gravity engines; Ian spun the ship around and headed for the atmosphere. Duke reported that the atmosphere was approaching fast and was made out of water. Susan heard something, but wasn't sure if it was natural or made by an alien race. Ian heard Duke's comment about the atmosphere being made out of water, but it didn't register for a few seconds. By then, they were only a couple hundred yards from its surface. He saw, very clearly, that, unlike normal atmospheres that grow increasingly dense as a ship approaches a planet, this one had a definite boundary. How deep would it be? Could they float on it? The ship was designed to withstand all sorts of atmospheres, including liquid ones, but would there actually be somewhere to touch land? They couldn't survive long as a sailing vessel on a strange ocean.

Ian guided the *Pilgrim* at an angle so that they entered the upper water without glancing off it back into space while at the same time allowing them to pass through it without staying in it for too long. They could feel the ship lurch a bit when it hit the water, but other than that, that part of the entry into the atmosphere went well.

It was very surreal in there. It was clear, unobstructed water. Looking away from the planet, the crew saw the stars as if there was no water at all. When they looked down, everything was also clear, though Susan suspected that the curvature of the water might make things look a bit larger than they really were.

The bizarre thing is that, instead of things that someone would expect to see underwater like fish or whales or sea plants, the things below them looked like a countryside with woods and fields and a couple of lakes.

Suddenly, the ship lurched again. Duke reported that they had entered some gaseous atmosphere. They started slowly gaining speed again and were in free fall. Ian instinctively

grabbed the controls and hit the start engine button for the liquid fuel rockets on the ship. Nothing happened. He tried again. “José”, Ian barked, “try your ignition”. José had a separate, back-up button. He tried it. No response. “What’s the deal, Duke?”

Duke muttered something, checked his readings, tried a few controls himself and replied, “The water’s dampened everything. Either the igniters are wet or the fuel has been compromised. Unless you want to use the HG drive, we’re without power.”

Ian knew that using the hyper-gravity drive was not an option and that Duke was being facetious. He also knew that the *Pilgrim* could glide to a safe landing in an atmosphere just over half as dense as Earth’s, if it needed to. He must have somehow thought that the atmosphere really was thinner than Earth’s because, as he aimed for a clearing just in front of a large lake, he found the ship heading right for the lake. He reached over to fire the retro rockets, but they had suffered the same malady as the other rockets.

“Hang on tight” he called out. It was just an expression. They were all strapped in and couldn’t move if they wanted to. He tried to adjust the angle of descent so that when they hit, it would be more like a plane landing.

Ian was so concentrated on the job at hand that he didn’t have time to feel anything. Duke’s face was frozen, not so much with fear as with anguish. He couldn’t control any of this and that had him extremely worried. Susan and José both appeared to be praying, although Susan wasn’t real sure who she was praying to. She might as well have been rubbing a lucky rabbit’s foot.

They could see the ground, now, and José blurted out, “See there. It looks like we’re landing in Pennsylvania somewhere”.

“No, it looks more like North Carolina”, countered Susan.

The scenery seemed so normal to all of them that, for a minute, they forgot about the wormhole and HG engines and what had happened so far and could easily imagine landing in a lake on Earth.

“Here it comes!” Ian hollered. He didn’t have time to say what was coming. They found themselves in water again, although this time it seemed more like a regular lake. Duke turned on some external lights so they could see under the water. It was pristine and they could see almost a hundred yards in front of them. With the extra fins and the streamlined shape, the ship had been designed to traverse almost any atmosphere, even a liquid one. So, being underwater wasn’t a problem for the *Pilgrim* or her crew. They had enough momentum to give Ian some control over the direction of the ship. Out of the blue, José and Susan saw a small underwater mountain and almost in unison shouted, “Watch out”. Before Ian could comprehend and react to their warning, the ship seemed to be avoiding the rocks by itself.

“Nice job”, Duke offered.

“Yeah, quick thinking”, Susan, agreed.

“But, I don’t think I did anything”, Ian differed.

“No time to argue now”, José said when he saw another outcropping to the left and grabbed the auxiliary tiller and started to veer the ship to the right. He noticed that the controls seemed a little stiff under water and that although his steering intentions were good, they should have at least scraped the side of the ship on that rock ledge. Instead, they seemed to glide away from it just in time to avoid any damage at all.

It was Ian’s turn to offer congratulations to José on a good save. José, however, seemed perplexed by what had happened, and was just about to offer his objection when Duke noticed another something ahead of them. It appeared to be a whale or maybe a snake or something like

the Loch Ness monster. Whatever it was, Ian was going to have to steer around it. He twisted the rudder hard to the right. Just as he did, the creature slipped around to the left and seemed to push the ship with its tail. There was a loud clunk and the ship jolted forward.

“Just what we need! A stupid, giant fish punching a hole in the ship a hundred feet underwater!” Duke blurted.

“Not so fast”. José had noticed that without the creature’s push, they would have slowed too much to maintain control of the ship. Almost immediately, they were moving rapidly across a shallow undersea plain. Ian had to pull the rudder back to gain some altitude.

Susan gasped when she saw a school of strange beasts that looked like a cross between a stingray and an octopus. “What on Earth are they?” she said, almost in a whisper.

José reminded her, “That’s just it, we’re not on Earth, so there’s no telling what in the universe they are”. He couldn’t help injecting some humor, even in the middle of what could be their last moments together. The exotic sea creatures surrounded the ship so that Ian virtually lost control of it. They didn’t touch it, but propelled it forward by flapping what could be their wings or fins and forcing water against the ship.

Ian announced that they were gaining just a bit of speed again. Duke noticed that they were entering what he thought was an underwater canyon ahead of them. “Careful, there, Ian”, he warned. “That canyon seems to meet the sky”. The canyon was, in fact, the end of the lake where a stream flowed out of it. They had gained what seemed like too much speed and were headed right for the top of the canyon. Ian steered the *Pilgrim* as straight as he could toward the mouth of the stream and, in so doing, poked the nose of the ship out of the water. There was a lot of banging and grinding as their craft wrestled with dry land. It came to rest with just enough of the nosecone out of the water so that they could see all around them. The ship’s hatch was also above water, which was good if they chose to disembark.

No one seemed to be hurt. They discovered that wherever they were, there was gravity very nearly the same as Earth’s. They crept quietly to the window on the starboard side. It faced more downward and offered them a better chance for a glimpse of their resting place. It looked like a storybook forest on the edge of a prairie, with plants and animals so much like Earth that it was eerie. They knew that they were somewhere way beyond Mars, and they didn’t recognize any particular flora or fauna that would place them back on their own planet. The plants seemed so much greener and the water in the lake seemed so much clearer. Perhaps it was a strange atmosphere that made things seem so much more vivid.

Suddenly, Susan gasped and cried “What ... are they?” pointing out the window.

Duke was the first to say the obvious. “Why, they’re people!”

But how could they be? Ian reasoned that life could have evolved along the same lines as on Earth, but surely any ape-like creatures would have taken a different evolutionary path on a different planet, wouldn’t they?

The beings on the ground were eager for their guests to disembark, but they would have to wait a while for the travelers to gather enough courage to venture outside their spacecraft. Inside, the crew was debating what to do next. José was eager to engage their new neighbors. He said that if they were hostile, it would be better to know now and get it over with, even if it meant losing their lives. No use struggling for survival so far from home with nothing to gain but survival itself. If they were friendly, they might even be able to help them get home.

Susan was not as enthusiastic as José. It’s not that she was fearful, just unsure of what the natives of this world might want from them. She was very eager to explore the natural beauty of

this new planet, however. She could hardly contain herself as she admired some of the plants and animals outside the window.

Duke really wanted nothing to do with these creatures. How could they be civilized when they wore so few clothes? It was true. These people, who otherwise looked so very much like enlightened humans, didn't wear many clothes, and the ones they did have on didn't cover what the crew of the *Pilgrim* thought would be the usual places. The clothes seemed to be more for decoration or something other than modesty.

Major Ian Stevens would have to make the final decision about them leaving their comfort zone. He instructed Duke to check on basic atmospheric conditions. José was to make sure that all of the spacesuits were in working order and fully equipped in case they needed them. Susan's job was to see if she could detect what was in the soil and water around them.

It took a while to coordinate all of the testing they did. Duke and Susan each reported that everything was very similar to Earth, except that the atmospheric pressure was about twenty-seven pounds per square inch; nearly double that of Earth's.

"What does that mean for us?" Ian wanted to know.

"It would have the same effect as being at the bottom of a swimming pool." Susan replied. "Maybe a bit uncomfortable, but not dangerous".

"Well", Ian said, taking a long pause to make sure he would say the right thing, "it looks like we can try to make our first contact".

Excitedly, José blurted, "Feels to me like we're going to make our debut as the newest rock band in town!" It was also the right thing to say. Everyone had a good chuckle and felt just a bit less nervous about their next great adventure.

Chapter 5

First Contact

Ian opened the hatch. There was usually a bit of a hiss and a whoosh as it opened, but this time it was even more pronounced because of the extra air pressure outside. Immediately, everyone on board put their hands over their ears and let out a yell of some sort. The pressure was more than they thought it might be. Susan asked Ian if her ears were bleeding. He said that, even though they might feel that way, they weren't. They all fell back into their seats. Duke and José shook their heads to try to equalize the pressure.

José crept to the medical locker and got four doses of decongestant. "Here, try this" he told the rest. "It should make your ears feel better. If anything else feels like there's too much pressure on it, I'm afraid there's nothing I can do for it". Everyone took the pill and rested a while for it to take effect.

They all seemed to have drifted off into a light nap. Susan woke first, hearing something outside the hatch. She whispered, loud enough to wake the rest but quietly enough so as not to let the creatures outside know they were talking. "Does anybody else hear that?"

"What?" José wanted to know.

"The music". Susan sat up and leaned toward the hatch opening. "Don't you hear it?"

"I hear the water going by and a few birds out there." Ian offered.

"I hear more than just water and birds" Duke chimed in. He wasn't fond of most music, but this he couldn't refuse. "It's not a song, really, is it?"

Ian thought that it could be a machine of some sort. "Don't you hear all of those low sounds? I know they sound musical, but some machines have a drone to them."

Susan knew it wasn't a machine. "No machine I know has such sweet high notes to it. Even if it needed oiling, it wouldn't have such nice high notes".

José kept thinking that it sounded like church, only so much better. "I always wished our church choir would practice enough to sound like that".

They all kept quiet for the next few minutes. Then, as if on cue, each one took his place in line and left the *Pilgrim*, stepping gingerly on the hatch door that had made a bridge across the stream of water that separated them from shore, and lined up on the dense, rich turf on shore. There were about fifty inhabitants of the planet standing in a wide group and singing the most beautiful song in the most magnificent language. Men and women, boys and girls, all of them with some sort of brilliant clothing. All of the humanoids seemed to be about the same size as average Earthling humans. However, they tended to look a little healthier or stronger or something. None of them looked older than about thirty. There were no wrinkles or baldness or white hair or paunchy bellies.

The song went on for about ten more minutes and then, without benefit of any leader, they stopped in unison. José started to applaud but quickly stopped when he realized that no one else was doing anything. The rest of *Pilgrim's* crew stood, amazed at the sound.

Then they started really looking around. There were plants and animals of so many kinds that it would take decades, maybe centuries to just see, let alone catalog them all. Some of the animals looked as though they might be dangerous, but young children were petting or lying next to some of them. José thought of something the priest at church said about a lion and a lamb and a little child leading them or something. Then he saw two animals that could have passed for a lion and a lamb nestled one on the other. He pointed out these apparently incongruous scenes to the others. And the air smelled sweet, not like strong flowers, just void of any of the pollutants

that they were used to on Earth. They all agreed that things were definitely different. Susan couldn't help but say, "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore, Toto."

Duke pointed out something odd about the group of people that had come to meet them. There were about eight large men that, although they didn't really look like soldiers of any sort, had heavy tunics and belts, and carried staffs or clubs about four feet long the way that a soldier would present arms. He said, to no one in particular, "Are they just clubs or are they some sort of ray gun in disguise? They want us to think that they're all about nature and peace, but they have these guys with weapons. Do they think we're blind?"

Ian told him to keep an eye out for any suspicious movements, but not to do anything that would arouse their anger. Ian did notice that there was no mud. There wasn't a scrap of trash. There was nothing to suggest that this planet was anything but very well kept.

The people were not all alike, yet the differences in skin and hair color were not as extreme as on Earth. Nor were the differences in body size or shape as pronounced. Some hair was curly, some straighter, but nothing very extreme. It would have been hard to separate them into any sort of races. Characteristics that help Earthlings group people into racial groups were scattered throughout the population here. Noses and lips and ears and hands and feet were varied but not collected into groups that would have determined that a person was of one race or another. No one was too fat or too skinny. The crew did notice that, no matter what size, shape or color they were, they all seemed to be very fit.

One of the men at the front of the group of these people spoke. It was a rich, round voice, strong but not pompous. He made a sweeping gesture with his hands. Ian presumed that he was welcoming them to their land. Whether that meant a single country or continent or the whole planet, he didn't know.

Ian bowed, made a sweeping gesture with his hand to include his crew and thanked them in his best English, using the friendliest voice tone he could. There was a long, uncomfortable silence as both peoples stood and studied each other for what seemed like a very long time, although it probably wasn't more than a minute or two.

The same man that had welcomed them motioned for four other Awdnites to offer what was in their bowls to the *Pilgrim's* crew. As each resident offered a dish, it was accompanied by what José said was probably the word for that food. Each bowl held a different food and none of them seemed to be meat of any sort. Three of the bowls held a variety fruit and the fourth was a bread of some kind. All of it was very delicious and filling.

The two groups, one from Earth and the other from wherever they were now, spent the next couple of hours pointing - to themselves, each other and to other things using simple motions, trying to establish some sort of communication. José and Susan were the most involved Earthlings. Ian tried to keep up, but wasn't quite as skilled as the other two. Duke made some effort, but was not at all comfortable with his new hosts. He could sense that something about these people was different from what he was used to. No one, he thought, could be this intelligent yet simple. No, he would have to keep his eyes and ears alert to what was strange about these creatures.

When their sun began to set, the one who seemed to be somewhat of a leader, named Maugrab, motioned for them to come away from where they were. He was also the one who coordinated the Awdnite ship's inspection of the *Pilgrim*.

Duke bristled at the thought of following Maugrab. "There is absolutely no way I'm leaving the ship!"

Eden on a Distant World

The expression on his face seemed to bewilder and frighten his hosts. Even their frightened looks seemed out of place, as if their faces had never registered fear before. Ian stepped up and motioned to Duke to stand down. Then he tried to assuage Maugrab's people's fears. The language barrier was still firmly in place, so talking to them didn't seem to do a lot of good. He bowed low, backing away from them toward the ship and motioned for the others to do the same. Maugrab's people stood still, looking puzzled, but made no attempt to restrain or follow Ian and his crew. Ian stepped aside to let the rest of *Pilgrim*'s travelers retreat to the safety of the capsule. Then he followed them in and asked Duke to close the hatch for the night.

They all sat, gazing at each other. No one spoke, or knew what to say. They had just encountered not just some random, undeveloped life form on another planet, but massive amounts of extremely diverse life forms on another world. They had traded words with what seemed to be the most intelligent species on this new world, and neither of them had acted harshly toward the other.

"Am I dreaming?" Susan wondered out loud.

"If you are, then I'm in your dream or you're in mine", Ian replied. There were a few more minutes of silence. "Should we stand watch tonight?" It didn't sound like a commander's inquiry when he asked it.

The question prompted perplexed looks from José and Susan. "Why would we need to do that?" José asked. "They seem like decent, intelligent people.

"Seem like", Duke interrupted, as his voice trailed off, inferring that things aren't always what they seem.

They continued to discuss what they had seen and done. Most of their assessments of the inhabitants were good. Even Duke had a few good things to say about them. As the evening wore on, the conversation wore thin. Susan recognized that what was happening was so much like the slumber parties she had been to as a teenager. People open up a bit and share more of their true thoughts and feelings, especially after having shared an experience. What had happened to them in the last twenty-four hours had started to make them into even more of a unit than they had ever been before. Susan made one last comment about how she didn't recognize a single star from here but that they appeared beautiful from this planet just the same.

Chapter 6 New Beginnings

José woke up first. He just lay there for a while thinking. “Are we still in space? Was everything that had happened just a dream?” Then he heard a small creaking sound. Then he felt a shudder. The rest of the crew felt it, too, and woke with a start.

“What was that?” Ian asked, but before he could answer, the ship lurched backward and pitched its nose up just a bit. Duke and Susan dove for the portholes to see what was happening.

“We’re shifting in the water”, Duke hollered. “Everyone stay still!”

They all obeyed. The ship settled down and the creaking and grinding noises stopped.

Ian suggested that they all get out of the ship as quickly, quietly and cautiously as possible. José opened the hatch and they all crept out, being careful not to do anything that might dislodge the ship.

When they got to the bank of the stream safely, they were met by Maugrab and a few others, including the guards with the batons that were there the day before. Maugrab made some gestures to suggest that the ship was in danger. Ian nodded in agreement. He wasn’t sure if nodding on this planet meant anything. He remembered that in some scattered Earth societies, nodding meant “No” and shaking one’s head side to side meant “Yes”. Maugrab seemed to grasp Ian’s meaning, even if his signals weren’t quite right.

Maugrab signaled to some other workers nearby. They brought in the strangest, most wonderful machine any of *Pilgrim*’s crew had ever seen. It looked like it could move, or destroy, anything. It made very little noise and emitted no fumes whatsoever. A machine of that size and power on Earth would have been deafening and belching smoke of at least three different colors. It deftly plucked the *Pilgrim* from the water and, leaving only the gentlest bit of a track where its wheels had been, gently placed it about fifty yards from the edge of the stream in a shady area with what could be called a small yard in front. It was as if the Awdnites recognized the need for the Earthlings to have access to the ship, even if it wasn’t going to go anywhere.

A woman that had come with Maugrab approached Susan and motioned as she spoke. The motion seemed to ask if the location was good. The men from Earth were somewhat mystified by this odd exchange. Susan had not shown any indication that she was any sort of leader of the Earthlings. Why were they asking her?

Susan turned to her fellow travelers and said, “This is such a nice spot for the ship. It should make a nice home away from home until we can get the ship fixed, don’t you think?” She was asking none of them in particular.

She got a not too particular answer. “Didn’t much matter to me where they put it. We could have lived in it anywhere, I suppose”. Ian was evidently speaking for all of the men since they were all nodding as he spoke.

“Well, I’m glad they had the foresight and taste to put it where they did. Just look at the view when we come out of it. And we could put a small garden in over there if we needed. Don’t any of you see how thoughtful they’ve been?” The men still looked a bit bewildered, but nodded, and grunted to her in agreement. Susan thanked the woman and Maugrab and the workers profusely for their work. They seemed to understand the gestures, and even a few words by now.

Maugrab motioned for the woman to come over to him. He introduced her to Susan and the others as Austare and mimed a few words to them. First, he pointed to Austare. Then he pointed to his head as if to say, “Thought”. Then he put the side of his right fist firmly, but not violently, in to his left palm and smiled. It seemed to say that Austare had had the good idea for where to

put the ship. As he spoke, Maugrab also said the words in Awdnese. Susan and Ian motioned to Austare that they were grateful and nodded as if they understood the words, but the words escaped them.

Maugrab motioned to a man with what looked like a book or clipboard. He came and stood beside Maugrab who assumed the look of a teacher, as if to say, “OK, now it’s time for class to start”. A woman brought a bowl of mixed fruit to them. She held each piece of fruit out and said its name. Only when one of the ship’s crew repeated the word correctly did that person get the fruit. It felt strange at first. It was like being a chimpanzee being trained. Duke refused to participate initially, but José explained to him that this is how any stranger learns a native tongue.

When the fruit had been introduced, Maugrab revisited the giving and taking motions and said the words for them. That wasn’t too difficult. The woman then offered them something to drink, starting with Duke. But, as Duke reached for his, she took it away and said something. Instinctively, Ian reached his arm across Duke’s chest and simply said, “No!” He knew that Duke would take some sort of offence. “He’s teaching us the language, Duke, not being rude. They’re just trying to help”.

This sort of exchange went on for about an hour. Then Maugrab and his friends all seemed to breathe a sigh of relaxation together. The one with the clipboard motioned for everyone to sit down and enjoy a drink together. Class was in recess.

When they all had had enough to drink, Maugrab adopted the teacher face again. This time, they stayed seated. He started the word recognition process in reverse, this time asking for English words for various items and motions. It was the Earthlings turn to teach. They continued teaching for a number of hours until the sun just started to reach the tops of the trees. The Awdnites were learning English at an amazing speed. The Earthlings were embarrassed at their slow pace but were glad all the same that they could communicate fairly well with the Awdnites. When lessons were done for the day, Maugrab and his entourage rose and motioned for Ian and his group to follow them.

They wandered down a wide, soft path to a beautiful building that looked like it was made of marble and other beautiful stones. There were columns and porches, but just partial walls and roof. The colors of the stones were distinctive, muted and extremely well coordinated with each other and the building’s setting. Maugrab explained that this building was very special, partly because it was made of stone, which is hard to get because soft ground and plants cover most surfaces so that no one would get hurt on the planet. The most important reason the building is special is that it’s the only one in the village designed by Creator. Every village, town or other community has one. Each one on the planet is different; Creator has configured them all to be symbolic in many wonderful ways and totally unique to each community.

Inside were low tables with every imaginable kind of food on it, much of which the Earthlings had never imagined. Some of it was freshly picked. Some had been cooked; the aromas were mouth-watering. A very little bit of it was aged, like wine or sauerkraut, and smelled robust without being acrid.

The dishes seemed to be made of exquisite gold, silver, platinum and other beautiful metals as well as wonderfully made ceramics, and polished woods of every imaginable kind. There were musicians, each playing a different instrument, and all in perfect harmony. Once in a while, a group of singers would add their voices. The whole sound was heavenly. Some of those inside seemed to be busy getting the final details of the meal ready, while others simply chose their places to eat.

Duke wanted to know how people were paid for their work. What kind of money was used? Maugrab and other Awdnites looked at him quizzically. One of them said, “You say strange words”. Their hosts helped them find seats together next to Maugrab and a few others with whom they were acquainted.

As the sun set, another light appeared in the center of this building and everyone quickly found their place. The light seemed to have a form to it, like a person, with soft definition to its edges. It circulated among the diners, stopping every once in a while. When it stopped, those closest to it turned to face it and said a few words. They seemed to hear it say something and then it moved on.

“What is that?” Susan wanted to know. Now, the Awdnites had given the Earthlings more than a few strange looks for saying what they considered to be odd things, but the looks they gave Susan and her colleagues this time was more like shock and horror than a response to a simple, bizarre word or question.

Maugrab spoke slowly, deliberately and in a way that made Ian and his crew believe that he was somehow under duress, as if he was very angry with someone. “You have spoken many strange words to us. We have tried to understand, although many times your words had traces of words from the Dark One. Are you Dark Eyes of a different sort?”

Susan, Ian, José and Duke stood silent, puzzled and more than a little afraid. Maugrab’s face showed a displeasure and anger they had never seen in any of the people on this planet, yet.

“Pardon our ignorance, Maugrab”. Ian had summoned some courage after what seemed to be an eternity under their host’s severe gaze. “There are so many wonderful things here and some of them seem so very strange to us. Please tell us what we see”. Ian had wisely chosen not to identify the light by calling it an “it”, again.

Maugrab took a long, deep breath and began to speak, as if he were talking to children. “The Light is how the Son shines when He comes to visit. Often, He visits many places at the end of the day, especially when the next day is Last Day.” He had been carefully watching their faces to see if they understood this simple disclosure. So, when their expressions changed to bewilderment at the same time, he knew he had to explain more. “What is it that you don’t understand about what I’m saying?”

None of the Earthlings wanted to admit to not understanding and their faces and posture showed it. But Maugrab knew there was something to explain, so he enlightened them about all of it. “The Son is how the Father contacts us and communicates with us. He comes from His city at least once a day to meet with us. Often He will explain some mystery or give a solution to a problem or challenge. He always reminds us that He loves us.” He paused a minute to be sure that they understood what he said. He could tell that they did understand, even if they weren’t sure if they should believe it or not. Carefully, he continued, “Last Day is the day when Creator rested from His creating. He had formed everything that would be created and stopped creating. He took a day to see how Awdaim and Shavau would enjoy their new life on this newly created planet”.

José’s eyes suddenly grew wide as Jupiter. He stepped in front of his crewmates to face them and said in an excited whisper, “Do you what he’s saying?” They gave him blank looks that expressed their ignorance. “He’s talking about Adam and Eve on this planet!”

José seemed to be the only one among them that believed this. Susan and Duke thought it was a nice myth or fairy tale. Ian wasn’t sure, but he pointed out to Susan and Duke that there was no good explanation for the light that came and went. Maugrab didn’t really understand José’s reference to Adam and Eve but sensed the sudden rush of reason in José.

Eden on a Distant World

Maugrab looked intently in each of the Earthlings' faces to see if they understood.

"I think I know what you're saying, now", Ian offered, even if he and the others weren't exactly sure what it really meant.

Maugrab graciously led them to a group of seats at a table where the Light had already been so that they wouldn't feel any more uncomfortable if they had to encounter Him.

Chapter 7

Such a Strange and Wonderful Planet

The crew of the *Pilgrim* had been on Awdnaw for about eight months and was slowly acclimating to this strange new world. The guards that surrounded them had been told simply to monitor them, to take an occasional look for telltale signs of inappropriate actions.

Some things were very familiar like birds and animals and hills and streams. Other things seemed to be missing. Maugrab had described much of the planet to them. There were no saltwater oceans. Not even any of the largest bodies of water contained any salt. There were a number of mineral springs that people liked to soak in at times. There was no snow anywhere. There were some high hills and a few low mountains. There was no strong wind, except now and then when a good, stiff breeze would allow people to fly their kites and enable the eagle-like birds to soar. And it never rained. The whole concept of rain was very mystifying to the inhabitants of Awdnaw.

People wore only what clothes they wanted to decorate themselves. That was probably the hardest thing for the Earthlings to get used to. The weather was consistently warm, and only a few degrees cooler at night. That sort of climate made the Earthlings want to shed some of their clothing. They started by turning their pants into shorts and cutting off their sleeves. The guys finally took off their shirts. The best that Susan could do was to turn her pants into shorts and cut off the bottom and collar of her shirt. Even though they had spent years working together, they had never seen this much of each other's bodies. The awkward interaction they had with each other baffled the Awdnites. They had never seen anyone blush from embarrassment. Some thought that the Earthlings might be a different sort of human, possibly with characteristics of a chameleon or something. When Duke heard about it, he got quite irate. Fortunately, Ian was able to calm him down before he said anything to an Awdnite.

The Awdnites and Earthlings had continued to learn each other's languages. The natives, however, were far more adept at learning from their guests than the other way around. The name of the one with the clipboard was Onayasim. He had become very helpful in pointing out ways to make learning easier for both groups.

There were quite a few times that each planet's natives came to encounter what were genially called 'strange words'. The Awdnites had had time to explore and name so many things on their planet that they had five different words for dew and seven words for smile. Very little of their language was used for negative things, and when those things needed to be mentioned, it was always done with great seriousness and even fear. Many Awdnites would refer an Earthling's question about dark things to one of their leaders so that they didn't even have to say the words.

The Earthlings, on the other hand, had quite a few words to define for their hosts. 'Jealousy', 'hate', 'gossip', 'snow', 'rain', 'thunder' and 'lightening', 'meat' and what it meant to eat it, 'sick', 'old', 'starve', 'broken', 'worn out', 'lost' and 'useless' all had to be explained. Some of the words seemed to amuse them, like 'rain' and 'lightening'. Others like 'hate' and 'old' made them sad or frightened. Then the Earthlings had to explain what they were feeling. Often when this happened, Maugrab or another wise one would redirect the conversation or stop it altogether to save his people from those emotions.

One time, Susan was complaining to the other Earthlings how useless she felt after seeing all the skills that the other women on Awdnaw had and she could only fly a rocket. Yaleah and Austare were there as well.

Austare could understand what was happening, but before she could speak, Yaleah asked what was in Austare's mind. "You mean to say that you feel you have no use?" she asked with a very quizzical face. "But, surely, Creator has a use for everyone".

"Yes, I know..." Susan began. "But, there are times that I feel..."

Austare gave Yaleah a quick, knowing glance, indicating that she would explain. "You may well have used such words and had such an attitude on Earth, but such words and attitude are dangerous. They lead the speaker into darkness and can affect any who hear. If Creator determines that an attitude has led someone into a darkened way of life, he has no choice but to have that person put into the Valley of the Dark Eyes".

By now, Susan was frightened. She wasn't sure what this Valley of the Dark Eyes was, but it didn't sound like anywhere she wanted to go. "But..., but how can you know what my attitude is or when I've started this..., this dark way of life"?

"No one can tell except Creator," Yaleah added. Austare nodded in agreement. "And He gives you lots of chances" she continued.

There was a few seconds of awkward silence. That is, it was awkward for the Earthlings. Austare and Yaleah were giving them time to consider what they had heard.

Austare broke the silence. "You are the one who determines where you will live on Awdnaw. To continue to genuinely feel that you have no use is to call the Father a liar. There is a liar, a father of lies, but it is not Creator." Then she gave Yaleah another knowing look. It was Yaleah's turn to speak. She would share with her Earthling friends one of the most important things she had learned.

She moved just a bit closer to Susan, since she was the one who, at the moment, was the most susceptible to the lies she had spoken. "Thoughts lead to words. Words lead to attitudes. Attitudes lead to actions. Actions lead to a life-style. The life-style only demonstrates from whom you get your thoughts. If you are not getting your thoughts from the Creator, the Father of truth, you are demonstrating that you don't want to enjoy His gifts and, and so you will be put where you can live without all of His best gifts."

"The Valley of the Dark Eyes?" Susan asked, with a rise in her voice at the end.

Neither Yaleah nor Austare had to say a word. They nodded "Yes".

Susan clamped her hand over her mouth, but not merely as a symbolic gesture. She kept it there for the better part of an hour, refusing to speak. Only when it was time to eat did she take her hand away. And then, she asked if she could thank the Father for the food. As she talked to Creator, she thanked Him for the food, the day, His gifts and His love. It was the first time she had ever spoken directly to Him and she carefully chose every word. When she was finished, she felt lighter and freer than she had ever felt.

Only a few days after that, Maugrab announced that any further discussion of an Earthling's strange words would have to be reported to him. It wasn't his decision, but had come from Creator Himself. The Earthlings at first felt insulted, but soon understood why it had to be that way. From the time they had left the space ship, they had been shadowed by two or more Awdnite men with those simple clubs. After a while, they had gotten used to it, but this incident made them realize that they were still aliens in a strange land and a possible threat to the Awdnites' safety and happiness. Creator had allowed them to stay out of the Valley of the Dark Eyes, but it had been His gift and had nothing to do with the way they acted. But, like all Awdnites, they could be put there if Creator determined that they had decided to follow the Dark One.

Ian, Susan and José became extremely aware of the precariousness of their situation. They hadn't taken their freedom as seriously as they should have. From now on, they would be aware of the Father's mercy. Duke, on the other hand, was feeling proud that he had somehow beaten a system that wanted to put him in the Valley of the Dark Eyes. He wouldn't listen to anyone's warnings, insisting that he knew what he was doing. That attitude made his fellow travelers start to trust him a little less. He used to be a good teammate, but now, they weren't so sure.

One evening, the Earthlings and at least as many Awdnites were sitting, watching the sun go down and the birds and animals settle in for the night. After a thoughtful lull in conversation, Susan mused, "Wish I had some popcorn".

José sat up straight, looked bright-eyed at Susan and exclaimed, "Yeah, me too!"

Ian asked of any Awdnite who might be listening, "You don't happen to have any popcorn, do you?"

A young woman named Yaleah answered, "I might if I knew what it was". She was Maugrab and Austare's eldest daughter.

"Well," Ian explained, "it's a grain that you heat over a fire or on the stove and it explodes into white, fluffy balls that you eat."

"We have something like that. We actually have a few things like that, foods that are fun to watch and fun to eat."

"What's your favorite?" Susan asked.

"I like the popcorn, as the Earthlings call it" one of the Awdnites ventured.

"I'd rather have glow gel fruit," another said, licking her lips and rolling her eyes in mock ecstasy.

"No, no. Tell them about the needle seeds" another offered, and started telling what happened when they were cooked. "It takes a while, and just about the time you think nothing will happen, they start growing, slowly at first..."

"Oh, you just like them 'cause they're a study in architecture" Yaleah interrupted her friend playfully. "What you really want to see, and eat, is the fizzy-fuzzy fruit."

The Earthling's expressions had grown increasingly incredulous as the Awdnites had described each new food. But, now, when Yaleah said fizzy-fuzzy fruit, they all erupted in laughter.

"Yes, yes," the Awdnites all agreed, "tell them about the fizzy-fuzzy fruit".

"Alright", Yaleah agreed. "Many years ago, when our parents started cooking it, they did it over an open fire or with the aid of a bulging glass."

"Wait a minute", José politely interrupted. "What is a bulging glass?"

One of the Awdnite men drew a picture of what appeared to José to be a convex lens. José shared with the other Earthlings what he thought it was.

"That makes sense", Ian said. "A convex lens used to focus the sun would heat things. Sorry, Yaleah. Go on".

"Where was I? Oh, yes. When they cooked it in the open, it was almost uncontrollable. The seeds would spin and spit and fizz and fuzz and the results were hard to gather and eat. It was fun to watch, but few people knew what it tasted like! As time went on, we developed a glass bowl that has a lid with holes in it and a special set of bulging glasses on top so that no matter what time of day it is, when you set it out in the sun, it will heat the fizz-fuzz seeds. You can cook them in water or cook them dry. When you cook them in water, it makes a sweet drink with decorations on top. When you cook it dry, the decorations are crunchy sweet treats and the fizzy stuff has a sweet fizzy taste when you put it in your mouth."

Ian, José, Susan and even Duke were listening intently. Any candy-type treats on Earth were usually all sugar and pre-made. No one ever got to see things ‘fizz’ into being.

“Now for the fun part. When you put the seeds in the bowl and cover it, you never know which ones will fizz and which ones will fuzz. As they heat, they all start by shimmying a little. Then, the fizzers will start shooting out a little stream of sparkly dust in a variety of light and dark pinks and they’ll spin really fast while spewing their dust. When they do their dance in water, it mixes with the water to make the sweet tasting drink. In a dry bowl, the dust spins out and sticks to the sides of the bowl so that you have to scrape it off with your finger to eat it. The fuzzers will spin a bit and then start turning inside out, not too fast and not too slow. It happens just slowly enough that you can watch, but fast enough to be surprising.” Then, with a mischievous twinkle in her eye, she asked, “But you wouldn’t want to see any of that, would you?”

The Earthlings all nodded vigorously and announced that they definitely would like to try some fizzy-fuzzy fruit. The Awdnites were equally as anxious to have some even though they had all had some before.

Maugrab appeared behind Susan and asked her if she would like to make the first batch. When he had noticed that Yaleah was going to describe the process, he had sneaked away to get the seeds and bowl and other things they would need to eat this treat.

The sun was now almost completely set, and Susan looked disappointed that it had because she figured that they would have to wait until tomorrow to try it. Some of the other Awdnites had gathered some very dry wood and got hold of a special fire grate. They set the fire in place and lit it. It was a very intriguing fire. On that grate, there was only the tiniest puff of smoke when the fire was lit, and then the fire burnt virtually smoke-free.

They had decided to cook these without any water. It was a more exciting display the Awdnites said. Susan carefully poured the seeds into the bowl. “Not too many,” Yaleah offered, “or they’ll get in each other’s way and you won’t be able to see what each of them does”. Susan poured a few more and stopped. “Perfect”, Yaleah encouraged.

Susan wasn’t so sure about how to put the bowl on the fire. José took it gently from Susan and, with Maugrab’s visual direction, placed it as neatly as any of the locals would have.

Silently, they all watched as if expecting, well, the unexpected. First, there was a faint hissing. Then a sputtering and a few of the seeds began to tremble. Ian and José put friendly wagers on which one would do what first. Duke even seemed a bit interested, though he had something else on his mind.

As ferocious as a miniature firework display, the tiny pods all seemed to erupt and spin and spit and whirl together, a wonderfully orchestrated display of fun cooking. They smelled like a cross between cotton candy and kiwi.

The seeds did exactly as Yaleah had described. When it had settled down and was cool enough to eat, the Earthlings were invited to try it first. Susan looked around for something.

“What are you looking for?” José asked.

“I need a plate or napkin to put mine on,” she explained.

“Why?” one of the Awdnites wanted to know.

As Susan started to reply, she realized that her request wasn’t going to make much sense here on Awdnaw and her sentence slowed to a crawl by the end of it. “Well, to keep from getting someone else’s germs”.

“What are germs?” Maugrab wondered.

“Microorganisms that can make you sick.”

“What does sick mean?”

After an awkward pause, Susan ventured, “Nothing that we need to talk about now. Forget my strange word. I was wrong in my assessment of the situation.” She grinned wide; the rest laughed, not so much at what she said, but at the sudden pseudo-seriousness that she displayed and the incongruous grin on her face.

They all dug in with unwashed hands and all the delight of children who don’t care that they have not-so-clean hands.

After that batch was gone, they decided to wait at least till tomorrow for more. The conversation turned quiet again. Duke cleared his throat. He wasn’t used to talking casually in crowds. “I could go for some nice fried chicken,” he announced. He expected the same reaction from everyone that Susan had gotten when she mentioned popcorn. But, that is not at all what happened.

“What is a chicken?” Maugrab needed to know, before he could respond to Duke’s statement.

José filled in the gap, “It’s a bird about so big”, he said, motioning with his hands to display its size. “They come in white and...”

Maugrab interrupted. “Do you mean you want to eat a bird like you would eat other food? Wouldn’t the feathers taste bad?” he asked, feeling that somehow Duke was joking.

He wasn’t. “Oh, you pull all the feathers off after you wring its neck” Duke said, matter-of-factly. Whatever conscience Duke had displayed in the past now seemed to be totally absent.

Everyone’s faces looked frightened or confused. The Awdnites had heard of others who had done such terrible things. People were protected from the specter of death, but people were to protect the animals, and animals could be killed if the protection was gone. Those who had killed animals all now lived in the Valley of the Dark Eyes. Ian, Susan and José were afraid that they would have to explain what Duke was saying. They were also afraid that Duke would talk himself into going to the Valley of the Dark Eyes.

Ian held out his hands, palms down and fingers tilted slightly up, as if to say, “Let’s not jump to conclusions. Let’s all stay calm”. He was buying some time to think about how to explain what Duke was talking about. Meanwhile, Duke was simply staring off into space, occasionally looking at Ian to see what the lull in conversation he had created was all about.

José’s eyes caught Ian’s glance and spoke simply with his face to say, “Let me give it a try”. Ian’s lips pursed and he nodded ever so slightly to give José the go-ahead. José carefully started, “Long ago on Earth, there was an extreme change in the way the Father dealt with us. We can tell you all about it later, but part of the change was that the food that we were allowed to eat didn’t have enough good things in it anymore to keep us healthy, and He allowed us to eat certain animals. It was not what the Father intended from the beginning, but things were very bad on Earth and this is one of the things that happened. Our friend Duke, I believe, was just wishing for some of the taste of the food that he was used to on Earth. I think I speak for all of us when I say that we have come to appreciate the wonderful food that you have shown us and provided for us and the memory of any animals that we have had to eat has faded nearly, if not completely from our minds”.

José’s skill at diplomacy impressed Ian and Susan. Duke started to say something to contradict what José had said, but Ian put his hand on Duke’s shoulder to distract him and keep him from getting anyone, especially himself, into trouble. Maugrab and the others seemed to believe José, but Ian knew that he, José and Susan would have to keep an eye on Duke. His

whole disposition seemed to have degraded and it could be trouble for more than him if he kept displaying such a bad attitude.

Yaleah sensed the tension among the Earthlings and, wanting to help, diverted the conversation back to the good food at hand by offering more snacks to those around her. It worked. The tension eased and everyone felt more at ease, talking softly about nothing in particular and enjoying each other's company. Duke kept staring off, wishing for chicken.

A few days later, as Susan and Ian were fine-tuning some of their language skills with Onayasim, some of the children came running up to them very excitedly. In Awdnese they started, all at the same time, to describe the horse races that were being planned. The animal wasn't really an Earth-type horse, but it was close enough that the Earthlings had decided to call it a horse.

In her best Awdnese, Susan asked, "Who plans the races?" The children all giggled. She looked quickly at Onayasim. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No", he said, "not really. But you did ask who plans the races".

"Isn't that a good question?"

"It's a real question. But you don't need to ask who plans the races".

"Why not?"

"You do ask a lot of questions. If the horses are racing, then the horses plan the race. They decide what the course is, how long it should take, any special accomplishment that needs to be done along the way, things like that".

Ian was as confused and curious as Susan. "How can they plan the race, especially with all of the extra things involved?" he wanted to know.

Onayasim said, "Wait here for a minute. I think it's time you met some of the animals."

As he disappeared, Ian and Susan looked at each other as if to say, "Meet the animals?" Finally, Ian voiced what they were thinking. "How does someone meet an animal? It's not like being introduced at a party or something; or is it?"

Susan ventured, "Well, when I go to some of my friends' houses, they sometimes have a new dog or cat and tell me its name and then bore me with a cute pet story".

"But, I don't think they do things like that around here. I have a feeling that maybe they don't have pets like we do, either", Ian countered.

Susan agreed. "You're right. Not much has been normal since we got here".

As she finished, Onayasim returned with Austare. With a big, genuine smile on her face, she invited them to follow her. Austare and Onayasim led. Ian and Susan trailed along behind their Awdnite hosts, like children going on an adventure with an adult, but not sure of what the adventure is.

Sue whispered to Ian, "Where do you think we're going?"

"Beats me", Ian whispered back, but evidently not too quietly. Onayasim and Austare grinned as they glanced at the two Earthlings acting like excited children. Susan and Ian weren't even sure why they were acting so childlike, but they didn't mind a bit.

After a nice stroll across a meadow, they came to a small herd of horses. There was no corral, no barn and no indication that anyone owned or took care of the horses. There were sounds coming from the direction of the herd. Neither Ian nor Susan thought that it sounded like regular neighing or whinnying. There was an articulation to it, almost as if a person could understand what they were saying if he listened closely enough.

Onayasim walked up to one of the horses and began making noises that sounded like the noises the horses were making.

“What is he doing?” Susan asked.

“Why, he’s finding out the details of the race, just as you asked”, Austare answered.

“Now, wait a minute, Austare”, Ian chuckled. “You don’t mean to tell me that he speaks horse.”

Austare returned the chuckle. “Oh, no” she said. “He speaks a dialect that most of this type of animal uses, although, he is working to learn each of their respective languages. It conveys a sense of respect if one can communicate in a creature’s own specific language”.

Ian and Susan watched her face for a minute. Austare was serious, and amused at the Earthlings’ lack of speech skills.

Onayasim finally came back and told the three of them that the horses would be racing from there, out of the valley, around the Red Mountains and back along the lower stream. The Red Mountains were called that because of the abundance of a certain red fruit that covered them. Along the way, they were to gather information about any migrations of animals and the reason they were migrating. They were also to bring back, uneaten, one of the fruits from the Red Mountains.

Susan couldn’t help but laugh out loud. Ian simply threw up his hands in mock exasperation and exclaimed, “Sure! Whatever!” He saw no reason to try to figure anything out about this place anymore. The more he tried to understand it, the more inscrutable it became.

One of the boys, dressed in a colorful costume complete with a hat that waved in the breeze, asked the horses to line up at the starting line. He took a flag, said something slowly and deliberately in Awdnese and then dropped the flag. The horses were off, running faster than any horses Susan or Ian had ever seen on Earth. There was no dust since there was no bare ground. The cadence of the hoofs was not quite the same as an Earth horse. It was more even, with an accent on the first hoof, almost like a drumbeat, making it sound as if the horses were making simple music as they ran.

“How long will the race last?” Ian wanted to know, asking no one in particular.

The boy who started the race answered, “They will return before it is time for the last meal of the day”. That would put the end of the race some time just as the sun was setting.

Meanwhile, there were some young girls making silly noises at each other. They would then speak a while in Awdnese and throw in a few phrases of English, then go back to the silly noises.

Susan had to ask Onayasim, “What are they doing, speaking duck?”

“What’s a duck?”

“A bird about so big”. She held out her hands to indicate the size. “They’re different colors, and I bet they’re even more different here.”

“They have a bill about like this?” Onayasim used his hands to show the size and shape he was talking about.

“Yes, that’s it”

Susan’s mouth nearly dropped off her face when Onayasim simply answered with a deliberate nod of his head, “Well then, yes”.

Like the horses, the animals Susan called ducks weren’t really Earth-type ducks, but were so similar that the Earthlings called them ducks.

“Wha..Why..Huh..?” Susan wanted to ask a question, but wasn’t quite sure what the question should be.

“I guess what Susan wants to know is, what are the girls talking about and why are they speaking duck to talk about it?” Ian was able to ask for her.

Onayasim looked at them, amused and mysterious. “They are excited about the duck races”.

“Why not?” Ian muttered, half to himself and half to anyone who might be listening.

“OK, I give”, Susan told Onayasim.

“You give what?” Onayasim wondered, not understanding the slang.

“I give up. I admit that this planet is different from Earth. But do you really expect us to believe that the animals can talk and arrange their own sports events?”

“When Creator spoke all of His creation into existence, there were many things that He gave His creatures. We all, people and animals, communicate and help each other. He made people last and on a higher level than the animals so that we worship Creator and have a special relationship with Him. The Son, whom we also call Ymanyale, rarely meets with the animals to discuss anything except some job or something else that he needs them to do. That doesn’t mean that they can’t relax and enjoy Creator’s work by having races or dancing or anything else that they might like to do.”

“Yes, but...” Susan wasn’t sure how to explain to Onayasim what her question was. “Are they intelligent enough to speak and plan a race?”

Onayasim looked amused. Then a grin spread on his face, followed by a full size smile and finally a big belly laugh. “What have you just seen?” he asked, in between fits of laughter.

Susan and Ian silently looked at each other. They could tell by how the other looked that they had to concede that the animals really could talk and plan races and other events.

“I’ve got to see these ducks race, then” Susan said, partly as if she was now excited about the prospect of seeing ducks race and partly as if she simply needed to see for herself that ducks could actually plan a race.

Onayasim called one of the girls and she led Ian and Susan by the hand to the duck-racing site. It was a lovely, shimmering pond, surrounded by a clearing of bluish-violet grass, beyond which were some shrubs with pale opalescent flowers. Susan was remarking to Ian about how lovely the pond was, when she realized that it wasn’t water in it. “Ian, that looks like mercury!” she exclaimed incredulously.

“Can’t be” Ian responded. Then, after a pause to consider how to find out what it really is, and realizing that it really could be mercury he said simply, “Let’s ask Onayasim”.

They approached their adult host. Somewhat reluctantly, they tried to ask what was in the pond. Susan tried first. “What is., I mean what kind of?”

“Is that a mineral in the pond?” Ian finally asked.

Onayasim wasn’t sure what a mineral was, but he responded, “The metal in the pond is cewik seolfar, the only metal we have that is liquid in its usual surroundings”.

Susan concluded that, by Onayasim’s description, the only thing it could possibly be was mercury. “But isn’t that dangerous for the ducks, not to mention the children?” Susan was almost frantic. Ian’s face shared her worry.

Onayasim wasn’t sure what to make of this sudden show of anguish, but he calmly replied, “Please don’t let your faces and voices be that way. Cewik seolfar was made by Creator, who said that everything He made for us is good.”

Ian and Susan looked almost sheepish. What Onayasim had said was right. Could it be that, indeed, everything that had been made was truly good and that only on the planets where the people had fallen prey to the Dark One had things been made poisonous?

They followed Onayasim when he suggested that they go a little closer. “Here” he offered.

“Come feel it.” The Earthlings were reluctant. “Like this” he continued as he scooped up a big handful and let its big, beaded drops slip through his fingers. They tried it and, after a few times, seemed to enjoy it. “Just don’t eat it” Onayasim warned. Just as Susan was about to say

something about it being harmful, Onayasim finished, "It sits real heavy on your stomach. Come, let's watch the race."

The children were chattering excitedly as the ducks made their way up a little rise to their starting places. The idea, as it was explained to them by a very knowledgeable forty-three year old child, was for the ducks to get a running start down the hill and, as they hit the surface of the pond, to roll their feet into what can only be described as canoe shapes. With these natural pontoons at work, they would then flap their wings and wobble their tail feathers to give them just the right amount of forward thrust to take them as far across the pond as possible. They could not fly or sink, but propel themselves carefully with wings and tails. The last one to be still moving this way would win.

One boy that would have been about ten years old on Earth stood with a colorful flag and quacked out some last minute orders to the ducks, who all responded with their own noisy conversations. It sounded almost like too many children talking at once. The boy quacked out a 'ready, set, go' sounding phrase and they were off, waddling and quacking with feathers flying and bills and wings and tails in the air.

When they hit the surface of the pond, the spray that flew was the most glittery thing that the Earthlings had ever seen. A few of the ducks immediately tumbled, spun or flipped out of control. With a lot of racket they complained their way, good-naturedly, out of the pond. Most of the rest of them were making all sorts of flapping, waddling, wriggling, stretching, striving motions accompanied by quacks, squawks, squeals and honks.

One by one, the ducks failed to complete the race until only three remained. These had evidently done this many times because they nearly got to the other side of the pond. One tripped, it appeared, on nothing more than a small wave and was done. Another flapped too far down and got his wing in the pond and lost his equilibrium and his chance at winning. The remaining bird kept on going another two or three yards before he noticed that he had won and, with a triumphant, long honk, settled skillfully on the surface and made a small victory circle.

As the race was happening, Duke was on the other side of the pond, watching from behind some bushes. He wasn't at all interested in which animal would win. In fact, he wasn't concerned about the race itself at all, but only about which duck might wander too far in his direction. He was still dreaming about eating some chicken, and this bird would be the closest to chicken that he could get for now.

One of the ducks that was the first to drop out had noticed something in the bushes where Duke was. He wasn't sure if the bird had caught sight of him or something else. He didn't care, just so long as the bird kept coming. He saw it stop and angle its head to see better. It had seen something, and now was squawking excitedly. As it ran toward the bush where Duke was, another bird dashed out of the brush toward the first bird. Duke was furious at himself; the other bird had been just an arm's length away and would have been an easy prey. Evidently, the birds had agreed to meet after the race and were pleased to see each other. They ran into each other, tumbled and rolled apart, then waddled off, making their own unique duck language noises. Duke was making noises as well, but they were angry, frustrated noises.

He waited a little longer since there were still some birds wandering in his general direction. He tried making some clicking, clucking noises to attract their attention. A couple of them were amused at such attempts, but one was intrigued and wandered, head tilted, toward Duke. As it disappeared under the bush, Duke reached down, grabbed it, squeezed its bill shut and hurried off with it away from the pond and any person or animal that might see.

Duke sloppily wrung its neck, having only seen it done and never really having had to kill his own food. Instead of dying instantly from a quickly broken neck, the poor animal choked to death on its own blood. Duke tried to light a fire, but after a few attempts, decided that it might be better if he didn't light one; someone might see it and investigate, especially since he hadn't mastered the art of a smokeless fire as the Awdnites had. Now, he had a dead bird and didn't know what to do with it. A single dark swirl ascended out of the ground, circled his head near his ears once or twice and then drifted off beside a tree and hovered there, possibly to watch to see if its suggestion would bear fruit. As it watched, Duke cocked his head, as if listening to and considering some new idea. Then he began to pull the feathers off the bird, slowly at first and then a little faster until it became a frenetic, desperate attempt to get at its insides. When he had taken enough feathers off the bird to reveal some flesh, he began to eat, evidently not noticing that it wasn't cooked.

Back across the pond, the race had finished and all the people and animals that were watching cheered wholeheartedly for quite a while before they ambled off in different directions.

Ian turned to Onayasim and asked, "Well, what did he win?"

"What do you mean?" Onayasim responded, not sure of what Ian wanted to know.

"Doesn't he get a prize or a title or something?"

"We cheered for him. That is what we do."

"But is that all?"

"What more is there?"

"On Earth, we pay those who run races and play games large sums of money so that we can be entertained by them."

"What do the words 'pay' and 'money' mean?"

By now, Susan was deeply interested in this conversation, and it was all she could do to keep quiet, but she did. She wanted to hear how Ian would explain this most bizarre Earth custom.

Ian started feeling like he was being backed into a corner, not by Onayasim but by his own words. "Let's start with 'money'. When someone works on Earth, he is given money so that he can buy things that he needs, like food or clothing." Now he really knew this wouldn't be easy.

"But doesn't Creator provide those things for you?"

"Well, yes, but since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the garden, we've had to work very hard to get what Creator has given us."

When Ian mentioned eating the forbidden fruit, Onayasim's face blanched. "I think we will ask Maugrab to be with us when you explain about the forbidden fruit and why Adam and Eve ate it. So, you have this thing called 'money' that you get when you work. Why don't you just get the thing that you worked for?"

"Because we work for money most of the time instead of things." Ian was getting frustrated, not at Onayasim, but at himself. He knew his friend's questions were legitimate. It's just that he was seeing how inane things were on Earth, especially compared to Awdnaw. Susan started giggling, and not quietly. Ian gave her a look that said, "Let's see *you* try to explain this!" To Onayasim he said, "Let's just say that money has a lot of value on Earth and people want a lot of it".

Onayasim wasn't sure that he understood why what Ian said was true. He decided just to accept it for now, so that they could get on with the discussion. "I will believe you about 'money'. You say that people who play games receive a lot of this for playing games?"

"Yes", Ian said with a satisfied look on his face. He thought that he might have made Onayasim understand.

Instead, Onayasim looked at Ian with the oddest, blankest, quizzical stare. “But...but games are to be played by everyone.”

Susan howled with laughter. “I told you it was just a game and it was silly to pay people to play a silly game!”

She continued laughing and Onayasim chimed in to drive the point home, even if it was unwittingly. “And if Creator provides everything, why do people spend their time playing games for money instead of searching or working?”

Now, if it had been a year or so ago, Ian would have been ragingly furious. But, having spent time on Awdnaw and among these people who lived so much in the center of the Father’s Spirit, he understood that what he was hearing was a God-centered perspective on how far Earthlings had fallen. Susan had regained her composure. Ian turned to Onayasim and said, “Maybe we should go and meet this highly skilled racing duck”.

Onayasim shook his head and, with a laugh, said, “No. I’m hungry. Let’s have something to eat. Do you have any money?”

Ian replied with a huge grin on his face, “No, but I’m sure I can work for it”.

The three of them headed for a grove of delicious looking fruit, chattering like friends do.

* * * * *

The village they were living in was called Nadtsarett. It included several hundred houses of sorts where families ate, slept and otherwise engaged the community. These houses each consisted of a large, enclosed area, more like a nest than a house of any kind. There were areas for cooking and eating, entertaining family and friends and for sleeping. There seemed to be very vague lines of ownership. One cooking or lounging area may connect loosely with the one from the next house. There were also short walls, mostly for holding shelves or boxes where things were put when not being used. There were also walls for displaying a wide variety of artwork. And there were areas for privacy. These people weren’t crude, just honestly open about their lives and their living.

* * * * *

Later that day, on the far side of Nadtsarett, José found Duke sitting by a tree with a strange look on his face.

“What’s the matter, Duke?” José asked.

“Nothing” he replied, wiping what looked like berry juice or perhaps blood from his fingers.

“Been out trying some of the local food?” José was really asking two questions; where had Duke been and was that really blood on his hands?

“Yeah, that’s it. I’ve been trying some of the local food.” After a pause, Duke continued, “Ever try something that you think will taste great and find out it’s nowhere near as good as you thought?”

“Yeah, I suppose. I remember trying what I thought was apple juice and finding out it was iced tea. That set my taste buds back. What did you try that wasn’t so good? I thought everything on this planet was good.”

Duke stared for a few minutes, trying to decide how to answer without giving himself away. “Guess there’s just some things that people don’t like. I mean, asparagus is good, but I don’t like it.”

“You’re right about that.” José still wasn’t sure what Duke had been doing or what was on his hands, but he knew he wouldn’t get a straight answer from him, at least not now. “Let’s go see if we can do more to the *Pilgrim* to get her back in the air again.” He motioned for Duke to follow.

They went and found some of the local mechanics and asked them for help to try to figure out how to repair the *Pilgrim* so the Earthlings could get home. Now, to call the Awdnites who were working on fixing the ship mechanics would be like calling the planet Jupiter a rock. They had more quantum mechanics in their brains than was in all the textbooks on Earth. Some of their math and physics principles were vaguely familiar to Duke and José, but they felt like third graders by comparison. And these mechanics didn’t seem to be a day over thirty.

Duke finally had the courage to ask one of them, “How can you know so much and still be so young?”

The Awdnites looked a bit puzzled. The lead mechanic, a woman named Ahmahna, asked, “What do you mean by the word, ‘young’?”

“You know”, Duke said, “not very old”.

José tried to help Duke. “How old are you?” he asked Ahmahna.

“You want to know how many years I have lived.” she replied, more as a statement than a question.

“Yes.”

“It has been three thousand, six hundred, fifty-one years since I was born.”

Duke looked at José and José returned the look. “Something got lost in translation” was what their faces said. They both started to say the same thing at the same time, “Three thousand and what?”

Ahmahna, filled in the rest, “six hundred fifty-one” she said rather matter-of-factly, not understanding their amazement.

“But you are still so beautiful”, José blurted, realizing what he had said only after it had come out of his mouth.

“There’s not a wrinkle or a baggy place on you”, Duke agreed, though not as tactfully.

“I think I am grateful, though you are using your strange words again” Ahmahna replied through a self-conscious giggle.

José and Duke didn’t need to ask what the strange words were this time. They started to offer definitions, but Ahmahna waved them off with a gracious gesture. “It’s not necessary now. Let’s get back to work. I’m glad I can help.”

The two men agreed and the three of them started working again, but the two Earthlings kept sneaking a peek at the beautiful, ancient wonder of a woman.

Chapter 8

Where Are We, Really?

That evening, after everyone had eaten and talked and gone to their homes, the crew of the *Pilgrim* was still sitting and talking. For some of the time, they simply stared off into the twilight. Even when there wasn't a full moon, it never got truly dark. There were no artificial lights so that the stars were bright enough to see by at night. The light was never enough to keep someone awake, but just bright enough to keep even the smallest child from being afraid. This evening, there was a bit of a light show from the northern aurora. They were somewhat mild tonight, although at times they could be quite impressive.

Susan commented on how she would usually have to be swatting mosquitoes or other pesky bugs when she sat out in the evening on Earth, especially after sundown in the summer. But there weren't any here, at least none that were bothering them. They had seen mosquitoes and flies of all sorts, even some spiders, but the Awdnites weren't afraid of them or annoyed by them. Swarms of gnats seemed to make way for any person or animal that came toward them. The bugs all seemed too polite or something. Ian agreed; it just didn't seem natural.

Duke wondered, somewhat out loud, about what might be happening on Earth. Was the government still in control? Would there be a space agency to guide them down and pick them up after they landed? What was the price of gold? The others weren't too surprised at Duke's comments. They did wonder if he might not need to be thinking a little more about where he was, though, instead of where he wasn't anymore.

There was a long, thoughtful pause. It seemed that they were all asking themselves the same question.

Finally, José put it into words. "Where are we?"

"On the planet Awdnaw", Ian flatly replied. He knew where they were, technically, but he also knew what José was really asking, and he didn't have a clue.

"But..." Susan started, then realized she didn't have much to add, really.

"We are on a distant and strange planet. We need to make the most of it." Duke sounded more like a seventeenth century Earth explorer, ready to conquer and subdue.

Ian knew where they were, or at least had a real good idea. If he had believed in alternate universes and time travel and other science fiction ideas, he would say that they were in another time plane where Earth was still innocent and naive. "No, we're not on Earth" he said, as if explaining to himself about his thoughts. The others, of course, looked at him as if he might be a bit off his rocker.

"We know that, Ian," Susan offered gently.

"Oh, I know. I was just trying to come to grips with where we really are. I know I haven't said much about anything religious or anything, but I do believe that what I learned a long time ago is more real than I ever thought."

"Well, this planet sure is a good place to reconnect with your spirituality" Susan eagerly chimed in. "There's such an aura of goodness and peace here."

Ian countered, "I don't think it's just a vague aura. I think it's God Himself that wanders over the planet."

"I knew it was something like that, but I wasn't quite sure," José offered tentatively. "When I was growing up, most of the time I spent learning about God, it was about how He was watching and waiting for me to mess up so He could punish me or something. I did learn about the garden of Eden and how God walked with the people before they ate the apple or whatever."

Eden on a Distant World

José wasn't restricted by many inhibitions, now, especially those that would keep him from sharing himself.

Duke wasn't sure of their assessment of their location. Nice place, simple people. If he could ever figure out how to get back to Earth, he could export some of this to the people back home. This would make a great vacation spot, too, if he could nail down the location of the wormhole. He was busy thinking about his plans for making profit when Susan interrupted.

"What's your take on this whole thing?" she asked Duke.

"What thing?" Duke blurted as his head snapped around to face her and hide his plans. "Oh, that. Don't think so" was all he could say.

They sat for another little while and then, as if on cue, all headed for where they would sleep.

Chapter 9

Discovering the “Dark Eyes”

More than two years had passed since the *Pilgrim* crash-landed on this strange and wonderful planet. Most of the crew of the *Pilgrim* had picked up on the rhythm of the people. There was a sense of time; the Awdnites recognized times for eating and working and playing and sleeping, but there was no sense of hurry, no sense that they would miss some deadline. If a project or song or exploration wasn't finished one day, there would always be tomorrow.

Susan was intrigued by this concept of time, but she also realized that time did, indeed, continue to pass. How then, did the women stay so young looking. One day, as they collected grain, Susan asked one of her new friends, Rhayah, how old she was.

Rhayah had been sharing her discoveries about a particular grain. “I have discovered this grain and how to cook it in seven different ways. I spent the first many years of my life, after I was no longer a child, simply learning all of the other ways to gather and cook and weave and draw and sing and play and explore and all the other things that Creator has put in me as inclinations to do. I was a child for about thirty years. After that, I spent about a hundred years enjoying finding what Creator had put in my soul. When I knew a lot about myself, I asked the Father about finding a husband. He led me to the man I married. It didn't take long, about ten years. We have been married for quite a while. I have sixteen children and many grandchildren.”

Susan began to be skeptical. “But you don't look to be a day over thirty! And there's not a gray hair on your head!”

Rhayah didn't understand the compliment. “If I was still only thirty, I would not be very long out of my childhood. I would not be quite as tall as I am now and I certainly would know so little compared to now.”

“How many years has it been since you were born?” Susan asked, almost demanded.

“Two thousand six hundred seventy-eight” Rhayah replied somewhat slowly, a little taken back by Susan's insistent tone.

Susan could do nothing but stare at Rhayah. No Awdnite had ever lied to the Earthlings, at least that they knew of, and Rhayah had no reason to make up what seemed like such an enormously tall tale. Awdnite sense of humor was deep and rich and varied, but would include nothing like this. “I'm sorry,” Susan mumbled, not quite sure of what she was sorry for, except maybe not being able to believe her friend. Then, in a more positive voice, she simply said, “Let's finish collecting this grain so you can show me your favorite way to cook it”.

Rhayah joined Susan in earnest, harvesting the grain and explaining what else they would need to gather to prepare it just right. Susan would have to think about what her friend had told her and see if any of the others had heard anything like it, yet.

The same day that Susan was talking with Rhayah, José was working with some of their spacecraft searchers. They were working on fixing the *Pilgrim* so its crew could return to Earth. The work was proceeding, though not nearly as quickly as the crew had hoped it would. The inhabitants knew where Earth was. Their people had done a few fly-by's, although they never landed. They knew that they would be grossly contaminated by contact with such a foul planet. The problem was that the Earth-style ship was not equipped for regular long-distance space travel, and the Awdnites weren't sure if it would survive another pass through the wormhole.

José was taking a break from the repair work. He had discovered a tree with a fizzy, tart fruit that had become his favorite. As he made his way to the tree to enjoy more of his new favorite fruit, he saw a very unusual sight. It would not have been so unusual on Earth, but here it

seemed so out of place, so foreign. A group of four Awdnite men and two other creatures were surrounding and leading two Awdnites, a man and a woman. The two other creatures looked like men, but slightly larger, fiercer looking and seemed to have an unnatural glow about them. They also had something that José never expected to see on this world, huge swords, drawn and shining in the sun. The procession reminded him of police escorting prisoners to jail.

He suddenly lost his appetite and gained an immense curiosity about this procession. He tried to look nonchalant and follow them, wherever they were going. One of the two beings with swords turned to look sternly at him and somehow José knew that the look meant, “Go away! Now!” and there was no chance for even thinking about arguing.

He was out of breath when he found Ian and Susan helping some plant searchers investigate some seemingly new plant. “We’ve got trouble!” he blurted out, not seeing the others. “Come here, quick” he said, pulling their sleeves to get them out of earshot of the searchers. There were no secrets in Awdnaw. The only quiet, personal talking was between a husband and wife or close friends. This flushed-faced, urgent secret seemed so strange to the searchers there that they immediately stopped working and could do nothing but look at the Earthlings with puzzled expressions.

“What in the world are you talking about?” Susan whispered loudly.

“They have swords, big ones!” José countered.

“Well, what were they doing with them?” Ian wanted to know.

“Hauling people away!”

“What do you mean by hauling people away?”

“Settle down, José”, said Susan, “Take a deep breath and start from the beginning”.

José had been breathing so erratically that it took a few times before he succeeded in getting a nice deep breath. “I was helping some of their spacecraft searchers analyze our ship when I saw these four Awdnite men and two other creatures hauling a man and woman away to...to... somewhere, I don’t know. The two other whatever’s were big and mean and had their swords out, ready to whack somebody...”

Susan gasped, “Swords!”

Ian could only look puzzled and amused. “I can’t believe that they would hurt someone.”

“You can say what you want”, José retorted, but they were bigger than anyone else we’ve seen and had swords.” He paused a minute to let his Ian and Susan try to understand his report. To help them out he added, “Have you seen anyone with any weapons of any sort, here, ever?”

Ian and Susan both shook their heads. There weren’t any weapons except the sticks some of the Awdnite men carried. What could this mean? Why was no one else concerned that people and other beings were taking two of their own kind away somewhere? They all looked at each other at the same time and all said “Maugrab!” in unison. If anyone would be the one to tell them what was going on, he would.

They sneaked away, not very quietly, from the company of the plant searchers that Ian and Susan had been helping. They found Maugrab near where they had first encountered him. They approached him, very obviously unsure of what they wanted to ask.

“What question needs an answer?” Maugrab inquired, almost as if he knew what the question was. They never could figure out how he had such insight into so much, including people’s thoughts.

“Well,” Ian started “we, uh, that is, José, he was, not really being nosey, ya know...”

José couldn't wait for Ian to be tactful so he blurted out, "I saw four guys and two big shiny guys with swords taking a man and a woman somewhere and we thought you should know". Nodding his head emphatically, he added, "There, I said it."

Maugrab didn't know whether to look concerned or simply explain the situation. He had to think a minute about what to say and how to say it. The Earthlings didn't understand his hesitation, but just when José was going to press him for an answer, he began his explanation. "The man and woman you saw are now Dark Eyes. That's what we call those who let the words of the Dark One cause them to act like him and disobey Creator. They will be hidden away from the rest of us. It's what Creator has told us to do from the beginning. When there were only the first two people, the Dark One came to try to make them dark like him. But, they were strong and kept their bright eyes. Now, if there are any who follow the leading of the Dark One, we must keep them from the others. Everyone is told about the darkness and the upturned words so that when they encounter the Dark One or his servants, they know to run and pay him no attention."

"But what about the big, shining guys?" José wanted to know.

"They are the Cherowb who serve us, but not at our direction. Creator commands them to do what needs to be done. When we see them working, there is no need to ask what they do, since what they do is for our good."

"But, what about those swords? All we've ever seen are those simple clubs, but nothing like those swords!"

"The swords are needed because the Dark One's words are upturned and cause people to do other things than what the words are."

"You mean that the prisoners can be dangerous liars?" asked Ian, in disbelief.

"Please tell me what the words 'dangerous' and 'liars' mean and I will tell you."

"Well", Ian began, "'dangerous' means that a person can cause harm or destroy things". He could tell that he would have to define the words harm and destroy if he wasn't careful. "Let me say it this way. 'Dangerous' means that someone can disrupt the pattern of the way things are. A 'liar' is a person whose words are, as you say, upturned."

"I understand. In that case, the prisoners can be dangerous liars", Maugrab stated flatly, not sure if he might be using the words incorrectly.

"How long will they stay there?" Susan asked, almost as if she felt sorry for them.

"They are there", replied Maugrab, not sure of the whole question. "They have gone dark. They are out of the way of Light. Now they are out of the place where the Light lives. No one who has gone dark has become light again. Enough, now. Too much time spent on the darkness takes away from time in the Light. Maybe we should discover something else Creator has done".

"Please, one more thing" Ian said as he put his hand on Maugrab's arm to stop him from leaving.

Maugrab pursed his lips and, as conciliation to the Earthlings, nodded to Ian for him to ask his question.

"What are those light and dark swirls of light? They don't seem to be around a lot, just enough..."

Maugrab held out his hand to stop the rest of Ian's comment. "On this planet, and others like it, the unseen servants of Creator and of the Dark One appear most often as vapors. The Cherowb, Mawlawk and Mawleybid, Creator's servants, appear often as bright vapors that come most often from the sky. The Rawh, the minions of the Dark One, come usually from below us. Cherowb are sent usually to protect us. Mawlawk are sent to deliver messages and warnings, and to record some of what happens. Mawleybid are sent to perform simpler, manual tasks.

Eden on a Distant World

With that, Maugrab started away from them to do something else besides talk about the prisoners. José suggested that they find Duke. Maybe he had an idea about what to do. Ian reminded him and Susan that they were guests on this planet and that maybe they weren't supposed to do anything. They decided to take Maugrab's advice and do something else. Maybe they could find a diversion in just watching the flowers. Or maybe not.

Chapter 10

Encounter With the Darkness

That evening, after the evening meal and conversations with the Awdnites, as the Earthlings were going to their own sleeping areas, José started telling Duke about the encounter with the Awdnites and the large glowing beings with swords.

“You guys have been in the sun too long or maybe you’ve got space fever”, Duke shot back at José.

“Sorry, Duke” said Ian. He continued, half kidding and half serious. “The sun is never too hot and space fever is only caught in space. I believe what José said, though I don’t have a clue what’s going on.”

Susan offered, “Maugrab said that the two people they were hauling away were now something he called Dark Eyes. Evidently people who broke the rules or something”.

“Well, I don’t know, but it sounds way too weird for me. The sooner we get off this rock, the better” Duke mumbled, mostly to himself.

Ian found himself deep in thought. Even though he hadn’t seen it himself, something was familiar about the scene as he played it over in his mind. Great, bright, fierce beings with gleaming swords. Wasn’t that the kind of description the Bible used to describe the angels at the gate of the Garden of Eden to keep Adam and Eve out after they ate that fruit? “I wouldn’t be too quick to discount José’s story, or to think that they’re harmless or that they just take Awdnites as prisoners.”

“What do you mean, Ian?” José wanted to know.

“Remember the story of the Garden of Eden and how Adam and Eve got thrown out and God sent angels and a flaming sword to keep them out?”

“Yeah”, José tentatively answered. Then his face lit up. “You don’t mean?”

“That’s what I mean. I’m not sure if that’s what they are, but that’s what I mean.”

Susan liked the idea of angels she had always had in her head: cute, childish, soft and cuddly and nice to have around. She couldn’t get used to the idea of such fearsome creatures. “You mean those were angels? But they were so big! Where were their wings?”

Ian thoughtfully replied, “In the Bible, a lot of angels didn’t have wings. And most accounts of angels involved them fighting either demons or human armies that were enemies of God’s people.”

“Yeah, well, that’s the Bible. What about other people’s encounters with angels?” Susan asked, trying to defend her concept of angels.

“An angel has to fit the definition of the one who made them. If he doesn’t, then he isn’t an angel”. Ian surprised himself with his answer. He hadn’t spoken like that for a long time. It could be that, being here where he could think more, he could think more about what he should and about how he had let his faith wither. “We have instruments on our ship to show us which way is up and how fast we’re going and lots of other things. There’s no way we could fly by depending on our feelings or experience. Just because something shows up and says it’s an angel, doesn’t mean it is. The Bible also says that the devil can show up disguised like an angel of light, and God can give us the insight to see through the devil’s disguises.”

Susan looked offended, but said nothing. José nodded in cautious agreement. Duke had walked away midway through Ian’s explanation.

The next day, Duke was out just wandering around. It wasn't an odd thing to see an Awdnite doing that; it was part of their searching process. Sometimes they did it just to enjoy Creator's gifts. But, Duke wasn't enjoying anything. He wanted something. Though if someone were to ask him, he wouldn't be able to put his finger on it. He had been used to a lot of electronic entertainment and couldn't get used to this slower, easier way of life. He happened to see a woman talking with what looked like apes of some sort. He casually walked over to hear what they were saying. Most of the conversation was unintelligible to him, especially when the apes talked. But when he heard the woman, he could tell that they were directing her to a special deposit of minerals or stones or something.

Soon the woman made a farewell gesture and left the apes, walking up a steep path, carrying some kind of a shovel and a bucket. Duke decided to follow her at a distance. He thought he was in good physical shape, but this woman was outpacing and outdistancing him by yards at a time. He soon had to rest to catch his breath. When he resumed his trek, he discovered that she hadn't gone too much farther ahead and had started digging carefully at the base of a cliff. This cliff wasn't a rock-faced cliff like on Earth. There wasn't much rock showing at all on Awdnaw, except in some places where people usually don't go, where they can look and admire. This cliff was covered with vegetation designed for living on a vertical surface, with tiny pink and purple flowers and vines with small orange fruit on them. The woman carefully removed the sod and plants and a few inches of topsoil. She carefully placed the vegetation aside so that she could replace it when she was done. Then, she started digging, although it was more like simply uncovering. Soon Duke saw what she was gathering. Rubies. Or something very much like them.

As he watched, he found himself swatting at what seemed like a swarm of tiny insects, though he couldn't see individual bugs. He thought it might have been a cloud of smoke or dust. No, it couldn't have been that; there was little smoke and no dust since the ground was never really dusty dry. It seemed to come from the ground, swirl around his head a few times and then disappear off to his left. And it wasn't the shadow from a cloud, either, since he hadn't seen anything like a cloud in the sky since they landed. Whatever it was annoyed him terribly, and at the same time seemed to give him some idea about the amount of money he could be making from this discovery of gems.

He became furious. Not at the woman, but at his predicament. Here he was, stuck on this boring planet, trillions of miles from Earth, with no imminent chance of getting back, and in front of him was the easiest fortune he could ever make. Rubies, and other precious rocks, just inches below the surface of the ground and he couldn't sell them to anyone because here they were free to anyone who wanted to dig them up!

He mumbled this all to himself, and not very quietly. The woman looked up at him, startled at first, but then she relaxed when she saw who it was. It didn't take long, though, for her to feel just a bit concerned when she saw the way he looked. Duke had a look on his face that she had never seen before, and now she was feeling something she had never felt before - fear.

Trying to smooth things over a bit, Duke said, "Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to startle you. What are you digging?"

His words didn't do quite what he had expected. The woman was still fearful. The words and the look didn't go together. She had seen this once before in someone that had become a Dark Eye.

As Duke watched the woman, he saw the same type of cloud surround her that had annoyed him just a minute ago, except that this cloud was bright white, and came from the sky,

and seemed to stay just to her side instead of flying away. The woman summoned her courage. "I'm gathering these stones for a special project. They are to provide color and intensity for some art I am making."

Any gentleman would have offered to help. Duke offered, but not as a gentleman. He had other plans. "Can I help?" he asked. Those words sounded funny to him, especially coming from his lips, but if it would get him what he wanted, he would say anything.

"I need to fill this container just to the top with these. The apes said there might be enough here to do that."

"How did the apes know where these things were?" Duke wanted to know.

"They are always looking for new things to eat. They saw a couple of these just above the ground. When they came to investigate, they found that they were only stones. They buried the two they found so that they wouldn't be fooled again. That's when they saw that there were more here". She wasn't comfortable telling Duke about the apes and the stones. She gave the white cloud to her side a quick glance every so often as she spoke and that seemed to give her encouragement.

"Well, let's get to work, then", Duke ordered. He was not as careful at digging as the woman was. When the container was about half full, Duke distracted her. "What's that over there?"

The woman looked. It was an old, juvenile, Earth trick, but it was brand new to this planet. She looked for a while as Duke slipped a few of the gems in his pockets. Then she said simply, "I don't see anything."

"Sorry, it must have flown away". Duke chuckled to himself. His little scheme would be easier than he thought. He would have a harder time hiding his loot from his shipmates. But, the planet was big and he was sure he could find a place to hide these beauties. They dug and picked gems for a few more minutes when Duke played the same trick. This time, though, it was harder. The woman kept looking at where Duke had pointed and then back at his face to see where he was looking. Her glances were so random and unpredictable that he couldn't pocket any of the stones. He didn't want to have to come back up here to dig himself, but it looked like he just might have to. So, he helped the woman finish filling her container.

"Let's go", Duke said, more as a command than a suggestion.

The woman knew that they should replace the soil and plants close to the way they found them. She wanted to say something, but, because of the way Duke was acting, decided that she could come back and repair it later. She cautiously picked up her container and shovel and followed Duke, who had abruptly lost his gentlemanly manners. He also failed to see the white mist accompanying the woman, whose name he was too rude to ask.

That same dark shroud of vapor suddenly swept past Duke. He swatted at it, but it didn't seem quite so annoying this time. He wondered why it didn't bother him for a second, but he was distracted by the thoughts that seemed to be entering his head. "Now make sure you don't tell anyone what we found", he called over his shoulder.

"Why not?"

"Let's just call it our little secret".

The woman knew what a secret was, but this wasn't the kind of thing to be kept secret. Creator had provided all these things for everyone. Even so, she said nothing.

Duke kept distrusting this woman more and more, even though he wasn't sure why. He found himself saying, "Let's try this trail. I think it's shorter. We wouldn't want to be late for the evening meal, now, would we?" He started down a steep path that was probably a track for small

animals. The woman followed behind. There seemed to be more of the dark mists coming out of the ground. The path made a sharp curve to the right and revealed a steep bank to the left. Duke had just gone around the curve when he heard the woman give a sharp cry, not really a scream of fear, but an expression of surprise. He turned around to see her tipping precariously over the edge of the bank. Around her were three or four of the dark mists and an equal number of the bright white vapors. They seemed to be in a struggle for control of the woman. She would look like she would surely fall over the cliff; then she would be nearly upright. This happened two or three times. Then, one of the bright mists grew so dazzling that Duke had to cover his eyes and look away. When he opened them a couple of seconds later, he saw the dark shapes being chased by the bright shapes. Then he realized that the woman was laughing, not hysterically, but joyfully, like she had won a race or something.

“What are you laughing at, stupid woman? You almost got yourself killed!” The woman laughed even more. Duke felt drained, so he let her finish.

When she had composed herself, she told him, “The Father loves me and has kept me from the servants of the Dark One. Have you never felt love like that?”

Duke could only shake in head.

Chapter 11 Finding Help

After Duke had returned from stealing the gemstones, he moved furtively toward the Earthlings' resting place. They had stored all of their things on their shelves and in their boxes. Over time, they had come to realize that no one would even think of stealing what someone else had set aside. No one really owned anything, but they did recognize a sense of caretaker-ship. If someone found or made something, it was his or her right to decide who would use it and how it would be used. More often than not, it was given to whoever expressed an affection for it. With this relaxed attitude toward ownership as a backdrop, Duke's movements were very noticeable and suspicious, even to the Awdnites, who didn't seem to be suspicious about much of anything.

Ian had just come back to get something when he saw Duke. "Whatcha up to?" Ian asked with a tone of playfulness, concealing his serious intention to find out what Duke was hiding.

Duke's head snapped toward Ian, his eyes looking like a deer in headlights. "Uhh, nothing" he replied, like a child caught doing anything but 'nothing'.

"José thought he saw you going up that hill with a woman. Did you have a date?"

"Don't be a fool. Why would I want to date any of these women? They wouldn't want to go back to Earth with me."

"Don't get so upset, Duke"

Just then, Ian saw an unusual cloud or mist swirl up around Duke's feet, buzz around his head and disappear behind him somewhere. "Did you see that?" he asked Duke, not quite believing what he had seen.

"Yeah. They were bugging me earlier up on that hill."

"So, you were up there?"

Duke mumbled something under his breath.

"What'ja say, Duke?" Ian was more than curious, now; he was worried. Even though Duke wasn't the most effusive person, he was acting even more mysterious. After that, he didn't say anything. He just walked nervously into the shelter area, paced around a few times as if looking for something, then strode quickly away from the town area, out to a densely wooded area where few people went.

Ian was stunned. The few Awdnites watching the whole thing were also affected by this drama they had just witnessed. One of them, the woman named Yaleah who had introduced Ian to the fizzy-fuzzy fruit, came up to him and said, very seriously, almost fearfully, "You must guard your friend. You must ask Creator to send Cherowb to guard him. Otherwise, he will go dark. He will be one of the Dark Eyes."

"How can I? How can we? What do I need to do? How can I speak to Creator? Am I somebody that He would speak to?"

Yaleah put her hand on his arm. The touch was gentle, but firm. "The Father loves you and wants the best for you and for your friends. He will speak with you, or you may send Maugrab or one of the others that go for us to speak with Creator."

"Where is Maugrab now?" Ian had let his politeness slip. He was nearly frantic for Duke's safety.

"I will take you to him." Yaleah was glad to help and, although she could have simply given Ian directions to find Maugrab, she preferred to spend the time with Ian as they went to see her father.

As they walked, Ian was not only thinking about his friend in danger, but about how Yaleah had said that anyone could go to see Creator. He remembered that the Bible said something about being able to pray directly to God because of what Jesus had done. But, Jesus hadn't needed to die here, or did He?

"Yaleah" Ian said, hesitantly, not sure of how to ask his question, "has there ever been a time that someone had to take the punishment for something someone else had done wrong on Awdnaw?"

"You are using those strange words again," Yaleah said with a grin. The strange words had become a source of amusement for the Awdnites, except for when they had to do with the darkness. Yaleah was hoping they were innocent words, but they weren't.

"Which words?"

"Start with 'punishment' and 'wrong'"

"Well, 'wrong', I guess, is what you would call it when the Dark One turns something upside down. Instead of giving someone something that they need, someone takes it from them instead."

"I don't understand why someone would do that, but I understand what it means. And 'punishment'?"

"'Punishment' is something that you do to someone who has done something wrong, hopefully so they won't do it again and to show other people what would happen if they did something wrong."

Yaleah was not comfortable with this conversation. What's more, she was getting agitated. "It seems like a waste of time. If someone has truly decided to follow the Dark One, he should be put in the Valley of the Dark Eyes."

"Where is that?" Ian was not simply curious. He was startled by the name of the place.

"It's where those who follow the Dark One are hidden."

"Now I remember. Maugrab told us about it when José first saw the Cherowb and others leading that man and woman away. But what if...", Ian started. "What if there was a way to get the people out of the way of the Dark One and rescue them from the Valley of the Dark Eyes?"

Now it was Yaleah's turn to look startled. "How could that be?"

They had come very near to where Maugrab was working, but had been so distracted by their conversation, that they forgot where they were headed and stopped to talk more intently under the branches of a tree with silver bark and marvelous blue fruit.

Ian stopped a minute and did something he hadn't done regularly for a long time. He closed his eyes and said a quick prayer for words to say to Yaleah. As he opened his eyes, he saw a dove landing in the tree next to them. At first, it played a bit of a trick on his mind because he recognized it as a dove. Then he remembered where he was and wondered what an Earth bird was doing so very far from home. As he thought, a swirl of glowing vapor seemed to come from the air, spin around his head and disappear above the tree. Then, it came to him Who the Dove was and why it would be a Dove anywhere in the universe.

Ian felt wonderfully comforted by the Dove's presence and smiled as he turned to Yaleah to explain. He began with his knowledge of creation, the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve's temptation and sin. Yaleah listened with great interest as Ian recounted what had happened on Earth, occasionally interjecting phrases like, "Yes, that's right" and "Same, here" as he described the first part of his story. But, when he got to the part about Eve and the snake and Adam taking a bite of the fruit as well, she looked mystified, and then sad. Then Ian saw something he had rarely seen on Awdnaw, tears, on Yaleah's face. Ian tenderly used his finger to wipe them away.

“Was everyone on your planet taken to a place like the Valley of the Dark Eyes?” she asked after a moment.

Now Ian had to explain about Adam and Eve being expelled from the garden and about shame and death. Yaleah continued to look sad, with an occasional tear staining her normally porcelain face. Ian continued explaining, including how a lamb had to be sacrificed for sin, until he got to Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Yaleah had listened intently, having to ask for explanations of many of the strange words Ian used. She felt as though she might be listening to a fairy tale or something, but Ian would mention the Son and she knew how the Father had been working in other places of His creation.

When Ian finished, Yaleah sat very quietly, thinking. Ian started to ask what she thought, but could sense that she wasn’t done thinking and maybe she wouldn’t be sure just what she thought right then.

“No one has died here”, Yaleah began, using one of the strange words Ian had explained to her. “We have never made a sacrifice. The Dark Eyes are in their valley because they cannot die, and because they cannot live with the rest of us.” She was thinking out loud, laying out all of the facts, trying to learn how it all fit together.

After a while, her face seemed to display a sense of resoluteness and she simply said, “We will have to speak to Creator to find out if there is anything to be done for those in the Valley of the Dark Eyes and how we should do it. For now, we must do something about your friend so that he does not have to be subject to life in the Valley of the Dark Eyes. Let’s go talk to Maugrab so that he can ask Creator to send Cherowb to protect your friend.”

Yaleah slipped her arm through Ian’s as they went to talk to Maugrab. As Ian looked at Yaleah, he saw that she was smiling and he relaxed his arm in hers.

They soon found Maugrab, busy organizing a group of people working on some sort of spherical thing floating in mid-air.

“Daddy, may we interrupt you?” Yaleah asked.

“I want to complete this project very soon so we can use it.” Maugrab replied, not with the annoyance of a looming deadline, but with the excitement of a child who is just about to finish building his first building block structure or kite.

“It is very important, Dad” Yaleah declared, with more urgency than Maugrab had seen in a long time.

Maugrab looked up and, seeing the concerned looks on the faces of Yaleah and Ian, instantly put down his tools, wiped his hands and walked away from the work, motioning them to follow.

Ian took a deep breath as if to speak, but instead looked at Yaleah. She smiled, understanding his reluctance, and spoke for him. “Ian’s friend is being attacked by the servants of the Dark One. He doesn’t know it, and until he can understand his danger, we would like you to ask Creator to send Cherowb to protect him. Will you be able to speak to Creator for us?”

Both Ian and Yaleah were taken back when Maugrab replied simply, but firmly, “No.” Maugrab waited a moment to see if Yaleah would understand what he was saying. She was relatively young, only two hundred and twenty-eight years old and hadn’t had the privilege of speaking directly with the Son yet about anything this serious. The Son had spoken with her many times, but usually about her own life, and development, and different choices she would need to make. She never had had to approach Him on behalf of someone else. This was what Maugrab was urging her to do.

Suddenly, Yaleah flushed, not in embarrassment, but at the realization that she could talk to the Son herself about this. She asked gently, “You want me to talk to Ymanyale myself, don’t you, Dad?”

“Yes. I will be sure He gets to speak to you this evening when He comes to visit.”

Yaleah smiled her big, beautiful smile. She and Ian said “Thank you” to Maugrab at least a half dozen times each. Maugrab was smiling as well and trying to say “You’re welcome” but he was having a hard time talking while he was chuckling, not at what they were saying, but at how many times they were saying it. He finally waved goodbye to them and went back to work. Ian made a crook in his arm for Yaleah’s arm and she willingly and easily slipped her arm in his as they walked away, in no particular direction.

The Awdnites had a very clear idea of what situation determined the proper time to use any certain tool. Fire was used to cook some foods and for some experiments, but the fuel was clean, the flame was bright and there was very little, if any, smoke or soot. And the fire wasn’t left burning; nothing was wasted. Communication was done as personally as possible. There were a few occasions when Maugrab or Onayasim used what could be called a wireless phone or e-mail when they had to get in touch with other communities on other parts of Awdnaw. But, generally, people talked to each other and the communication tools were not used as games.

The simplest tool was used, if possible. If a small branch needed cutting, the smallest saw was used, whether it was a handsaw or a power saw of some sort. If any of them had to travel anywhere within about thirty miles, they walked. The food they ate and their whole lifestyle made them extremely fit so that walking was virtually no strain on them at all.

The Earthlings had noticed how they seemed to conserve everything, though Duke called it scrimping. He complained that there was so much of everything that they should just use it and not worry about where more would come from.

Susan thought that how they wasted nothing was a very spiritual thing to do. Once when she was talking to some of the Awdnite women about their conservation efforts, she said something about preserving their mother planet for future generations. The other women looked at her as if she was speaking some totally foreign language. One of them asked her if she knew what the word mother meant. She said, “Of course; it’s the woman who gives birth to you.”

“Well then, why do you refer to a planet as your mother?” one of them asked.

“Because it gives us life.”

“Creator gives us life,” the woman explained gently, as if to a child “and uses the planet as His tool. The planet holds us, but it cannot love us as a mother does”.

Susan didn’t feel so spiritual anymore. She knew what she had meant by the phrase, but it had lost its meaning in the light of the woman’s explanation.

That evening happened to be the eve of Last Day. The whole community had gathered together in the Great Hall. Everyone was talking and laughing and sharing their week’s adventures and discoveries and accomplishments. Susan had had an especially significant encounter with a number of women who had not only showed her the difference between a mother and a planet, but the difference between a reward from Creator and some impersonal consequence of a person’s actions, something she had referred to as karma. Being a woman of

science, she understood their explanation when they had applied the laws of physics. José and Duke had both been working with the other Awdnite mechanics, trying to fix the *Pilgrim* so that it could take them home. Duke had become frustrated at their seemingly slow pace, but José was beginning to see the importance of careful study so that he could do it right the first time. That way, there would be no waste of time or materials. The atmosphere on the planet, both physically and spiritually, was beginning to rub off on the Earthlings. Unfortunately, there was one type of spiritual activity that was beckoning to Duke in a way that could cost him his eternal freedom. That was the reason that Yaleah and Ian were now seated very near to where the Son would be.

The whole community got very quiet as the sun's last rays faded from view. The Son began to shine as He entered the area. People near Him kept quiet to hear what He had to say to them. His conversations were always quiet and intimate, so that anyone who spoke to Him would feel confident that anything they said could be trusted to Him. Soon, He was standing next to Ian and Yaleah. The brightness of the Son almost blinded Ian, but Yaleah was used to His shine and enjoyed its warmth.

"You have been busy and involved" the Son began.

Ian nodded. Yaleah replied, "Yes, Ymanyale". She paused to let Him know that she was finished with her reply. It was imperative that there had to be a greater sense of manners and politeness when speaking with the Son.

"Who is your friend?" It was only a matter of etiquette that prompted Ymanyale to ask. He had, of course, known Ian intimately from his birth.

"This is a friend of mine; one of the ones that came from Earth. He has begun to know Creator much better since he arrived here."

The Son looked at Ian for what seemed like an eternity, though it was really only a few seconds. He continued to address Yaleah while looking at Ian. "I know. I have seen the darkness fading from his eyes. The darkness they carry is the same darkness that invades this planet, but it has affected them differently. Now the darkness has turned to light in his eyes. He is now a Bright Eyed one". The Son had never had the privilege of declaring someone to have His light return to his eyes on Awdnaw and it made Him extremely happy to be able to do it. As He finished His sentence, His head turned slowly to see Yaleah's reaction. Their eyes met and Yaleah knew that she had done something wonderful, though she wasn't exactly sure what it was.

Meanwhile, Ian was trying to comprehend what Ymanyale had just said. Ian hadn't really felt any different. He had simply tried to live the way Creator wanted him to. He had increasingly been thinking about Creator first and about those around him; he had been thinking less and less about himself first. He hadn't forgotten the gifts and abilities Creator had given him; he just wasn't as self-absorbed with them now. "Is that part of what being a child of God was all about?" he thought to himself. It became rhetorical for him as he listened to what Ymanyale was saying to Yaleah.

"You have led a leader," Ymanyale told Yaleah. "Ian will do wonderful things for many people because you have helped him turn to the Light and let me rid him of the darkness. His great work will be soon."

Yaleah blushed at the complimentary statement. Her life and words had helped Ian regain the faith that he had once.

There would be no need to announce Ian's Bright Eye status. Everyone he met would be able to see it.

Ymanyale turned to Yaleah and asked, "So, what have you been involved in?"

Eden on a Distant World

“We have seen a friend of ours”, Yaleah started, “doing things that the Dark One does. We believe he may be on his way to leaving the Light, that is...your Light”. She stumbled over her words, realizing that she wasn’t talking about the Son now, but to Him. “What can we do to keep him from deciding to follow the Dark One?”

“Nothing” Ymanyale stated, “because everyone must choose who he will follow. But, we can do a lot to guard him, as much as he wants to be guarded. There are Cherowb and Mawlawk around him now and there will be more. He will decide soon who to follow. You must continue to let me shine through you as you have done and do not let your own light be dimmed or jeopardized. I’m glad we could talk. We’ll do it again soon.” He leaned over to Ian and whispered in his ear, “and this lady would make a fine wife for you” and then winked at him. “Enjoy your meal” He said to both of them. His words were simple, but His communication was deep.

Ian and Yaleah rushed off to tell José, Susan and Onayasim what the Son had said about Duke.

Chapter 12

When the Valley of the Dark Eyes Came to Be

The Valley of the Dark Eyes was intended to be a giant playing field for some giant games. It was simply called The Valley of the Giant Games. For a few hundred years, there was an annual game that the younger people would play. The contest combined elements of what could have been Earth games like capture the flag, a math Olympics and a science fair with some jumping, climbing and swimming. Contestants chose balanced teams with between one and two hundred young men and women on each team. Each team would have to traverse the length of the valley, achieving all of the goals determined by a group of more mature former players called the Astute Ones, who were, when it came down to it, a group of playful, but not quite mischievous, young adults who tried to make the game even more challenging than it was when they played.

One team would start at the eastern end of the valley and the other at the western end. They would often be in full view of each other since stealth was not a requirement. What use was being sneaky on a planet where openness and honesty were the norm? Movements and challenges involved mental, physical, spiritual and emotional skill and stamina.

Unlike many Earth games, teamwork was not only encouraged, but required for victory. The valley was about sixty miles long and twenty miles wide, not large for a valley, but just the right size for these games. Its sides were very steep and formed by some of the highest ridges and mountains, if one could call them that, on the planet. At the top of the ridges were plateaus about half a mile wide, like a lip around the top. Beyond that, the outer side of this natural area gently sloped away to a surrounding plain. The game would last for two or three weeks and be watched by thousands of people who would camp on the plateau surrounding the valley. Many people still talked about the games, and the parties and feasting that accompanied them.

But, now, the valley had to be used for something so much more important and dangerous. Its eastern end was, as it were, the rounded end of a horseshoe. The western end had a narrow opening, through which anyone who wanted to enter the valley had to go. There was now a small battalion of Cherowb guarding this opening with flaming swords. No one got in or out without an extremely good reason, approved by Creator Himself.

During the last game ever played here, there were two people, a young man and a young woman, who, no matter which team they were on, had never won a game. His name was Ennemnus and hers was Zeffria. The last few times they played, the servants of the Dark One, the Rawh, had increasingly visited them with their dark swirls of shadow and subtle whispers. “You’ve never won”, they would taunt. “You just can’t do it”, they would jeer, as if the winning was really important.

The prize for the winners was a great, delicious banquet of rare and unique dishes; foods that were aged for a hundred years or had to be gathered from high and distant hills or other far off places. The meal was so large that the winners would share it with the losers and no one really lost anyway!

Even so, the Rawh would buzz in the ears of Ennemnus and Zeffria. “What makes them think they’re so great? You deserve to win once in a while. You need to do something about this injustice!” And they did.

During the last game ever played there, Ennemnus and Zeffria sabotaged the equipment of the other team. They were attempting a tricky maneuver, catapulting one of their team members over a stand of trees. The ropes snapped and he went flying far too high and erratically.

In a flash, there were Cherowb and Mawleybid guiding the wayward human projectile to a safe landing.

The game was immediately cancelled. Cherowb had surrounded the two offenders. All of the other participants and the thousands of others who came to watch became silent. Even the animals, all of them, including the birds, were silent. No one had ever seen anything like it. They all knew that the Dark One was always saying things to try to make them disobey Creator, but everyone, at least so far, had relied on Creator to repel any attacks. How had someone been defeated? What did the Dark One say to defeat children of Creator? What would Creator do? The silence asked all these questions, and more, with perfect clarity.

A single Mawlawk, in the form of a bright vapor streaked down from the sky and swirled three times around the head of Miyka'el, the lead Cherowb, before shooting straight back toward the sky. He stood silent for a moment, looking as if he was trying to comprehend something. Then, in a beautiful yet powerful language, he called a thousand other Cherowb to come. They traveled quickly as bright swirls of light and took solid form only when they arrived to take their places.

Miyka'el spoke to them again in that wonderful language and they immediately flew, in full solid form, to all parts of the Valley of the Giant Games, and announced that everyone was to leave at once and to go to their homes as quickly as possible. The players started quickly for the mouth of the valley. Those on the plateau above made their way down the slopes. If people asked why, they were told that the whole planet would be informed when Creator determined that the time was right for them to know.

It took more than two whole days for the valley to be cleared of everyone in it. The Cherowb swept through the area three times to be sure that absolutely no one remained. Then Miyka'el assigned about a hundred of them to form a line at the mouth of the valley and not to let a single person into or out of the valley, from this time forward, until they were told differently.

Everyone had left except two who were detained. The only humans remaining in the valley were Ennemnus and Zeffria. They were alarmed when they heard that no one was to be allowed out of the valley. They thought, "Wouldn't people be back next year to play the games? Didn't people come here sometimes on an outing?" They had left all of their belongings in their home village.

Suddenly, they became very frightened. The Son appeared, shining as the sun, but with the saddest face they had ever seen. He stood, silently, looking at them. Then, He drew a deep breath and spoke.

"You have become dark like the Dark One" He began. "Your eyes are now dark. You have refused to listen to the voice of Creator. You have listened to the Dark One and obeyed him. You have refused to be a child of the Father as He intended. This act today was the final one that told me your hearts' desires. You had committed other acts of rebellion and disobedience. Others had tried to warn you, but you wouldn't listen. Instead, you have chosen to be a child of the Dark One. Because of that, you will spend your lives here. You will not be able to escape by your own power. You may not see anyone from outside this valley for a very long time." Ymanyale was weeping. There was nothing, yet, that could be done for them. "You will not die; you will continue to live, but you will learn what it is like to live without my friendship. As you can see, it makes me sad beyond words and beyond measure. I still love you, but you have chosen to repel my love. Goodbye Ennemnus. Goodbye Zeffria." With that, he turned slowly and walked from there to His spiritual realm.

The two humans didn't watch Him leave. They were too wrapped up in their own misery. Rawh were swarming all over them, their maniacally twisted faces showing delight at their victory. "It's all your fault!" Ennemnus screamed at Zeffria, his face contorted with hate and fear and alarm. His emotions were high but totally unfamiliar; he had never experienced hate or fear before, but now they were consuming him.

"What do you mean? You're the one who suggested that we cut the ropes!" Zeffria shot back. Her face was nearly identical to Ennemnus' and she was just as alarmed at her emotional eruptions as he was.

They continued arguing and yelling and shoving each other as they walked back into the valley, staying as much in the shadows as possible.

Creator had told his Mawlawk to announce to everyone what had happened and to let them know that the Valley of the Giant Games would now be known as the Valley of the Dark Eyes. No one was to go near it and everyone was to help encourage each other if someone looked like he was starting to listen to the Dark One. At first, a few people would approach it, keeping a distance from it. The Mawlawk would warn them away, often detailing what was going on in that Dark Valley. The combination of the Mawlawk's admonitions and the sounds they heard coming from that awful place soon made people stay even further away than the boundary Creator had established. Even the animals abandoned the area around it so that eventually a band of about fifty miles developed around it in which there were only some grass and scrub trees.

No flowers or anything beautiful grew in that Dark Valley, only the simplest food that they would need. Creator was gracious in one great way concerning those that lived there. They would never be able to bear any children. No one would be born into that evil place. Each one would be responsible only for his own rebellion.

When someone adopts a lifestyle of rebellion against Creator, there are consequences. Even though people did not die on Awdnaw, the signs of aging were apparent after a while in the Valley of the Dark Eyes. Limbs grew stiff and muscles grew weak. Hair turned pale and some fell out. It was extremely gradual, but eventually apparent.

Now, the only creatures who would travel there would be Cherowb and Awdnite guards hauling those who had turned their backs on Creator to that prison.

Chapter 13

Road Trip

One morning, the following week, the Earthlings and some others sat eating a meal and talking when Maugrab walked into the middle of the group. “Good morning” he started. Everyone greeted him in return. “Today we are going for a fresh view” he announced. As soon as he did, the whole crowd erupted in cheers. They shouted and clapped and looked as pleased as if someone was giving away the best chocolate in the world. “Please gather what you need for a trip. For this fresh view, we are going to the center of the north.”

José and Susan approached Ian to see if they were included in the excursion. Ian turned to Yaleah, who had become his constant companion whenever they weren’t doing their respective searching, and asked, “What is the center of the north and are we allowed to come, too?” Duke listened with disinterest so he would know what he would have to endure next from these people.

Yaleah was more than happy to tell them, without even asking anyone, that they were more than welcome to come. The guards who had followed them after they first landed had not been near them for some time, now. The Earthlings had acquired the same level of trust as the rest of the people.

Yaleah continued, “We go for a fresh view every time the planet passes a day change.” She could see their perplexed looks and quickly offered her explanation, “The day change is when the days become longer or shorter or are the same length for a short time.” They immediately recognized Yaleah’s references to equinoxes and solstices.

“Which day change will it be?” Susan wondered.

“The day change on the short side.” Before her Earth friends could even acquire a puzzled look for their faces, Yaleah explained, “The days are the same length, but after that, they get shorter for three months until the next day change”.

They realized that it was tantamount to an autumnal equinox and that satisfied that question, but Susan was curious, “Where is the center of the north?”

“The center of the north is the place at the farthest northern place on Awdnaw.” Now the Earthlings looked a bit worried since they realized that they were going to Awdnaw’s North Pole.

“Won’t it be too cold up there?” José asked. The Earthlings had gotten quite used to being without many clothes, and even the shame they had felt had started to erode. But, they knew that the poles on Earth were cold and, without thinking, expected the same on Awdnaw.

Yaleah laughed again. “You use the strange words as much as Ian. Oh, the word isn’t strange, but the way you use it is. Why would it be cold anywhere on Awdnaw? We make things cold when we are investigating an idea, but that is only in very small places.”

They hadn’t thought of it before, but it had never gotten cold there, not even chilly. “Let’s see”, Susan began, “doesn’t it snow anywhere?” She could tell by Yaleah’s face that she had used another strange word. “When water gets very cold, it turns to ice crystals. When these ice crystals form in the clouds...” Susan trailed off because she just realized that there had never been any clouds on Awdnaw, either. “Yaleah, maybe we had better let this one go for now. It’s not a matter of life or death, or even an inconvenience, just a difference in planets.”

“Are you sure it has nothing to do with the Dark One or anything?” Yaleah wanted to be sure.

Susan looked at Ian and José. She wasn’t sure of how genuine her sort of spirituality was anymore.

José was glad to explain. “No, it is something that happens on our planet, but not here. I heard our priest explain it this way. He said that even though the people on our planet had disobeyed and had to pay the penalty with the flood and all, Creator was still very gracious and gave us a different sort of beauty to look at instead of the original one that He had created.” José’s face lit up as soon as he finished his wonderful explanation. It was almost as if the look he gave meant, “I didn’t know I knew all that” or “That wasn’t me that said that, was it?”

José’s words intrigued Yaleah. “You must tell me more of Creator’s grace and different sort of beauty.”

“It may be a long story”, José warned with a grin.

“That’s not a bad thing since we have a ways to travel to the center of the north. Let’s move closer to the long range vehicle so we won’t make the others late.”

Yaleah, Ian, Susan and José kept chatting as they moved toward the loading area. Duke followed them, not saying a word. He was only going because he might find something else to exploit. He could be heard muttering, part of it being, “if we ever got off this rock.” Months before, they would have wanted to know all about the vehicle before they would move anywhere. Now, they trusted the Awdnites enough that whatever kind of vehicle it was would be OK by them.

But, this vehicle was so much more than OK. In fact, it was two vehicles, each about sixty feet long. There were about four hundred people in this local community and these two craft would be more than adequate to hold them all and any luggage they brought. A cockpit of sorts was at the nose end, where four people could sit, namely, a pilot, copilot, navigator and communications officer, although each would be able to assume another’s role if the need arose. Seeing as how there were no accidents, illnesses or other things that might incapacitate a crew, the only thing that might require one of them to take over another’s role would be if one of them wanted to see a beautiful view or get a snack or talk to someone else on board. Rarely, the Rawh might try something, but the Cherowb were quick to chase them away without much bother.

The vehicles were made almost entirely of glass with a shining metal frame that ran most of the way underneath, but allowed a downward view over the edge of the frame. There were also ribs that ran up the outside to a top rib. The vertical ribs allowed passengers to see around them quite easily. Seats were arranged so that everyone had a window seat if they wanted. The interior could also be arranged so that the seats could be in clusters for talking or eating and there was always enough room for walking among them.

The most interesting thing about the craft was its propulsion engines. One of the pilots explained to the Earthlings that the engines were decelerated hyper-gravity displacement engines. Instead of creating a deep well in the space flux lines, they created very tiny disruptions that allowed not only controlled movement, but also a type of anti-gravity device. Two spheres, each about the size of a basketball, protruded from the ship, one on top and one in front. The one on top was the anti-gravity device and the one on front was for thrust. One other sphere about the size of a tennis ball was at the rear, for reversing.

Ian and the others were standing with their few pieces of luggage, talking excitedly when they heard a soft whoosh and a whining sound. Then they saw both sides of the vehicle open up and out, like the wings on a giant bird, to allow the passengers inside.

“Let’s find seats next to each other”, Yaleah said quietly, and held out her arms as if to herd the Earthlings to the part of the craft where she thought they might sit.

Ian and his crew allowed Yaleah to help them find the right place to sit. They all stowed what they had and settled in for the journey. The doors closed with a soft whooshing sound and a

click. The Earthlings took a while to look around the vehicle, commenting on every new and wonderful thing they saw. The comfort of the seats; the way the glass fit into the frame without any visible fasteners; the countless number of ways the seats could be rearranged and adjusted; the way the windows allowed just the right amount of light in without getting in anyone's eyes; the way the whole thing smelled, even though it was new it didn't have any chemical odor to it like a new car. It would be more than a comfortable ride.

"How far are we from the center of the north?" Susan wanted to know.

Yaleah looked thoughtful. "The distance from where you sleep to the place where your ship stopped in the mouth of the river is about one half milleyon. We are about three thousand milleyon from our destination."

"I'm glad we don't have to walk!" Susan declared.

They all agreed.

"We walk when we should and use help when we need," Yaleah explained with a grin. "It's all a matter of wisdom. We are to use the planet without misusing it. That was one of Creator's only commands to us."

Ian asked, "How long will it take us to get there, then, since we can fly?"

"That should take us, what, about six hours?" José calculated quickly.

"I don't think it will be that long", Yaleah gently corrected. "Could be two or three hours. Or could be two or three days. It depends on what we want to see on the way." She saw their look of mild confusion. "The traveling isn't the long part; the searching is. If there are a lot of wonderful things to see, we take the time to see them. But we never lose sight of the fact that we do want to see the center of the north at the right time, so we don't spend more time than we should in searching when we go for a fresh view."

Slowly at first, and then with unhurried acceleration, the craft left the planet and hung, suspended, in midair. There was no sound of engines, just people talking, verbally appreciating the view from 50, 100, 500 feet in the air. The pilot began speaking over what had to be a very sophisticated P.A. system. It sounded as if she was right in front of whoever was listening. There was no crackle or static or tinny sound, just natural, human voice. "Ladies and gentlemen", she began. "Welcome aboard".

José, through a giggle, said to his shipmates, "Don't tell me that airline pilots sound the same way out here?!"

They all laughed, but Ian had to explain to Yaleah about the seeming similarity of the two types of pilots. Yaleah's face showed that she didn't quite understand the humor. She started to point out the window at something when she burst out in laughter. "Oh I see; you traveled such a great distance to find the same mundane behavior in someone doing the same thing as on Earth!" When she got the joke, her amusement was uncontrollable. "I...I suppose we are more alike than we thought, although, maybe, this wouldn't be something to brag about!" She laughed some more. They all had a good time as the ship began its ascent.

They didn't fly very high as compared to an Earthly airplane. In fact, they followed the contours of the hills and valleys most of the time, except when they were flying over another inhabited area.

They were soon flying over a low ridge of hills covered mostly with trees. But, these looked as though they had been carved, like a giant topiary. José asked someone near him what kind of trees they were and if that was the way they grew naturally.

A man named Admawa spoke up. "These trees bear no fruit. Since they are up on a hill, they help control the breezes that come from the center of the north. Not too long ago, some

gardeners like me thought it would be interesting to make a design in the trees. After getting permission from the Son, we trimmed the trees into a design. Every fifty years or so, we return and trim them into a different pattern. The irregular shapes provide the same amount of turbulence needed to keep the breeze just right, and we get to be creative, kind of like Creator.” Admawa looked pleased with himself, though not arrogant or proud. “You are welcome to join us as we trim the trees again.”

José was ecstatic. “Really? Cool! Just wait till I tell...” His voice trailed off as he realized that he might not get to tell anyone on Earth anything. But, his face brightened when he realized that where he was made Earth pale by comparison. “I will be delighted to help. You’ll have to show me how. The only kind of trimming I ever did was clipping the tops off the pine trees beside the driveway, unless you count trimming the Christmas tree.” José knew he had said too much when he got to the mention of Christmas. He quickly started asking about what kinds of tools they used and how they marked it off so that it would look like they wanted it to. That seemed to avert their attention from any interest in the word ‘Christmas’. “That one would have been really hard to explain” he thought to himself. Little did he know that someday the Earthlings would have to explain it, and Easter, too, in more detail than they would ever have wanted to.

Since she knew Admawa’s proclivity for these trees and other fun things to do here, the pilot came over the speaker and asked how many wanted to investigate the area to their left. Those on the right side of the craft either walked over to look or simply stood on tiptoe to see. Most of them made some sort of complimentary comment about it and they decided to stop there for the night.

They were near a village called Sher’mekome, but were far enough away not to impinge on their food supply or anything.

Camping on Awdnaw is absolutely nothing like camping on Earth. There are no tents to erect, no need to hide food in a tree to keep it from the wild animals. In fact, they had brought no food with them at all. The first thing they did was to send a message to the Father to thank Him for their journey and the new place they had to explore. The next adventure was to see what kinds of food they could find. Susan mentioned that people on any planet seem to appreciate good food wherever they are. Her companions agreed with a chuckle.

The whole group also made special notes about any new animals or variety of creature they might see. Just as on Earth, animals weren’t the same all over the planet, although here on Awdnaw, the animals had not had to adjust to such extremes in climate as those on Earth had. There were horses with curly manes that could not only talk, but also sing, after a fashion. And birds like oversized flamingoes that danced, as well as other unique and intriguing animals. As Ian and Yaleah wandered around, they saw Susan standing with her mouth open in disbelief.

“Whatcha see?” Ian asked, knowing that it was probably something at least unusual, if not strange.

Susan could only point. It was a large bird, something like an eagle or a hawk, but with four wings!

“I have heard about this kind of bird, but I’ve never seen one. Isn’t it beautiful!” Yaleah was impressed, but not surprised.

“And look at the colors.” Ian added. It had about four or five different iridescent colors on it, especially on the wings and back, but they weren’t bright like a parrot, more like muted shades of blue and yellow, appropriate for a nobler bird such as this one. They stood and looked at it for a while.

Then, Yaleah called out to it, in some sort of bird language, “What do you call yourself?” in the same tone she would ask someone she had just met what her name was.

Ian and Susan looked stunned for a few seconds until they remembered where they were, not on Earth. They heard the bird call out something to Yaleah, though it didn’t seem much like a word they could understand. Yaleah made a note of it in a journal and then excitedly announced, “I must tell our animal searchers. I’ll be back in a very little while.”

Susan told Ian she would go and look for José so he could see the bird. Then Ian tried to talk to the bird. Perhaps the bird simply could not understand him or perhaps Ian had unintentionally insulted the creature. In either case, it flew away.

Susan found José helping a group of adolescents cheering on a race, even though neither of them could tell exactly what kind of creatures were racing. They seemed to be a cross between an elephant and an alligator; scales on a body that included modest, chunky legs, a short, stubby trunk and short rows of sharp teeth in its mouth. Susan forgot about the bird. These animals were even more unique to her. Despite what seemed to José and Susan to be considerable limitations, they ran quite fast.

After a while, Maugrab whistled for everyone to gather for an evening meal. He announced that they would need to leave in the morning, but that they would stop here on the way back so that Admawa, José and the other arborists could trim the trees and everyone else could explore some more. He also suggested that everybody would need to sleep well in order to enjoy the rest of their adventure; that meant going to bed just a little early. Yaleah and Ian took a little longer to say goodnight before they each went to their respective family’s area.

Early the next morning, everyone was chattering excitedly as they boarded the vehicle. Today, they would arrive at the center of the north. There was talk about seeing the great lights up close tonight. Duke was wondering, half out loud and half to himself, why no one had ever developed a place like this into a nature park or a theme park. Then he remembered that the people here were, in his eyes, too stupid to build moneymaking things. They just wanted to enjoy it all. “What idiots” he mumbled as he took his seat, not caring who he sat next to.

Yaleah made sure she had a seat next to Ian, not knowing that Ian was making sure that he sat next to her. Ian wondered how long they would be able to share outings and other things the way that they had. He was still thinking with a mind that knew about death. Yaleah simply believed that life would go on forever.

José and Susan were busy visiting their favorite Awdnites and soon found seats where they could talk to most of their friends. From different parts of the vehicle, Yaleah and her Earth friends all snickered when the captain started again, “Ladies and gentlemen...”

They traveled a little longer this time. Yaleah and Onayasim pointed out some very unusual geography to their Earth friends. One was what the Earthlings would call real mountains. They were at least a couple of miles high and had bare rock faces on the upper parts of them.

“Creator made some places like this to demonstrate His power and majesty,” Onayasim explained. “Occasionally, people climb them for the challenge. Many people, like me, just like to admire them.”

They also spotted a narrow, winding river. Yaleah spoke up, “This area is reserved just for a certain group of animals. It’s not that they’re not allowed out or anything; it’s just that, when they’re here, they don’t have to be careful about people, and people don’t have to be careful about them. Some animals like to visit here just to relax a bit.”

“Kind of like their own fresh view” Susan added.

“Exactly” Yaleah agreed as she nodded.

They traveled on a little farther. Then, Susan saw it first. A small pile of smooth round rocks in the middle of a beautiful meadow. The vehicle landed and let everyone off with their luggage. Then it took off and found an out-of-the-way place to park.

“What’s the pile of rocks for?” Susan wanted to know.

Onayasim was standing nearby and told her. “That marks the center of the north. If you stand there and look straight up, it will appear as if everything revolves around you.”

Susan could only think to herself, “You know, Suze, there was a time when that would seem the only natural thing to expect. Now I know that it’s just an illusion.” To Onayasim she said, “That sounds fascinating. I’ll have to try that.”

“It’s more obvious at night when there are stars and planets to see. Would you like to watch it together?”

Coyly, Susan replied, “Yes”.

“Let’s take a look at some of the other things there are to discover here,” Onayasim offered, and, without quite touching Susan’s back, directed her to what looked like some delicious berry trees.

People wandered off in small groups, some to discover new plants or animals, some to find what kind of food there might be. Quite a few wanted to do something fun, so they looked for water to swim in or vines to swing from or something else active to do.

When they had all gathered for the evening meal, there was a lot of excitement about the great lights.

“I believe that we should let our Earth friends be among the ones that have the prime positions tonight” Maugrab said, not as an official announcement, but somewhat loudly so a lot of people could hear. There was no argument from anyone. It seemed like a good idea. The only one who grumbled was Duke, but he agreed to take a top spot to see the show. Yaleah, Onayasim and about a dozen others were also chosen to take the best places to watch the show.

It got dark quite early, which only heightened the level of anticipation. Those who had the privilege of getting the best view all took their places. They lay down with their heads near the pile of rocks that marked the center of the north. Their feet were all pointed away from the pile; the group appeared to be a crude star. They were all looking toward the Awdnite pole star.

Duke asked, “What are we supposed to be seeing? The way you all were jabbering so much, I’d have thought it was a fireworks display or something.”

José was beside him. “Shh, Duke. Just wait a little. I’m sure it’s coming, whatever it is”. José agreed with Duke. It was a bit boring just looking at the stars, as exquisite as they were.

The rest of the group had found places around the edge of the best locations without much regard for order. The night got very dark and the stars did appear to be turning, however slowly, around their heads as if they were the center of everything. This went on for a short hour.

Suddenly, when he started to get a little groggy, Ian saw a faint streak of light from the corner of his eye. “What was that?” he whispered.

“There’s another one,” Susan said, only not as softly, to Onayasim, who was beside her.

Onayasim smiled at her. He had seen them a few times and was touched by her awe.

“It’s about to get very beautiful,” Yaleah said quietly, mostly to Ian, but others close by heard it as well.

Then, as a ring around their heads, high in the sky, almost too far to be seen, were dashes of color and light, streaks and spikes of brilliant rainbows, flashes of every tint and shade imaginable.

Eden on a Distant World

Normally, they hang as a curtain, as on Earth, but on four nights of the year, they appear this marvelously. The magnetic field at each pole is conical, and the solar wind is drawn into it at these times.

The drapes and eddies of light came closer and closer, swirling and flashing. Sometimes the sun's plasma was strong enough to cause the solar wind to reach the very vortex of the cone. "Would it tonight?" Yaleah wondered.

As the light show grew more intense, Yaleah and Ian found that they had taken each other's hand. Neither one knew who reached first or when, but they were comfortable with the situation. They had also moved closer together, not enough to touch, but they could feel the heat from each other, which felt good tonight, because here at the pole, it was just a little chilly.

Even Duke was amused by the show, even though he later tried to account for it strictly in scientific terms. "You think we'll get the whole show?" he asked José.

"Don't know. Hope so. What do you think, Onayasim?"

"They're still very strong. They sometimes start to fade as it gets near the end." Onayasim took a long, deep breath. "Looks good for it." He grinned, first just to himself. Then, he turned his head to share his smile with Susan, who sweetly returned it.

Ian asked Yaleah, "Would this be something that you would ask Creator to do; you know, to make the lights come all the way down this time?"

She thought for a minute. As she kept an eye on the lights, she replied, "Not usually. This is a gift from Him. We take the gifts as He gives them, enjoying them. If we need food or a tool or something else that we really could not do without, we ask Him and He gives it to us freely." Then she looked at him and finished, "I *really* hope we can see them come to our heads!"

Ian squeezed her hand. It didn't take but a very few minutes for the lights to descend, closer and closer, brighter and brighter, until they were a frenetic mass of color and light that ended in a silent explosion of white light. When that happened, most of them let out a squeal or other cry of delight while some simply tried to catch their breath.

Then, the explosion quit, cut off as with a knife and the sky was just stars again. No one wanted to leave just yet, so, silently, they stayed. Many of them simply drifted off to sleep there, with the memory of the light show and the beauty of the stars to blanket them.

The following morning was a lot slower than the one before it, especially since the sun was so late in coming up. After a leisurely breakfast, everyone loaded onto the transport vehicles. A quick vote was taken; did they want to explore somewhere else or return to the area where Admawa and his gang would be trimming the trees? The vote was unanimous, return to Sher'mekome so they could trim the trees. There were also a lot of recreational activities that the others wanted to do, too.

It didn't take long to reach Sher'mekome, even though they took another route; there's always something new to see. Everyone found a place to settle for when night came, and when they had, they struck out to explore.

Ian and Yaleah wandered off to the far side of a wooded area. They sat to talk for a while. After a bit, Ian asked Yaleah if she could hear anything.

"I hear the breeze. But that other sound is too loud to be just the breeze."

Ian nodded in agreement. "I hear something like whistling or something, too".

They both got up and tilted their heads to see if they could tell what direction the sound was coming from.

"Over here" Yaleah whispered and, taking Ian's hand, led him around a small hill. As they came to the other side, they saw the most amazing thing. A hill, about a hundred yards high,

not too steep, but not too gentle, with a stream gushing out of its side near the top and pouring down toward them in a gully a couple of yards wide and smooth as glass. There were a few creatures that reminded Ian of an otter but maybe a bit bigger. They were sliding down this water slide with all of the pleasure of a group of children.

Ian and Yaleah gave each other a knowing look and scampered up the hillside to the top of the slide. They clambered into the gully just ahead of the water and raced down together. They splashed into the large pond at the bottom of the slide. Now they were as excited as children! They couldn't seem to get to the top of the hill again fast enough to slide down again. They went down, together sometimes and separately sometimes; they went feet first and head first, on their bellies and on their backs.

Once, when Ian went down headfirst and on his back, he landed a little deeper in the water than usual. He was a bit disoriented and was trying to figure out which way was 'up' when a bright vapor appeared to zip down past him from the surface of the water, whirl around below and to the side of him and then dart back up out of the water out of his sight. When it first appeared, he thought that one of the servants of Creator would be there to help him, but then, as it left him again, he questioned the reason for its appearance. Just as he was lost in thought and just about to start needing air, two fish came from below and caught him in the armpits, gently righted him and gave him a good shove to the surface of the water.

When he broke the surface of the water, he had seconds of air to spare. He shook the water out of his hair and slicked it back out of his face. Yaleah was standing beside the bottom of the slide waiting for him. He had been in the water a bit longer than usual. But, when Yaleah spotted Ian, she flashed him a big smile and waved for him to come on out, and quickly.

Ian was all too eager to get out. He had to ask, "Did you see that?!"

"See what?"

"The bright vapor and the fish pushing me and all that!"

"Why, yes" she said, almost matter-of-factly. "Wasn't that a great way to come up?"

"You don't seem surprised or impressed or anything". If this had happened on Earth and he was talking to one of his terrestrial friends, he would have thought his friends were trying to joke with him or something, but he had learned that not much on this planet was what he would call usual, so her demeanor did not surprise or annoy him.

"I am so glad that Creator sent his servant to direct the fish to bring you up quickly. Being down there too long can make a person dizzy sometimes."

Ian thought about blurting out, "Dizzy, nothing. It could kill you!" but he knew better. No one dies here. There is no death because their Adam and Eve didn't eat the forbidden fruit. But it made him wonder for just a moment what would have happened if he had been under too long. He had maintained a smile of some sort, though he wasn't sure how genuine it had looked. Finally, he simply said, "Well, I wouldn't want to get dizzy now, not when we're having so much fun". Yaleah smiled wide, took his hand, helped him out of the water and led him back up to the top of the slide for one more trip down.

Between the noise of their laughter and the squeals of delight that the otter-type creatures made, the water slide was no longer a secret to the rest of the group. It soon got crowded with dozens of thrill seekers.

When they got to the bottom of the slide and were out of the water, Yaleah looked at Ian and said, "I think I've had enough of that kind of fun for a while".

"Me, too" Ian agreed, out of breath. "Let's just take a walk this way".

They headed out around the hill, following the stream that left the pond. There was a gently sloping field that eventually led to another small lake that was fed by the stream from the pond with the water slide. This place was as peaceful as the other pond was fun. Then Ian spotted them. They made him feel as at home as almost anything else he had seen. They were like wide canoes made for two people. "Would you like to paddle a canoe?" he asked, hoping that Yaleah would take to the idea.

"What's a canoe?" she asked.

"Well, it's those boats there. I wasn't sure what else to call them."

"Well, then, sure" was all she said. She took Ian's hand and headed for the group of boats. She chose one that was a darkish pink with purple accents. They had a silly discussion about whether it was pinky purpleish or purpley pinkish. It wasn't long before they were near the far side, simply enjoying the day and the lake and each other's company.

One time, Ian had thought about what it would be like to have to go back to Earth and leave Yaleah. He turned to her and said, "You know, if I ever had to leave this place, I would miss you terribly".

Yaleah didn't say anything, but Ian could tell from the look on her face that she felt the same way. It made him sad to think about it, but he didn't want to spoil the day, so he suggested that they give someone else's canoe a playful bump, since there were a few others who had followed them to the lake and had launched their own canoes.

As they paddled furiously to catch up to another canoe, Ian asked Yaleah where the canoes had come from. "From the people of Sher'mekome. The people that were here have gone for a fresh view somewhere else," she said rather easily.

"But aren't they afraid of someone messing with their stuff or even stealing it?" As soon as Ian heard himself say the words, he knew how wrong he was.

"Are you going to make me learn new strange words today?"

"No" he said through a chuckle. "Those words are just some we use to describe things that the Dark One does. Forget I even said them".

"Sounds good to me. Look! We're almost ready to bump them." She called to their friends in the other boat, "Watch out! Here we come."

While Ian and Yaleah were having their fun on the lake, José and Duke were aimlessly wandering and exploring. They had also discovered that they were among the belongings of another community. José was honestly curious. He wanted to see if everyone on the planet lived the same way. He discovered that, in a general way, everyone lived about the same. But, of course, there were some differences. The 'nests' that the people lived and slept in were actually a different style, like a Tudor house is different from a thatched cottage. Both are about the same size and shape, but the structure and finish are different.

Susan and Onayasim weren't far behind them. They weren't too interested in getting wet and acting quite so childish, but they were having a good time anyhow. Susan was learning so much about her new friend and about his relationship with Creator and His Son. For so long, she had thought that religion of any kind was just a set of rules and ceremonies that were meant to make a person feel better and do nice things. Now, she was learning that what Onayasim had with the Father wasn't even a religion, but a relationship. Onayasim described it as like being part friend and part child. The Father loved him and his people so much that everything that was made was made for their benefit. Nothing would hurt them unless they turned to the ways of the Dark One.

Susan shared some of her search for God. She told him she had looked at different religions and belief systems and was actually still on a quest when they landed on Awdnaw.

“My dear friend, Susan” Onayasim began, somewhat hesitantly, “what are these strange words you use?”

“What words do you mean?” She knew that she wasn’t using any words that referred to the Dark One and was a bit confused by his question.

“Well, what is God?”

“What is God?” she repeated. The question seemed, for a second, to be silly in light of where they were and how the people lived. But, then she realized that she had never heard anyone on Awdnaw refer to Creator as God. “Why, ‘God’ is another word for Creator”.

“But what does the word mean?”

“What does ‘God’ mean?” she wondered to herself. Then, somewhat to Onayasim and somewhat to herself, she answered her own question. “God is the Creator, as you know”. She nodded slightly to Onayasim as if to correctly place part of the definition in the right spot. “God is also the ruler; He tells us what to do. Although on Earth, there are so many more people who don’t do what He says. He is the perfect one, the one we should worship”.

“Oh, we know about worship” Onayasim eagerly interrupted.

“I know you do! I’ve experienced it here with you and it’s wonderful!”

“But why do you need Him to tell you what to do? Don’t you want to do what pleases Him anyway? He has told us that we should simply love one another as we love Him. He has written it on our hearts. That is all He needs to tell us to do. What else is there?”

“We, on Earth, haven’t learned how to understand the way Creator thinks. In fact, we probably won’t because our first father and mother disobeyed.”

“I’m sad to hear that.” Then Onayasim noticed Duke and José in a workshop area. “Let’s go see what they’re doing” he suggested to Susan.

As Susan and Onayasim approached Duke and José, Onayasim called out, “Are you looking for something in particular?”

José was startled a bit since he didn’t know anyone was so close.

Duke, on the other hand, was almost shocked when he knew that they had been discovered. “None of your business” he called out in an irritated tone. José was as alarmed as Susan and Onayasim were at his reply.

“What’s the matter, Duke?” José asked.

“They don’t need to know what we’re doing here. It’s our business!”

“Just what *are* we doing here that’s so private?” José wanted to know. He had just been poking around to see what he could see. He didn’t know that Duke was trying to find some technology or tools or clues or something that he could steal to try to make the *Pilgrim* flyable again.

“Please don’t go beyond the orange ribbon” Onayasim called out.

“Why? What is it?” José asked simply. Duke had his own disgruntled question, but it was confined to the look on his face.

Onayasim explained, “All things were made by Creator for us to use and enjoy. But, sometimes, when we are in the middle of a project or job or something, it needs to be left alone so that the searchers working on it can finish it. We put an orange ribbon or cloth around it to signify that it should be left alone. These workers have evidently been working on something very important to them to leave such a big marker.” Onayasim pointed out the orange ribbons and cloth around a large cluster of machines and notebooks.

Eden on a Distant World

José started being careful about where he was going. Duke, on the other hand, began moving the orange ribbon so that it looked like he could go where he was allowed when, in fact, he was really well beyond where the ribbon had been.

José called to Duke, yelling at him in frustration, “Duke, didn’t you hear the man?”

“I heard him”.

“Well, then, what are you doing? You’re going to get us in trouble!”

“I don’t think so. These people are so weak that they won’t do anything to us.”

José, red in the face and exasperated with Duke as a parent with an incorrigible child, grabbed him by the arm and virtually dragged him away from the whole area. “Maybe these people won’t, but did you forget about those big, bright guys with the even bigger and brighter swords?”

Duke went reluctantly with José, mumbling something about not needing to be treated like a child.

Chapter 14

Ian's Big Question

Ian had been thinking about what the Son had said to him when he and Yaleah went to ask for help for Duke at the evening meal before Last Day. He didn't think that the Son would joke about something as serious as marriage, especially not on this planet where people stay married forever. It was the last night in Sher'mekome before they ended their fresh view and went back to Nadtsarett. The polar auroras were putting on an exceptionally beautiful display tonight, not like before, but still wonderful. Ian thought that it might be a good time to talk about the possibility of marriage with Yaleah. But, what would she think. In Awdnite terms, he was a mere child of only fifty-some years old. In Earth terms, she was past dead. The incongruity made him smile for a second. But, this was real life, his life, and his future, and the future of the daughter of two important people on a different planet, a planet whose inhabitants, for the most part, had decided to live in perfect harmony with the Creator of the universe. The incongruity wasn't humorous anymore; it was almost scary. Then again, what did he have to lose? It wouldn't cost him his life. In fact, if he went about it properly, he would learn from it and become more the man that Creator wanted him to be. He finally decided that he really couldn't lose.

Ian had been away from the group as he was pondering his situation. He wandered, as nonchalantly as possible, to where Yaleah was sitting and asked her to take a walk with him. She was glad to go and was quickly beside him. They wandered around behind a stand of bushes, not secluded, just separated a bit from the rest of the group. They talked a bit about how beautiful the lights were and how the colors change and how they both liked the shades of pink and purple that they saw. Ian's hands were sweaty and he cleared his throat a few times. Yaleah asked if he was all right.

"Yes, I'm OK. I was just going to talk to you about something."

"I could tell".

"You could?" His voice squeaked as if he was fourteen again and it embarrassed him.

Yaleah suppressed a giggle. "Yes."

"Do you know what I want to talk to you about?"

She shrugged, just a little, coy shrug. Her head tilted the slightest bit, as if so say, "Maybe".

"I can read most of your shrugs. That looks like either a 'Yes' shrug or a 'Maybe' shrug. I think it's a 'Yes' shrug because of the way you've got just a bit of a smirk going on." He waited just a second. Then, as he peered deeply into her eyes again, they betrayed her thoughts to him. "It is a 'Yes', isn't it?"

After a coy pause, she confessed, "Yes". Her face was concentrated on Ian, but there was no sense of impatience or urgency about the way she looked at him.

Ian took a minute to compose his thoughts and Yaleah knew to wait for him. "Yaleah, we come from totally different places. We are, at least in my mind, so very many years apart in age. I know it doesn't mean much of anything here, but I am so relatively young compared to you."

Yaleah started to look a bit worried at Ian's opening sentences.

Ian had to quickly get to the point or risk conveying a meaning he really didn't mean to. "What I mean is, even though we're so very different, I like being with you. You're not only very beautiful, but smart and talented and gracious. And, you trust me. That means a lot just by

itself. You have a kind of humor that makes me smile long after the joke is over when I think about it later.”

Now, Yaleah was blushing demurely. She gazed even more deeply into Ian’s eyes, as if to steady herself with the strength of his heart.

“Yaleah, I’m not sure how to go about this. That is, I’m not sure how it’s done on Awdnaw.” Ian figured that the Earth style would have to do here, so he got down on one knee.

Yaleah wasn’t sure what Ian was up to, so she asked, as simply as possible, trying to not sound alarmed, “What are you doing? Are you worshipping me? Please don’t”.

Ian might have laughed before, but this time he simply said, “No. I’m not worshipping you. I’m simply acknowledging that I admire you and am asking, as passionately as I can, if you will marry me.” Then Ian looked intensely into Yaleah’s emerald eyes and said, “You are the most beautiful, wonderful woman that I have ever known. I cannot imagine going another day without you in my life. I love you.... There aren’t words to tell you how much I love you.” Ian swallowed hard. “Will you do me the great honor of consenting to become my wife?”

Yaleah had to refrain from asking what a few of the words meant. With a mist in her eyes, she finally said, “I would be more than happy to be your wife, even if you used some strange words to ask me.” A smile crept onto both of their faces as she demurely joked about the words. “But, we have a few things to do before that can be.”

Ian started to get really nervous now. Was there some strange ritual that he would have to perform? He got off his knee and sat beside Yaleah at enough of an angle that he could see her and be near her at the same time.

Yaleah saw his face change and quickly added, “Oh, but it’s nothing that you need to... what was the word you used... worry about. We will ask my parents what they think, and if they believe it to be a good idea that we get married, then we will ask the Father for His permission and blessing.”

“Oh, is that all?” Ian knew that Yaleah’s parents liked him and that the Father wanted nothing but the best things for him and Yaleah. But, what would they all think about the Earthling marrying one of their own?

Yaleah wasn’t quite sure of what Ian’s words meant. He tried to explain how he felt and what he wanted. She looked perplexed. Then, she said, as kindly as possible, “If my parents or the Father don’t think that it’s a good idea that we get married, then we will know that it would not be good. Why would we want to do something that isn’t good? People who do things that aren’t good tend to become Dark Eyes.”

Ian paused for a minute, then replied, quietly, “I know what you’re saying is true in my head. Sometimes, though, it’s hard for my heart to believe it as much as my head does. I love you so much and really want this to be right. But, if it isn’t, then I will know that we can still be friends and there will be someone else for each of us”.

Ian almost choked on the words as he said them. He knew that, at least on Earth, it was an extremely rare circumstance that a man and woman really stayed friends after any sort of breakup, heartbreak or disappointment. And actually to admit out loud that there would be someone else for Yaleah besides him nearly broke his heart. But, Creator is good, and Ian would have to trust Him, however hard that might be.

“There’s something else that I’d like to do, if your parents and the Father approve our marriage.” Now, it was Yaleah’s turn to look a little unsure. Her face showed not only her uncertainty about what Ian was going to say, but she was definitely curious, too. “On Earth, there is a custom that, when a man proposes marriage, and the woman agrees to marry him, he gives

her a ring to wear as a sign that they are engaged, that is, they've agreed to be husband and wife. Is there any custom like that here?"

"Well, what we usually do is, after the parents and Creator all agree that the marriage is a good thing, the parents make an announcement at a special banquet held to celebrate the future wedding. Both sets of parents stand in front of the assembly and the man's mother and the woman's father each make their own announcement, the man's mother first. After that, everyone knows that they are engaged."

"That's it?" Ian wasn't upset, just a bit puzzled by the simplicity of it all. He would later learn all about the simplicity of weddings.

"That's it." Yaleah was confident in her answer. She had known no other way.

"Well, if no one objects, I'd like to introduce this Earth custom to Awdnaw. Of all the things that we have done on Earth, this is one of the things that I believe we do right." He was pleased, if not proud, of this custom. "The man and woman also exchange rings when they are married. Would that be acceptable to your parents and the Father, too?"

"We'll ask about the rings when we ask about the marriage. We do wear rings and things to celebrate the beauty that Creator provides, so I don't think anyone would find a reason to object." After Yaleah had taken a minute to think about the idea of the rings, she decided that she thought it was a really wonderful practice.

Ian liked Yaleah's answer. Then he grew an odd grin on his face and interrupted Yaleah's thought. "Now for a really odd question. Well, the question isn't odd, but what I'm going to tell you before I ask the question will probably seem odd to you."

"It seems like it will be very, very odd" Yaleah joked.

"On Earth, there are a number of things that we consider very valuable, sometimes because they are simply very beautiful and sometime because they're not only beautiful but rare as well. We have diamonds. They are incredibly hard and equally stunning. But, they're made of dead plants that have been pressed under a large amount of weight. If the pressure isn't high enough, we just get coal, a rock that burns. But, if there's enough pressure, it turns to diamonds."

Yaleah was trying to hide her nervous laughter. "You mean you value squished plants?"

"I guess it does sound funny that way. But, they are pretty to look at!"

"You're right. It is very odd".

Ian started giggling, too. He had got ahead of himself. He knew that the next valuable object he described would seem even sillier. "Wait, wait. You haven't heard the best part yet." He decided to admit the earthly silliness of it all. "There is a creature called an oyster that lives in the sea. It looks like two cupped hands together, like this". Ian put his hands together to show Yaleah the shape.

"Yes, we have a couple of sea creatures that look like that", she said, though her face showed that she wasn't sure how they could be as amusing as Ian made out for them to be.

"Well" Ian continued, "when one of them gets a bit of sand inside of it, it starts producing mucous to cover the irritation. When it's all done, it has produced a thing we call a pearl that women wear around their necks or put in rings for their fingers. They come in different colors, but they're usually white."

"What is mucous?" Yaleah wanted to know. She wasn't sure of the humor yet.

"Mucous is, you know, snot, the stuff that your nose makes."

When Ian said that, Yaleah grinned big, then laughed her demure laugh. "You value oyster snot! I want to share this with the others! Can I?"

What else could Ian say except, "Sure, why not?!"

“Oyster snot on my finger! Oh, I can’t wait!” Yaleah was delirious with silliness and they were both laughing at the absurdity of the idea.

After a few minutes, they composed themselves again. Yaleah remembered that Ian was going to ask a question. “Now, my friend from the silly planet, what is the question that you wanted to ask? Is it as odd as the things you consider valuable?”

“Hopefully, the question I want to ask will keep me from doing anything too odd. What do people on Awdnaw consider valuable? What should I make your rings out of so that they will be special and beautiful?”

Now, Yaleah was touched. She might be the first person on her world to have an engagement ring and a wedding ring and this wonderful man from so far away, who loves her so very much and wants to marry her, will be the one to make them.

After thinking a few minutes, she said, “Deep in the planet, it is very hot. It’s part of what keeps it comfortably warm all over. In a few locations, there are places under water where the liquid rock seeps out once in a while. Usually, when this happens, it touches the water and turns back into a strange rock. Rarely, it turns into a very smooth and wonderful rock. It looks like the glass we make, but it’s so much better since Creator has made it.”

Ian knew at once that what she described was what he knew as obsidian. “On Earth, because of the flood Creator had to send, there is a lot of that kind of rock because there are many places where fire erupts from the ground and spreads out. It’s still lovely on Earth. What do you call it?”

“It is called Owrah”.

“How do I get some of these rare and wonderful Owrah?”

Yaleah thought for a minute. “You will need to talk to some of the rock searchers because I really don’t know. I have never seen any of those rocks, but I have heard exciting stories of how they go to get them.”

“I will also need someone to help me learn how to work with metals. What metals do you use for valuable things?”

“You are a sweet and remarkable man, but these are things that some of the others know more about than I do. My brother Ya’akobe knows many of these things about metal and rocks.”

Ian looked at Yaleah with a spark in his eyes. “Well, then, let’s go start asking people if it’s a good thing for us to get married.”

Yaleah caught the spark. They stood up, facing each other. Ian held up his right hand with his palm facing out. Yaleah held up her left hand, simply to match his. Instead, Ian shifted his fingers slightly to one side and folded them between hers. With a deep, knowing look into Ian’s eyes, Yaleah folded her fingers between his, making sure that their palms were gently pressing against each other’s. Then, they changed the way they held each other’s hands so they could run together toward where they last saw Maugrab and Austare. As they ran, they would occasionally look at each other and smile a smile that only they could share. Also, as they ran, there were some of those pesky dark vapors that would swirl around their feet and heads. At the same time, there were bright vapors that descended from the sky and swirled around their whole bodies, and chased away the dark vapors more often than not.

Suddenly, they both tripped, not over anything in particular, but maybe just over their own feet. When they fell, they rolled a bit and landed one on top of the other. The dark vapors deepened their darkness while teeth and claws appeared and disappeared from them. The bright vapors became dazzling white and contained gleaming swords and shields. Ian and Yaleah looked quickly into each other’s eyes and, in unison, simply said “No” with such conviction and

determination that the dark vapors immediately fled. They got up quickly and, without being embarrassed, regained their composure. They smiled victoriously at each other and began running to their goal, their hands at their sides. The bright vapors swirled once more around their heads and soared back to the sky.

Chapter 15

The Rings – Part One

Soon after the village returned from their fresh view, Ian was intent on getting started with the ring-making process. He soon found himself being in a hurry and frazzled and had to ask the Father for forgiveness. There is no need to rush unnecessarily here. The rings would be made in plenty of time. Ian just had to be consistent in his work - no hurry, no delay.

Yaleah had already told him about the rare obsidian called Owrah. The next thing he wanted to know was what the most precious metals were on Awdnaw, so, one morning after breakfast, he asked Yaleah's brother, Ya'akobe, to tell him about them. Ya'akobe was more than happy to describe some of the metals.

"The precious metals on Awdnaw are in places that take more than the usual amount of effort to acquire. Some are deep under the water in a sea or high on one of the mountains, the ones we usually look at but don't go on unless we need to."

Ian smiled a bit at Ya'akobe's veiled reference to high mountains. On Awdnaw, a high mountain might be a mile high, but no more.

"What are you grinning at?" Ya'akobe wanted to know.

"I'm sorry, but when you were talking about a high mountain, I was picturing, in my mind, one on Earth. They can be as much as five times as high as one here on Awdnaw."

"But how do you get to the top of them?"

"Most people don't. Only a very few have gone to their tops. They became that way when Creator had to send the flood on the Earth. I believe that when the Earth was new, they were much like these that we enjoy on this planet."

Ya'akobe looked perplexed, then shrugged and continued. "I'm glad you came here, but I'm not sure I would like to visit Earth."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't" Ian acquiesced. "But, what is the truly most precious metal on Awdnaw?" He was beginning to get really excited about this whole project, not only because it was going to be a unique gift to Yaleah, but it would be the first of its kind on Awdnaw.

"Well" Ya'akobe began, but paused for a few seconds to tease Ian.

On Earth, Ian would have pretended to choke Ya'akobe or do some other kind of pretend violence, but here, it was not only in bad taste, but it had lost its humorous appeal to Ian. Instead, he stomped his feet, waved his arms in the air and generally acted like a spoiled child, something that Ya'akobe had seen before.

Ya'akobe laughed hard at Ian, who was also smiling as he threw his tantrum. "Please don't cry, dear child," Ya'akobe said in mock condescension. "The most valuable metal on our humble planet is silver like the cewik seolfar, but hard as glass. It is known as Chupphernechel or Chel for short. It is deep underground. Would you like to go get some?"

"Sounds perfect" Ian replied. "Do you dig for the metal in a mine or something?" he asked, quizzically, not sure if he wanted to go underground.

"If it was mine, I would give you some" Ya'akobe replied, looking equally as mystified. Now the two of them stood, each with their own style of puzzled expression, wondering how to get out of this linguistic quagmire.

Suddenly, Ian exploded with laughter. "Mine" he said as he chuckled.

“Yes, mine. Not yours” Ya’akobe responded.

“No, my friend, not mine. A mine” Ian tried to explain by emphasizing the A in ‘a mine’. “A mine is a deep hole that we dig on Earth to get valuable things like gold and silver and coal. No, forget the coal. It’s a strange word we don’t need to worry about now.”

“Why do you dig so deep? Doesn’t Creator supply ways for you to get what you need from the ground?”

“No, not as easily as He does for you. How do you get things from deep in the ground?”

“There are certain paths that He has shown us that go for many milleyon under the ground. Even now, we haven’t searched out all of them. But, there is one that I know of that has just what you need for your rings.”

“And, I also need to know where I can find some of the Owrah.”

“It’s in the sea near the first garden.”

“How soon can we leave?” Ian eagerly wanted to know.

“To get to the Chel, we will need to wait about three weeks so the moon will move the water for us. We will also need to eat differently so we can travel this path properly. But for the Owrah, we can leave in a few days.”

The look on Ian’s face was all the question that Ya’akobe needed to continue his explanation. José was wandering by just then and noticed Ian’s strange expression.

“What’s the matter, Ian? Did Ya’akobe use a strange word on you, for a change?” José asked with a big grin.

Ian told José all about wanting to get started with making the rings for Yaleah and him. He also asked him if he’d like to come help. José was more than willing. “But”, Ian continued, “Ya’akobe was just about to tell me, I hope, about waiting for the moon and the water and eating something different or something.”

Ian relayed to José the part of the conversation that he missed.

José and Ian then looked at Ya’akobe. “Oh,” Ya’akobe said with a start. “You want me to tell you more.” Ian and José nodded. They had impatient, but humorous, expressions on their faces.

“Let’s start with how far the sea near the first garden is from here. And does it have a name?” Ian helped Ya’akobe start his explanation.

“The name of the sea is Rishownyawm. It is about five thousand milleyon from here.”

“We don’t have to walk, do we?” Ian didn’t want to use time walking when he could be learning how to make the rings.

“No,” Ya’akobe replied through a grin.

“How are we going to get there, then?”

“I’m sure we can use one of the smaller vehicles like the one we took to the fresh view”.

Susan and Yaleah were passing by as the three men were talking.

“Looks like something serious going on” Susan said with a smile, as a way to find out what they really were talking about.

“We were just planning our venture to get some materials for the rings.” Ian admitted, though he didn’t want to say any more about it.

Yaleah’s expression showed that she was instantly very interested. She had told Susan all about the rings. Susan was fascinated by the quest itself.

Then Ya’akobe mentioned that there should be four men on this adventure.

José wasn’t affected so much by Ya’akobe’s comment as Ian and Susan were.

“Why would you exclude women from this adventure?” Susan immediately demanded. She wasn’t angry, but she wasn’t happy either.

“Yeah” Ian agreed. “There might be one that has just the expertise that we need.”

José’s face revealed that he just now captured the meaning of Ian’s concern, though he still didn’t say anything. Yaleah wasn’t sure why Susan was offended, and the tension in the air confused her.

Ya’akobe became pensive for a moment before he asked Ian, “Why are we going to gather these metals and the mineral?”

Ian thought for a second. “So I can make Yaleah her rings”.

Ya’akobe looked at Ian, deadpan, for another minute and then asked, “And who is she?”

“Well, she’s your sister.”

Ya’akobe grinned ever so slightly. “But, who is she to you?”

“She’s my fiancée. Sorry. That’s an Earth word meaning that we’re going to be married.”

“And how many times have rings been made for a wedding before on Awdnaw?”

José was catching Ya’akobe’s drift and his face showed it. In fact, he almost started hopping up and down like an excited toddler. He was gesturing to Ian as if to say, “If I can get it, why can’t you?”

“None”, Ian replied to Ya’akobe’s question.

José couldn’t contain himself any longer. “Ian, it’s a guy thing because you’re a guy and even though girls give guys wedding rings, it’s only the guy that gives the girl an engagement ring. It’s not meant to be exclusive, just meaningful because of what we are” motioning to the men in the group.

As José spoke, Ian got the meaning and his face lit up. When José had finished, all Ian could say, very thoughtfully, was, “Yeah, right...cool!”

Susan was placated now that she understood. The whole concept seemed quite desirable, even romantic, when she got to thinking about it.

Yaleah was pleased, not just that the mood had brightened again, but that her rings were the center of new concepts and traditions. She wasn’t proud in any way, she just felt special that she was so much a part of it all.

“So”, Ya’akobe said, somewhat tentatively, “who do you think should be our fourth man?”

Yaleah looked at Susan with a knowing look.

“What are you looking at me for? I’m no man!” Somehow, Susan knew that Yaleah wasn’t suggesting that she go, but she wasn’t sure what Yaleah might be up to.

Yaleah, somewhat shyly, replied, “But, you know a man that might like to learn how to make rings for weddings, don’t you?”

“You mean Onayasim?” Susan blurted out. She knew that she had given her secret away when she came up with his name so quickly.

“Why not?” Ian was on the ball now.

“Sounds like a good idea to me!” José chimed in.

“Actually, Onayasim and José would be a very good help to us from above while Ian and I go under”. Ya’akobe’s support for the idea was more practical, but no less enthusiastic.

By the time the three men had all offered their approval for Onayasim to help them, Yaleah was giggling at Susan, who was trying, through her own somewhat embarrassed laughter, to deny her affection for Onayasim, as if she was a young teenager. In the end, she admitted her

fondness for him and that, in her opinion, he just might make a very good helper in this adventure.

“Do you want me to ask him for you?” Susan offered.

“No” Ian said, puffing up and acting more macho than he really could be. In his best, deep, throaty voice he continued, “It’s a guy thing and I think one of us manly men should ask”. The joke was somewhat lost on Yaleah and Ya’akobe, but Ian looked and sounded so silly they couldn’t help but laugh with the others.

It didn’t take long for them to find Onayasim. When they had, Ian asked him if he wanted to join them in the ring-making process.

“I would be more than happy to help. I’ve wanted to learn how to make things like rings for quite a while now”.

A knowing smile crept onto the faces of the rest of the group.

“What are you all smiling at?” Onayasim asked, a bit unsure.

Susan blushed a bit. José poked Ya’akobe in the ribs. Ian and Yaleah just looked at each other and grinned some more.

“We thought you’d have an interest in ring-making. That’s all.” Yaleah said to Onayasim, as she looked at Susan.

“They think you might be wanting to make me a set of rings some time.” Susan exclaimed, not out of frustration, but just so Onayasim wouldn’t be without a clue anymore. She didn’t really want him to know they had been talking about him; she just didn’t want him to look so bewildered anymore. It made Onayasim even fonder of her.

The four men spent the next few days gathering tools and supplies. They would need a diving bell; the Awdnites called it an underwater searching trumpet because of the shape of the end of the horn by the same name. But, they wouldn’t need to carry it or any of the technical gear they would need because there was a fully outfitted trumpet in a village on the shores of Rishownyawm, near the first garden. They contacted the people there and they were more than happy to share their trumpet.

Then they arranged to be able to use the transport vehicle. Ya’akobe and Onayasim could both fly it and they said that they would teach Ian and José to pilot it as well. On the morning of the chosen day, they loaded their gear and said goodbye to Yaleah and Susan. Ian and Yaleah laced fingers as they had become accustomed to doing. Then, Ian gave Yaleah a lingering hug. Onayasim and Susan simply touched foreheads and gazed for a few seconds into each other’s eyes.

As they gathered together, the Dove landed on the vehicle and cooed softly as the two couples said their tender goodbyes. Then, He spread his wings and ruffed His feathers. It looked like a show of force. If it had been just any dove, it would have looked silly. But, everyone knew who He was warning.

Yaleah made sure she faced Ian to wave to him just before he got in, and he returned the wave. With a whoosh, they were off. They flew for about three hours before they stopped for a bite to eat. Ya’akobe knew where there was a grove of trees that had all of his favorite foods in one place. He knew that Creator had assembled those trees for a good reason and he couldn’t help but wonder if he was the only one with that set of favorite foods or if there were any others that liked what he liked, and how many there could be, especially that would pass by this place. The rest of the group found that there were plenty of good things to eat there, even if everything wasn’t necessarily their favorites.

After just another hour or so of flying, they arrived at Rishownyawm. Ian and José disembarked as if they had arrived at the house of the king of the planet or something.

“Why are you walking so gently and being so quiet?” Onayasim asked.

“Isn’t this where your first parents live?” José replied.

“And isn’t this where the tree you’re not supposed to eat from is?” Ian added.

“Yes. And, yes” Onayasim answered each question with a nod to each one who asked.

“But, you probably won’t find Awdaim or Shavau nearby. They travel a lot, searching for even more new things that Creator has for them to find. As for the tree, there are three of the fiercest Cherowb who stand near it to warn those that might get too close.”

Ian thought it was an interesting reverse of condition. On Earth, the Cherowb guarded the garden after Adam and Eve were thrown out. Here, they guard the tree to reinforce Awdaim and Shavau’s choice.

“Who wants to see under the water?” Ya’akobe asked as nonchalantly as possible.

“What do we do first?” José answered immediately. He was almost more excited about this adventure than Ian was.

“Well, first we’ll need to get the searching trumpet and all that goes with it. Then, we’ll look at the instruments that will monitor Ian and Ya’akobe’s journey. After that, we’ll set it all up...” Ya’akobe could see that José was too eager to work to listen very well. “Come on, then, everybody. Let’s go get started”.

It took the rest of the day to set everything up and, despite José’s eagerness to do a test dive that evening, they all had something to eat and rested. They had to take everything out on the sea about five miles on a flat boat that had a dozen pontoons in a circle around it about fifteen feet from the boat itself. It was so stable that, even in the highest Awdnite wind, it wouldn’t capsize. When they got to the place where they would dive, instead of throwing iron anchors overboard, they anchored the boat with what looked like tiny propellers that adjusted their speed and direction to counter any drift or currents. The whole thing was controlled by a computer of some sort. Ian and José were extremely fascinated by it and wore Onayasim and Ya’akobe out with their questions about it.

“Sometimes, you have strange questions to go along with your strange words” Onayasim finally said. He was trying very hard to politely make Ian and José be quiet, or at least talk about something else.

“What do you mean” José asked, truly ignorant of how annoying they had become.

“Let’s talk about something else for a while. I’ll let you look at the designs later” Ya’akobe offered. That seemed to satisfy the curious Earthlings for now.

Ya’akobe went to the transport vehicle and brought out what Ian and José thought was a piece of diving or collecting gear. Instead, it was a stringed instrument, roughly shaped like a guitar, but with two extra pieces of body. One extended off of the larger end, opposite the fret board. The other hung down and pointed just a little toward the rear. There were six strings on the main part of the instrument. On the rearmost piece, there were four thicker strings, and on the other were eight very thin strings.

“What’s that?” Ian asked, moving quickly toward the stringed instrument Ya’akobe was holding.

“It’s a Manayabell” he replied. “Want to play?”

“It’s been a century or two since I’ve played anything. I used to play an instrument called a guitar, but it was a lot simpler than that.” Before Ya’akobe or Onayasim could ask, Ian recited the definition for them. “High school, a place where adolescents are supposed to learn important

things. Sometimes this actually happened, but it took a lot of work.”

José laughed a little at Ian’s Earth-oriented social comment, which, of course, increased the Awdnite friends’ confusion.

“It’s a place where young people go to learn things.” Then Ian waved his hand as if to say, “But, enough of that” and said out loud, “How does this Mana...”

“Manayabell” Ya’akobe said, finishing the word for Ian.

“Manayabell” Ian repeated. “How does it work?”

José moved in a little closer to see as well. He couldn’t play anything, but the technical aspects of the Manayabell had his curiosity.

“The main part of the instrument is this set of strings,” he said as he motioned to the six strings on the fret board. “These heavier and thinner strings are activated when you play a chord. The heavier strings add lower notes and the skinny ones add higher notes.”

He went on to describe the extra layers of ribbing and supports and all about the sympathetic vibrations and frequency isolations that occurs as someone plays it.

Ian didn’t care so much how it worked, just how it was played.

José was fascinated by the technology they had used just for a musical instrument. “Does it need an amplifier?” he asked. Now it was José’s turn to anticipate the quizzical looks of the Awdnites. “It’s a machine to make sound louder.”

“Oh, if we want it louder, we just have more people play their own Manayabells”, Ya’akobe explained. “When we get twenty or thirty people playing together, it can be heard for a long distance. Now, for my first question; would you like to play?”

Ian nodded and smiled; Ya’akobe began his lesson. It would take a few months to learn it well enough so that others would want to listen, but Ian was a good student and learned quickly. After half an hour or so of introductory Manayabell lessons, they put it away to simply relax a while. Conversation that evening was simple and easy and, as always, included appreciation for all that the Father had done for them that day. Ian knew why the Dove had visited them, but he couldn’t help but wonder why He had ruffed His feathers. Was there something they should be aware of, even afraid of?

They all found a comfortable place to sleep and had a good night’s rest. After breakfast the next morning, Ian and Ya’akobe got fitted out for going into the searching trumpet. Onayasim and José took their places near the controls. All four men were excited about going to fetch some Owrah.

The trumpet was clear, flexible glass. The umbilical to it consisted of five cables or hoses bundled together. One was the support cable that held it in place. There were also two air hoses, one each for fresh and stale air. The fourth was the communications cable, a speaking tube actually, with flexible diaphragms at each end to transmit sound, keep out water and allow the air pressure in the trumpet to be balanced properly. If it had been a simple, open-ended tube, the trumpet would have flooded and sunk. With all of their sophisticated capabilities, the Awdnites still opted for the simplest means to get something done. No waste, no consumption for consumption’s sake. The last cable was a sort of optic fiber, made out of the same material as the trumpet itself and fused to the top of the trumpet. Light from the sun shone on a collector on the surface and the light traveled down the cable and spread throughout the trumpet. A semi-reflective layer on the inside of the trumpet made sure that an ample amount of light was transmitted to its inside and the rest was available for a spotlight that shone all the way around the trumpet at the same time.

The descent was slow but deliberate. Ian’s mouth hung open as he saw all the sea

creatures up close. It wasn't the first time he had seen some of them, but, before, he had been trying to keep the *Pilgrim* from crashing into one of them or the bottom of the lake they had landed in. Ya'akobe was always impressed with the diversity of Creator's imagination. He even saw a few creatures he had never seen before.

The water was crystal clear and the light from the diving trumpet shone for almost a hundred yards.

As they descended, there were a number of Rawh, the servants of the Dark One, in their dark cloud form, circling the trumpet at a distance, doing a poor job of trying to hide as they stalked their prey. Ian and Ya'akobe could also see a few bright clouds dancing, as it were, around them, occasionally darting toward the Rawh, as if to warn them away. Ya'akobe prayed, simply and with conviction, "Father, we are here, and the Rawh are nearby".

Ian checked with Onayasim to see how things looked from up top. Onayasim replied that everything looked normal. Suddenly the trumpet shook, as if it was being shaken from above somehow. Ya'akobe nearly shouted into the speaking tube, "What's happening?"

"I can't see what's shaking the trumpet" José hollered back.

Just then, Ian saw a fish about three feet long lunging toward the umbilical a couple of yards above the top of the trumpet. Its mouth was wide open and the two men under the water could see the fish's long, sharp teeth. Its eyes were wide open in amazement, as if it didn't understand what was happening. Then they saw why. There were two Rawh, their ugly, evil shapes barely visible, holding the poor beast's mouth open as they used it for a pair of shears to try to cut the trumpet's lifeline to the top. The trumpet shook again as the fish's mouth whacked the cable. Water started to seep into the trumpet and the air pressure dropped. The speaking tube and air hoses had been punctured and air was slowly bubbling toward the surface. Onayasim and José were doing what they could to save their friends, but it seemed to be taking too long.

Ya'akobe saw a thread of scarlet blood from the fish drift away slowly in front of him. He prayed again, "Father, we are here, and the Rawh are very close". Then he ordered the two on the surface, "Pull us up, quick".

The trumpet started moving up, and before they could feel too sorry for the fish, a small whale with two giant knots on its head was coming straight for them.

"Faster!" Ya'akobe instructed. He had become frightened by what was happening to them and the fear that welled up inside him frightened him even more!

Ian and Ya'akobe could see three or four Rawh forcing this behemoth toward them. The knob-headed whale had the same look of bewilderment and fear on its face that the fish had. Just as the whale came within a few feet of the trumpet, a Cherowb pushed it out of the way in time so that it missed being struck by the knob-headed beast. Then another pair of Cherowb freed the whale from the Rawh, chasing them down deep toward the bottom of the sea.

Ya'akobe prayed one more time, "Father, we are here and the Rawh are here".

With that, the dazzling clouds took on their solid shapes. The Cherowb moved swiftly to chase away the rest of the Rawh. The Mawlawk moved to warn the other creatures in the area to stay away. And one Mawlawk swirled around them in the trumpet. Ian and Ya'akobe looked at each other, having heard what the Mawlawk had said.

"I'll tend to the fish," Ian stated with an emphatic nod.

"Good, and I'll tend to the hole in the tubes," Ya'akobe said, just as emphatically.

On board the diving trumpet were helmets that acted as diving suits. They were self-contained diving trumpets that extracted oxygen from the water. Ian and Ya'akobe each grabbed

one, strapped it on their heads, and splashed down, feet first, through the rising water. On his way out, Ya'akobe grabbed a small bag of tools.

The Cherowb had been chasing and battling the Rawh while the two men were getting ready to leave the trumpet. Flaming swords readily identified the Cherowb. Even though the Rawh couldn't be killed, Cherowb were severely wounding them. Strange swooshing, screaming, moaning sounds came through the water. Ian was mystified and alarmed by them. Ya'akobe was equally disturbed. He had heard of such things but had never heard them himself.

Ian swam quickly to the fish that had had its teeth bashed against the trumpet's umbilical cable. It had broken one tooth badly and another just a bit on its lower jaw. Ian reached down and tore a strip of cloth off of his shirt, such as it was. He stroked the fish's head and neck area to calm it down. He decided he'd try talking to it as well. That actually seemed to work because the fish started making sounds back at him, though Ian couldn't make any sense of it. Then he slipped the cloth around the fish's jaw as a bandage. The fish wiggled its jaw a bit, trying to get used to the foreign object in its mouth. After a minute, it nodded its head a few times and slipped slowly away. Word reached Ian some days later that his bandage had done the trick to stop the bleeding and that the cloth had worn away after a couple of days so that the fish could eat again. The message, which had traveled through seven different species of animals, also included a thank you from the fish.

Meanwhile, Ya'akobe started out to repair the umbilical. The trumpet was built to be climbed on. It had handholds and footrests all over the outside and around the bottom rim. Ya'akobe pulled himself along the handholds until he reached the top of the trumpet. Then, he felt his way up the connecting cable to find where the hoses had been punctured. Two fish like the one that had been abused quickly pointed it out to him. It didn't look too bad.

As he had been climbing the trumpet, he had felt the water moving around him. He figured it was just him moving quickly through the water or some deep eddies. But, suddenly, he realized that most of the sense of moving water was because the trumpet was rising, fast. He had to tell Onayasim and José to stop reeling it in. Ian was nowhere in sight!

Ya'akobe scrambled down the trumpet and as he got to the bottom edge, he lost his grip. The trumpet kept rising as he swam desperately to catch it. He could see bright and dark vapors not too far away, but he thought they were busy, engaged in battle. He hadn't noticed Mawlawk circling the whale-like animal with the two big lumps on his head that the Cherowb had rescued. Then, subtly, Ya'akobe felt a strange pressure on the soles of his feet. The large, lumpy-headed beast was now directly under him. Each of the lumps on the beast's head fit perfectly under the arches in his feet. When he realized what was happening, he stiffened his legs and nodded to the whale. With a perfectly controlled flip of his tail, he propelled Ya'akobe up into the bottom of the trumpet. He grabbed on quickly and tightly with both hands. After he was sure he was safe, he let one hand go long enough to wave to the beast that saved him. Then he remembered his mission and called José and Onayasim and told them to reverse the trumpet's course. He didn't hear a reply, but the trumpet stopped almost instantly, so he figured they had heard. Now, he had to retrieve Ian.

The lump-headed whale was two steps ahead of Ya'akobe. The whale, which was accustomed to reduced light in the deeper water, had dived down to be with Ian. It nuzzled Ian's side and made some soothing, humming noises. Ian was glad to see his new, large friend, even though he didn't know what the beast might be saying.

Although it was a bit dark down there, Ian noticed a soft glow around him. It was coming from the knobs on the whale's head; they were two soft headlights like giant lightening bugs. Ian

heard it make a couple of beeps and three clicks. Then, it dropped down under Ian, letting Ian sit on its head between the bumps, and gave him a swift ride up to meet the trumpet.

After just a few minutes, Ian could see Ya'akobe's face peering down, looking for his friend. When they saw each other, they both threw their hands up in a celebration gesture. Ian patted his lump-headed friend to thank him for the ride. The beast whooped once, whipped its tail to give Ian one last shove and then dashed away, back down to where he felt more comfortable.

When they both were in the trumpet, they took off their diving helmets. The air leak had slowed almost to nothing. The water had also stopped rising in the trumpet, but neither one was really aware of these things yet.

When they had caught their breath, Ian exclaimed, "Man, that was weird!"

"I'm glad to see you, too", Ya'akobe countered, not quite sure of what Ian meant.

"Sorry. Yes, I'm glad to see you", Ian said, realizing that his comment wasn't the most appropriate.

Then, in unison, they raised their hands and said, "Thank you, Father, for your love and protection and life. We are yours."

They rested a few minutes on comfortable foldout seats on opposite sides of the trumpet, basking in Creator's gifts and ways.

Finally, Ian spoke up. "I've been on Awdnaw for quite a while, but that's the closest to real danger that I've ever been here. Does stuff like that happen often?"

"Many times the Dark One tries to interfere with what we are doing. The more we discover what Creator has made and how wonderfully He has made it, the more we know how great He is. And the more we discover what Creator has done for us and provided for us, the more we know how much He loves us. But, the Dark One wants all the greatness and attention, so he tries to steal it."

Ian was listening patiently. He had learned to do that here. He learned that answers aren't just sound bites like those that he used to get from TV or the internet. But, he was starting to fidget unconsciously.

"Are you OK?" Ya'akobe asked.

"Sorry" Ian replied sheepishly. "Guess I'm still excited from our little adventure. Please, go on. I'll listen better".

"We have heard about death, and no one has ever died on Awdnaw, but every once in a while, the Dark One tries to take a life. I believe that one of us has made him extremely angry".

Ian looked startled, even scared. "Do you think it's the rings? I suspect the Dark One doesn't like the idea of marriage". Ian was also silently wondering if he should give up the idea of the rings if it's going to put people in jeopardy.

"Could be" Ya'akobe mused, looking away from Ian, but not at anything specifically. "Don't know.....Maybe.....No, I don't think so."

Ian couldn't help but laugh. "Don't hurt yourself, Ya'akobe".

Ya'akobe's quickly looked at Ian, perplexed by his laughter and comment. When he finally realized the severe uncertainty of what he had said, he had to laugh with Ian. Ya'akobe took a deep breath, "I guess I am not yet knowing".

"We just call it being confused" Ian said with a grin. Then, his face turned serious. "I suppose Earthlings get confused because most of us, even people who claim to love and follow Creator, don't think to ask Him about things. But, you and your people have confidence that, if you don't know something now, you can ask Him and He will tell you."

Ya'akobe's face followed Ian's. "Yes, I guess your word 'confused' is a strange word that is also sad. I'm sorry that we couldn't get any Owrah today. We can try again tomorrow."

Chapter 16

The Rings – Part Two

Onayasim and José had been busy enjoying just being on the sea. Onayasim had been telling José about the first people and how they carefully followed Creator's instructions to explore and wisely use the planet. Creator had also explained that they had to settle it a little at a time so that they would still be able to stay in touch. If people lose touch with each other, they lose their sense of community and accountability.

Ya'akobe was on the communications tube, trying to get the attention of the two on the surface. Then he realized something that gave him a cold shiver and a smile at the same time. They had been attacked and had to help the fish and make sure that they had gotten back to the diving trumpet. Ya'akobe realized that he hadn't fixed the umbilical and a grin crept across his face.

"What are you grinning about, now?" Ian wanted to know. He knew it could only be something good, but Ya'akobe's grin wasn't a usual grin.

"Let's go look at the umbilical where it was damaged". Ya'akobe handed Ian his diving helmet, grabbed the bag of tools and motioned for them to jump into the water.

Ya'akobe went first and Ian was close behind. They soon found where the Rawh had tried to sever the cables. The metal support cable and the flexible light pipe were undamaged, but the speaking tube and air tube had small, tooth-sized holes in them. For some inexplicable reason, they had stopped leaking, thought the two friends had a real good idea of how. Ya'akobe reached into his bag and produced a roll of silver colored material, about three inches wide. As he did, the two punctured tubes began to seep a small stream of bubbles. He tore off an arm's length of it and wrapped it around the cable's wounds. It stopped the leaks immediately. He saw Ian pointing and laughing at the material he had used to fix the air hoses. Now there would be strange *things* that are funny to add to the strange words that the people from Earth brought with them.

Ya'akobe motioned for them to go back inside the trumpet. Ian tried to contain himself and follow. It was a good thing they didn't have to work too hard to descend through the water or Ian may not have made it. When they got into the trumpet and took off their helmets, Ya'akobe was very impatient to know what Ian was laughing at.

"Do you remember when we were flying to the fresh view for the first time and the rest of my crew and I thought it was funny that the pilot sounded like the ones on Earth?"

"Yes" Ya'akobe replied, tentatively.

"Well, when you brought out that roll of duct tape, I knew there was something, like, in common or something that we shared between planets". Ya'akobe's totally perplexed look made Ian try to slow down and explain better. "On Earth, especially where I came from, this type of material" Ian reached out and grabbed the tape for a second "is used for many, *many* things, a lot of them are not at all what it was intended for. It was meant to seal heating and air conditioning ducts but now people repair everything from clothes to cars and even make wallets out of it!"

Ya'akobe was more confused with every new strange word that Ian said, but Ian couldn't stop to explain them right now. He was too consumed by Creator's intergalactic humor. The only

word Ya'akobe recognized was 'clothes' and he couldn't figure out why anyone would use that repair material for clothes.

Ian finally settled down. "Let's just put it this way, the most useful tool on Earth may be the most useful tool in the universe. By the way, what do you call this stuff?" Ian asked, pointing to the duct tape.

"It's called sticky repair material."

"Well, let's take our sticky repair material and ourselves back to the surface."

"Yes" Ya'akobe said, looking truly concerned for Ian's safety. "Let's get you back to the surface. You may have been down here too long".

Ian nodded and called to the two on the surface for them to bring the trumpet up. This time it worked and they began their ascent.

When they got to the surface, Onayasim and José helped them out of the trumpet and onto the floating dock.

"What happened down there?" José demanded. He wasn't angry, just a bit overexcited.

"Man, the Rawh had grabbed fish and whales and were using them to try to destroy the trumpet" Ian started.

Ya'akobe interrupted with, "and Ian got left by the trumpet when you started reeling it in. He went to take care of a fish with a hurt mouth and we forgot to tell you to stop the trumpet!"

"And there I was, down real deep, and when I got the fish's mouth fixed, a knob-headed whale thing gave me a ride up to the trumpet" Ian continued.

"Must have been after he pushed me back up" Ya'akobe finished.

Onayasim was listening intently, with a knowing smile on his face. The other three stopped talking to look at him, wondering about that smile. He turned to José and asked, "Do you remember when the Mawlawk came swirling around us? And do you remember what they said?"

José was almost beside himself with excitement; he couldn't catch his breath. "Yes. Yes! We heard the Mawlawk," he said. He continued, "cause we started pulling the trumpet up for a while and then we stopped it without hearing anything from you two!" he blurted, looking at Ian and Ya'akobe.

"What do you mean, you didn't hear anything from us?" Ian asked. "Why else would you..." His voice trailed off as he realized what had happened.

"Yes, indeedy-do" José said with a smirk. "Onayasim gave me a listening lesson. It's not so hard when you learn how to hear the Father's message through the messenger."

"I have had impressions or suggestions or something when they've been around" Ian said, "but I've never heard a real message, like, telling me what to do or something. What did it sound like?"

"Don't remember" José mused. I remember what it said, but not the sound of its voice."

"That's because we're not to concentrate on it, but on the One who sent it." Onayasim explained.

"But, what did you do to stop the air from escaping from the trumpet before we got it fixed?" Ian voiced the question, but Ya'akobe was just as curious.

José glanced at Onayasim, who gave him a nod, suggesting that he tell that part of the story, too. "While the Mawlawk were talking to us, a smaller kind of servant of the Father zipped straight down into the water. The Mawlawk told us that you would be OK because this little servant would plug up the holes until you could get them fixed."

Ya'akobe and Ian both grinned big.

"Thought so" Ian said.

“Just like Creator” Ya’akobe agreed.

They talked a little more about the day’s excitement, stowed what gear needed putting away and then had a bite to eat. They made permanent repairs to the umbilical before dark so they would be all ready to dive first thing in the morning. Their failure to get any Owrah wasn’t really a failure; it was an opportunity to show their tenacity and faith in the Father.

After the sun had set, as they sat talking, there was a falling star, but it looked more like shimmering fireworks because of the nature of the atmosphere. No one said a word as they watched the nebulous point of light and all of its colored streamers make its way across the night sky. When it had finally disappeared, Ian ventured, “On Earth, I would have made a wish. But, now, wishing seems so futile, when I can ask Creator for the best things for me. A shooting star is now a great reminder that Creator provides all that I need, even beautiful things to look at”.

Onayasim and Ya’akobe had that look on their faces that said that an Earthling had used a strange word again, so José explained, “A wish is wanting something without telling our Father about it. It’s wanting something without really doing anything at all to make it happen. It’s like sitting under a fruit tree, waiting for a fruit to drop into your mouth. It might happen, but not likely. And sometimes, it’s wanting something that can never be, like someone wishing that he could grow wings to fly.”

“Wishing is wanting another person to do your work for you, or sometimes wanting what might not be good for you, but not letting our Father know your heart”, Ya’akobe reiterated, just to be sure he understood.

“That’s it,” Ian said, quite simply. “Although, sometimes a wish is quite harmless, like when Susan wished she had some popcorn. You remember, that night when you all introduced us to the famous Awdnite fun foods.”

“Yeah, that was a blast.” José said, remembering.

“It started with a wish, too. It seems like ‘wish’ truly is a strange word” Onayasim mused.

They were silent again for most of an hour. Then they decided to get an early start in the morning and went to sleep. The Dove came and settled on one of the nearby crossbars on the boat.

By the time the sun had risen, all four of them had already had breakfast and were preparing to dive for the Owrah. The only thing they needed to wait for was the sun to rise high enough so that the light tube would work. Ya’akobe giggled to himself and then blurted, “I could wish for the sun to rise faster”.

Onayasim caught on quick and shot back, “Go ahead; I want to see what happens”.

“How do I wish real hard for something?” Ya’akobe asked his Earth friends.

“Usually I would just close my eyes real hard and think about what I wanted.” Ian offered.

“I would close my eyes and say what I wish for over and over again to myself”, José added.

Ya’akobe and Onayasim both tried wishing real hard, but the only thing it did was make everyone laugh till they cried. When they had all settled down, they took a peek. Yes, the sun had risen a little higher in the sky, but it had nothing to do with wishing. They all, nearly in unison, said, “Thank you” to Creator and took their places to start diving.

This time, there was no excitement on the way down. And there weren’t any Rawh too close to the trumpet, though the two inside saw some out in the shadows. They continued to descend what seemed, to Ian, to be miles, but was, in reality, only about half a mile. They were

now in the bottom of the sea, at the bottom of a trench that was about twice the size of the trumpet. The open bottom of the diving trumpet covered the spot where they would dig. It still had some water on it, but it would be no more difficult to dig in than a muddy garden.

Ya'akobe and Ian were looking at the few wonders that Creator had made at this depth. Both of them noticed it at about the same time. Ian pointed and, with the awe of seeing great art, said quietly, "Do you see that?"

"I do. But, I'm not sure we want to." Ya'akobe said flatly.

"Why not? It's beautiful!"

It was extremely beautiful. It looked like one of the Mawlawk or Cherowb when they appeared as bright clouds, except this one was larger, more intense and had a hint of a rainbow of colors about it.

"I have never seen this before, but I think I have heard about it." Ya'akobe said while still looking at the creature skulking in the shadows.

Ya'akobe's statement seemed odd to Ian, since Awdnites were very smart and had great memories. Why would Ya'akobe only think he'd heard about this? Ian ventured the question. "Why do you only think you've heard about this...this creature, or whatever?"

Ya'akobe was looking suspiciously at the bright creature that had started out by lurking about a hundred yards away, but who was now creeping towards them, stopping now and then, as if to reassess the situation. Finally, he looked at Ian and said, "When we are young, we are told many things about Awdnaw, about Creator, the first parents, the other creatures and about the Cherowb, Mawlawk and Rawh, and mostly about the Dark One."

Ya'akobe paused a moment to look at their stalker. Continuing to keep an eye on it, he continued, "Few have seen him; he is usually too cowardly to do the work himself. He sends his Rawh. But, I remember my parents telling me that he can appear more beautiful than any other creature, even more beautiful than the head Cherowb, who are beautiful beings, indeed!"

The way Ya'akobe was talking, Ian had become afraid to look at this thing, even though it was beautiful. But, he looked anyway. It had moved to within twenty feet or so of the trumpet. Ian and Ya'akobe found themselves now looking at each other, and said, in unison, "Creator, we are here and the Dark One is very close".

Ian never quite knew how Creator decided when to send help, but he didn't think that Creator necessarily had been waiting for their prayer. By the time they had gotten halfway through it, the Dark One had lunged toward the trumpet, the brightness having turned to dark lightening and the most horrific scream having come from a mouth lined with ugly, sharp, bloody teeth. He seemed to be attacking with no plan whatsoever. He got just to the edge of the trumpet and stopped. He stared directly at Ian and screamed again; this time it was words. "Ian, you're dead! Do you hear? Dead! I will make you mine - all mine!" It was the ugliest sound they had ever heard.

Ian pulled his head back, mostly as a knee-jerk reaction. Ya'akobe noticed a strange look on his face. The look was partly fear. But, more than that, his eyes looked as if they were searching for something in his mind.

The Dove had appeared and was perched just to the right of Ian's head. His wings were spread and His eyes were fixed on the Dark One.

A single, bright swirl came from just behind the Dove, though this time, it had an air of resolve about it. It crossed slowly just above Ian's eyes and returned with the same resolve behind the Dove.

Ian's eyes, which had been searching for what to do, suddenly rested, as it were, on a thought. "Me?!" he asked, looking nowhere in particular.

Ya'akobe tried to ask him what he meant and who he was talking to, but he couldn't form a single whole word. Meanwhile, the swirl came from behind the Dove and deliberately circled Ian's head again, returning to its place behind the Dove. Ian's eyes were looking for something again. They stopped again on a thought and he said, "You're right. I'll say the words and let You do the real protecting."

The Dove sang a soft, ferocious song.

Then, Ian leaned forward, his face just an inch from the glass. He looked directly at the Dark One and loudly and confidently intoned, "I belong to Creator Himself. You will have no part of me and I will have no part of you. You will go away now!"

Ya'akobe looked a bit startled, but pleased at Ian's stand against the Dark One.

The Dark One looked shocked, then reared back as if to try to swallow the whole trumpet. As he did, two of the largest, brightest, fiercest Cherowb that either of them had ever seen appeared with their swords drawn, ready for battle. The Dove sang the most powerful, commanding song either of the men had ever heard. The Dark One fell down violently on the bottom of the sea. The Cherowb thrust their swords toward him as if to say "And don't come back!" The Dark One screamed once more, shrunk down to what looked like a hideous, slimy black ball and then shot upwards, toward the surface of the water.

Ya'akobe cheered for Ian, patting him on his back and jumping up and down.

Ian wasn't so sure. "Where did he go? Did he go up to torment someone else on the surface? Is he after José and Onayasim?"

"I doubt very much that he stayed on Awdnaw. He delivers orders to his lieutenants from the other planets that welcome him."

"No matter what his reason is for wanting me out of his way, I'm going to make these rings for Yaleah." Ian nearly shouted, looking Ya'akobe directly in the eyes. "If the dark twit doesn't like it, it must be something really good!"

"Say it, friend!" Ya'akobe replied. It was an Awdnese expression of extreme encouragement.

They both were so charged with adrenaline that they almost couldn't contain themselves. They tried pacing, just because they didn't know what else to do, but they kept running into each other. Finally, Ya'akobe said, "Maybe if we use our energy to dig, we can get done faster and be able to tell the others what happened down here."

It seemed odd that this time Ya'akobe actually wanted to hurry, but Ian didn't say anything about it. He just nodded, grabbed a digging tool, handed one to Ya'akobe and they both began digging.

"This is work", Ian said, after they had been digging a while.

"Yes", Ya'akobe said, unsure of what Ian really meant.

Ian saw the look on Ya'akobe's face. "Yes, I know it's work, and it's even kind of hard work, but it's not overwhelming. I feel like we'll accomplish what we came here for. Often on Earth, people who work feel like they will never accomplish anything worthwhile. They feel like they're wasting their lives. And remember, people die on Earth after only a few years."

"That's sad," Ya'akobe said, with an anxious look on his face. But, he could say no more about it.

It didn't take too long for them to gather a nice chunk of Owrah. In fact, it was too big for just Yaleah's ring.

Ya'akobe smiled.

"You're doing it again," Ian said, although he couldn't help a grin from crossing his face.

"I guess I am, aren't I?" Ya'akobe said while holding his smile. Without waiting for Ian to ask, he continued, "I just think it's a good thing that we have enough for two rings made of Owrah. Do you know of anyone else that might want to make a ring for someone to bond their engagement?" As Ian smiled, Ya'akobe chuckled, "Now you're doing it as well".

They both knew that Onayasim would like to be part of the adventure to make rings for marriage, and Susan would feel a lot better if she also had an engagement ring. She didn't miss a lot of things from Earth, but an engagement on her finger would make her feel truly affianced.

"Let's get to the surface," Ian said to Ya'akobe. Then, he hollered up the speaking tube. "José, beam us up!"

José hollered back, "Right away captain".

"Just an Earth joke" Ian said to Ya'akobe before he could ask about the strange words.

"I'll explain it to you on our way up. I'm sure José is explaining to Onayasim now, too"

Ian kept his word and told Ya'akobe all about the imaginary space travelers and the story-telling box called television. Ya'akobe was politely interested, though he couldn't figure out why so many people on Earth simply sat and watched other people live life instead of living it themselves.

When they got to the surface, Onayasim and José helped them out of the trumpet, and as they did, Onayasim, who was never very effusive, nearly shouted as he asked, "What happened down there this time?!"

"Yeah" José added. "We saw these two huge Cherowb blaze form the sky, swords on fire and plunge into the water."

"We could see the colorful whatever coming toward you."

"And then it went all confused and we could see those really bright Cherowb, but there was a...a...a..."

"A darkness hiding some of their light. And then there was a big, dark ..."

"Nasty, ugly black ball of...of"

"Darkness that screamed out of the water and headed straight for the sky. It didn't even seem to notice us."

"And we were glad!"

Ya'akobe and Ian were laughing a bit as Onayasim and José revealed what they had seen. "Yep, that's what happened" Ian chimed in when they were done.

Ya'akobe, now looking serious, explained. "Quite simply, the Dark One is after Ian, trying to destroy him. As he approached the Trumpet, we both asked Creator for His help. He sent the Dove, a Mawlawk and two Cherowb to restrain the Dark One. But, before they got to us, Ian faced the Dark One and told him to go away, that he belonged to Creator".

"Well", Onayasim said simply. "That explains it."

"Weren't you afraid?" José wanted to know.

Ian and Ya'akobe looked at each other and said, in unison, "No".

"Not really," Ian continued. "I was a bit nervous. I mean, I've never seen the Dark One face to face before and it was a little unnerving, but I guess I was just waiting to see just how Creator would help us."

"I was curious, too, to see what the Father would do." Ya'akobe added. Turning to face Ian he said, "It was inspiring to see the way that Ian stood up to the Dark One, that devil as you say."

Not wanting to take any unneeded credit, and wanting to divert their attention away from himself, Ian looked at Onayasim. “Guess what we got while we were down there?”

Looking a bit bewildered, Onayasim said, cautiously, “I’m sure I don’t know”.

“You didn’t come on this trip just to see how things were collected. You came to gather a few things, too, didn’t you?”

“I suppose I did. But I haven’t done much except help up here.”

“Well, we couldn’t take just a little of the Owrah. We actually had to take enough for two rings. And look here, the Owrah is different colors in different places. Deep purple with streaks of pink on this end and different streaks of green on the other.”

Getting excited about the prospect of being able to make Susan a ring, Onayasim blurted, “She’ll just love that green part.” Then he realized that he might have been speaking a little too soon. What if Ian wanted the green part?

He shouldn’t have even thought about it, because Ian said, “That’s great, because Yaleah will love this purple and pink part!”

Chapter 17

The Rings – Part Three

The search for the Owrah was over and the four men had returned to Nadtsarett. Now they needed the Chupphernechel, or Chel. When they first started planning their collection trips, Ya'akobe had told Ian that they would have to wait three weeks before they could get any Chel. That was just two weeks ago. Now they had just a week to prepare and get to the nearest place that had any Chel.

On the day they were to start preparing, Ian was pacing as he waited for Ya'akobe to finish breakfast. He still wasn't used to the idea of not needing to rush. He had been used to being aware of his mortality, and, now, he knew that his body wouldn't wear out. Still, he had a hurry-up tendency.

"So, what's first?" he asked Ya'akobe, almost impatiently.

"The plan." Ya'akobe answered, simply, so as to tease Ian. "The plan is first". When he saw Ian's eyes widen he quickly countered, "Ok, Ok. It really is the plan that we have to do first, but I already have it worked out, since I've done this a time or two before."

Ian was appeased. "I believe you have. You started to tell me about the moon and the water and all before we left for Rishownyawm but we were interrupted when we were choosing other searchers."

Ya'akobe nodded. "You're right. But, it worked out well because it would have been hard to remember it all. So, here's the plan. When we go to the underground path, there will be nowhere to leave our dirt, so, we will need to be able to have no dirt to leave."

"Such polite people" Ian thought to himself. "Don't even want to say..." Then he realized there was no need to say anything dirty when something cleaner would do. Then he reiterated Ya'akobe's thoughts back to him so he would be sure he understood what they would be doing. "So, we're just not going to eat?"

"We'll eat some very special food that will feed us for the time we won't be eating. The dirt we leave before we go down the path will be minimal. The water we leave will be nearly pure. It also means we'll have only our tools to carry."

"We will also need to wait for just the right time. Most of the month, the place where we find the Chel is covered by water. It looks very beautiful under the water, but we can't get to it. When just the left side of the moon is visible, the water is pulled to the side far enough so that we can get what we need. But, we only have about nine hours to get it before the water covers it again."

"Sounds like fun!" Ian exclaimed. They both laughed. Ian was curious about whether José and Onayasim might help with the search. "Do you think we could use some help?"

Ya'akobe knew exactly what Ian meant. "If they didn't come, I'd be surprised, and disappointed!"

Susan, Ian and José were learning that nothing happens by chance to anyone who is following the Father. Another lesson was happening now. Just as Ya'akobe finished speaking, José walked close enough that it didn't take much of a yell to call him over.

"I just had to have more of that pudding that someone had made. I could have been a glutton if I wasn't careful." José was never large, but the food here was hard to resist. "Anything

happening today?” he asked. Then, he got a look at Ian’s face and realized what was going on. “Of course, you’re going for the Chel!”

“We could use some help,” Ian offered.

“You’ve got it. And Onayasim, too, if I can pry him away from Susan. He acts so shy, but he gets kind of bold when it comes to Susan.”

The other two laughed at José’s humorous but accurate remark.

José spotted Onayasim, sitting close to Susan and sharing a casserole of some sort. “Hey, lover-boy, you want to help us get some Chel?”

Onayasim ignored José, not because he was being rude; he just didn’t think anyone was calling him lover-boy. Susan had to tap him on the shoulder and point to the knot of three men looking at him. José repeated himself when he was sure Onayasim was paying attention. The lover-boy turned red when he realized that his attention to Susan was so obvious, even from thirty yards away. He said a fond goodbye to Susan, touched her on the cheek and ran towards his friends.

“She’s wonderful, isn’t she?” Ian asked Onayasim as he approached. Ian was serious, now, and Onayasim simply grinned and nodded.

“It will be the four of us going for the Chel?” Ya’akobe said, part statement, part question. The others made affirmative motions with their hands and heads and started preparations. They only had to wait a few days before the moon started to be where it should be to let them get at the Chel. During that time, they traveled to a large hill that was southeast of Nadtsarett and set up camp outside the entrance to what looked like a cave. Even though Ian and José wanted to take a look at it right away, Ya’akobe said that they would have to wait for the right time.

Ya’akobe woke the other three Chel seekers very early the next morning and announced that it was time to start on their temporary diet. He brought them some very dense bread and water.

“Excuse me” José started, not wanting to sound like he was complaining, “is this all we eat?”

Ian, however, had simply started eating, after thanking Creator, of course. “José. You’ll like this” he half mumbled through the food in his mouth.

José shrugged as if to say “Why not?” and, after a word of thanks, dug in. His eyes widened and he nodded at Ian, agreeing wholeheartedly, his mouth too full even to mumble.

When Ian and José looked, Onayasim and Ya’akobe were eating and grinning at them for their nearly nonverbal discussion of the food.

When José had swallowed, he asked, “Why don’t we have this kind of bread all the time?”

Onayasim explained, “It takes a lot of time to make and, well, it’s only good for short periods of time. Sometimes we have a bit of it at special occasions.” He looked as if he would continue, but wasn’t sure how.

Ya’akobe chimed in to help him out. “It makes people bigger than they should be, and makes them look strange.”

“You mean it makes people fat?!” Ian exclaimed.

Onayasim and Ya’akobe both held their hands near their bodies to demonstrate fatness, Onayasim near his belly and Ya’akobe near his behind.

Ian and José roared with laughter. “Yes, yes, that’s what it means to be fat” Ian confirmed for them.

“We like the food, but we don’t want to overdo it,” said José. “On Earth, there are millions of people who are fat, mostly because they eat this kind of food all the time.”

Ya’akobe looked suddenly serious. “There are some people in the Valley of the Dark Eyes who are there because they would not stop eating this, and other bad food. They would not listen to Creator, and disobedience is disobedience, no matter what instruction we disobey.”

“We will definitely stop eating it when you say” José informed their Awdnite friends. Ian nodded in agreement.

They ate four meals like that before the middle of the afternoon. Ya’akobe said that they should get as much rest as they could, because when the moon was first visible in the morning, they would go to get the Chel. The four of them prayed together for good rest and for the Father to wake them at the right time. As they slept, the Dove perched in a nearby tree, cooing softly.

About fifteen minutes before they needed to leave, the Dove swooped from the tree He was in to another tree, where a flock of large, brightly colored birds were roosting, rousing them and causing them to make a boisterous exit from their resting place. The fluttering and cries of the birds woke the four men without being annoying.

“What a cool alarm clock!” José exclaimed through a yawn.

“Yea” Ian agreed.

“Should I ask what an alarm clock is?” Onayasim wanted to know.

“Not really” Ian responded. “We’ve tried to forget all about them”.

After each of them had a quick drink of water and splashed their faces to wake up, they started into the cave. It wasn’t like most caves on Earth. This one wasn’t the result of a major planetary upheaval caused by the need to try to wipe out sin. This one was designed by Creator for the people. The features in this one were dramatic. No simple stalactites or stalagmites, but loops and boxes and fans and lace all made from the most dazzling colors of rock. The floor was smooth but not slick, as if it had been paved.

Ya’akobe led the way through the corridors. No one had brought anything for light, but none was needed. The various shapes to the rocks were not just for beauty, but the crystals and smooth surfaces on them reflected and refracted the sunlight into the farthest areas of the cave. It didn’t even matter where the sun was. As long as it was shining, everything had been aligned to funnel the light where it was needed.

After about half an hour of choosing the right passageways, they reached an underground lake. The light was shining onto it and seemed to be coming out of it, too. Ian and José could only stop and look for a long time. Finally, Onayasim interrupted their reverie and announced, “We only have a little time to get the Chel. Do you see how the water is moving away?”

The two Earthlings muttered an apology. Ya’akobe and Onayasim just looked at each other and grinned.

Ya’akobe pointed to the right. “There, along the edge of the corridor, are some stepping places that will take us to where we need to go”. The other three went ahead of him and they all made their way down to where the water had just about exposed a small grotto.

As the moon finished pulling the water out of the way, José spotted a ribbon of silvery metal along its back wall. “Hey, is that what we’re after?”

“Yes” Ya’akobe replied. “Are you ready?” he asked. “We can start now”.

The four of them made their way across the wet rock, a little rough, but not jagged, with enough texture to keep anyone from slipping. When they got to the seam, Ya’akobe and Onayasim pointed to a few different places and asked the other two which one seemed the best.

The light that reflected off of the water and the surrounding walls let them see very well so they could decide accurately what section they wanted.

When they had decided, Ya'akobe took out what looked like a snake with a head at each end. One end was a small circular saw. The other end was a collapsible crank, which he extended. "Let us show you how this works and then you can help dig the Chel for your sweet ones."

While Onayasim turned the handle, Ya'akobe put the blade to the section of Chel they wanted. Onayasim didn't have to crank very fast and Ya'akobe didn't have to push very hard. The machine did most of the work.

"But you have to be careful. You can cut deeper than you want very easily. And if you need to cut the back part, just adjust this lever here."

After a few more pointers, Ya'akobe handed it over to Ian.

Ian held it out toward José. "Did you want to cut first?" Ian asked him. For some reason, Ian wasn't as confident with this machine as he thought he would be. Or, perhaps, he didn't want to ruin the ring somehow by cutting the raw material wrong.

"You'll do just fine" Onayasim encouraged him.

Ian took a deep breath, nodded to Onayasim to start cranking and began to cut. After a few minutes, he got the hang of it, without going too deep or too far off course. He turned around to grin at Onayasim, but it was too much. The blade shifted and bound in the saw kerf. It made a horrible screeching sound that echoed loudly throughout the cave. The handle suddenly stopped turning and kicked back a bit, giving Onayasim a smarting bruise. Ian froze.

Ya'akobe, grabbed the blade end to make sure nothing else would happen. José, who had been watching from a short distance, rushed to tend to Onayasim.

"What did I do?" Ian asked, almost plaintively.

"You did great for your first time" Ya'akobe was quick to offer.

"That might be so. But, how are you?" Ian moved toward Onayasim to see what damage he had done to his friend.

Before Ian could reach him, a cloud of gray mist, which had been lurking at the deepest part of the underground lake, was swirling at Onayasim's head. They were whispering into his mind, "He wasn't smiling at you because he was succeeding. He was grinning at you because he had just hurt you! Can't you read a face?" The others could almost hear them this time.

But, Onayasim cut them off. "I belong to Creator. Ian belongs to Creator. You do not. I will not hear you. You will go away from me now, back to that hole you call home. There are Cherowb nearby, and I am sure that, if I ask Creator, He will send them to make life very uncomfortable for you. Now, go, by the power of Ymanyale!"

Then, looking at Ian, and waving his hand to show that it still worked, Onayasim said, "I'm fine" just as calmly as could be.

"Maybe if you held it under the cool water for a little bit, it might take the sting away." Ian offered.

"Sounds like a good idea to me" Onayasim replied and headed for the water's edge. The others followed. Ian and José wanted to get a good, up-close look at this underground lake that seemed to have piled itself up into a small heap so that they could get some metal out of the ground. Onayasim sloshed his hand around in the water for a few seconds. It was enough to relieve any pain.

"It's good to drink, too" Ya'akobe said, reaching a cupped hand down to scoop up a sloppy mouthful. The rest followed his lead.

“Now” Ya’akobe said, starting back to their work area “we only have a very short time to get what we need and get out of here before the water really *does* cover us”

Ian and Onayasim were the first to reach the drill. Ian gave the blade end to Onayasim, who took it and said, “I’ll drill now, but only because we’re in a hurry.”

Then, looking behind Ian to José, Onayasim said, “We’ll have to let you practice on some other metals”.

Turning his attention back to Ian, he told him, “You nearly had it perfect. Ready? Start cranking.”

The two of them worked well and quickly, extracting a lump of Chel about the size of a man’s fist. It didn’t look like much, but it would be big enough for all the rings with a little left over.

Just as Ya’akobe was packing the saw, the water started easing toward them. Two bright flashes of light flashed near the ceiling. José and Ian looked startled.

“Cherowb” Onayasim said as he helped pack up.

José and Ian understood that they were there for general protection, against the Rawh and against the water itself. José and Ian followed the other two as they hurried toward dry ground. When they reached the top of the stairs, they paused a minute to watch the water flatten out again. But Onayasim wouldn’t let them linger. “It starts as a heap over there, but it makes its way over here in just a little while.”

With Ya’akobe in front, they started up the path with José next in line. Ian was carrying the Chel, in front of Onayasim at the rear. “You didn’t seem too concerned about what those Rawh were trying to do back there, trying to make you angry or something,” Ian said, almost as a question.

“They have tried it before, quite a few times in my life. The very first time, their lies were too transparent to believe, but I still had to tell them to leave. The second time, I had hurt myself so that I was bleeding and in some real pain. Between the pain and their lies, I started to become so angry that I tried to hurt someone. A friend of mine started to tell them to leave. Then, I realized what I was doing and told them to leave, too. That time, it was a battle. The Rawh were so intent on trying to deceive me that they didn’t see the Cherowb coming. Toward the end of the battle, the Rawh had forgotten all about me and were howling as they were driven away. My friend and I actually started laughing at their defeat.”

“But, why do they keep trying?” Ian was curious.

“They’re just stupid like that, I guess” Onayasim said as he shrugged. “So, I have to keep a lookout for them.”

Chapter 18

The Most Revealing Search

As part of the continued exploration of all that Creator had produced, the Awdnites looked absolutely everywhere to see what they could find. They knew that anywhere they searched, Creator's fingerprints would be there. They had explored hundreds of millions of cubic light years of space and found a few other planets with life on them. All of the life on the other planets was similar to life on Awdnaw and Earth.

Some of the planets had water over the sky for protection. The Awdnites had even made contact with the few of those that were close enough to reach. They were only able to get readings from a distance about the other planets.

There were also a few planets, including Earth, with no water over the sky, but they had great amounts of water on the surface. Their skies were polluted, the life readings were very strange and there were many more dark vapors traveling to and from them. They made no contact with them, although some of the inhabitants may have seen them circling high above.

While the Earthlings had been integrating with the Awdnites, there was a special crew of four searchers out in very deep space, looking for any other planets that may have life on them. On board their craft were two men, Captain Yayhushaw and Kelabe, and two women, Meerjam and Meerjay, who were twins. There were usually only two on such a ship, so this was double the usual complement of space searchers, but, then, this was not a usual search. Creator Himself had commissioned it. They had traveled for about a year at the speed of light and then stopped to take readings to see if they could discover any life forms. They had detected some very faint readings many light years away. In order to get there and back, they would need to find a wormhole to transport them. They sent a message detailing their findings and their intention to travel near to where the planet was so they could get a better look. Traveling at the speed of light, the message would take another year to get back to Awdnaw.

Meanwhile, they hunted for a wormhole to take them to a position somewhere near the planet. As they looked, a single Mawlawk appeared in the cabin of the spacecraft. He took the form of a person and perched on one of the control panels. He began, like a friendly businessman, "You will be observing the planet you have found from two locations. The first will be at this distance". He wrote a number that would correspond to something on the far side of two thousand light years; that was how far they were to be from the planet. He also gave Yayhushaw a time that included the month, days and hours they were to record. "You must be at this exact location at these times to see and record what Creator wants you to take back with you. The only thing you will need at the first location is a video recorder. Point it at the destination planet and focus it well. What you see will have happened some time ago and the light will just be reaching that location."

The crew looked at each other for a moment, puzzled at what the Mawlawk said. They would have to figure that out after he had left.

He continued, "After the time is up at the first location, go to the next location. I will tell you what to do there. Three wormholes are available for you to use. One will get you to your first location, and the second will get you very close to the planet and the third will take you back to Awdnaw." When he had finished speaking, he transformed into his cloud and vanished through the ceiling.

Kelabe speculated about what the Mawlawk had said. “How can we be recording what happened some time ago?”

“May I see the figures?” Meerjam asked Yayhushaw.

“Sure” he replied as he handed her the notes. “Has anyone ever seen what a Mawlawk has written before?”

Meerjay seemed to speak for the rest. “We’ve heard them speak countless times, but we never had one write for us. I’d like to see what his writing looks like later.”

Meerjam looked at the figures, stared off into space for a few minutes and then snapped her fingers in discovery. “Speed of light, distance from the planet, video only” she said, as if laying out facts on a table to examine.

The others nodded in agreement to her unspoken conclusion. Yayhushaw voiced it. “The light has been traveling for all this time, so we can see what happened so long ago.”

“But why haven’t we seen other planets the same way?” Kelabe wanted to know.

“We may not have been looking for anything like this before” Meerjay suggested.

“Or, this may be a special privilege by Creator since he did commission this search”.

The rest nodded in knowing agreement. The time that the Mawlawk had given them to find a wormhole and travel to their first location was just under three days. Even though they weren’t used to having to hurry, they worked as quickly as they could to find the wormhole to take them to where they needed to be first. They eventually found one and, after checking all their calculations again, headed for it. At first, it seemed to be taking them exactly where they thought it should. Then, without warning, the ship lurched to the left and spun like a corkscrew.

The crew wasn’t in any physical danger since they were strapped into their seats. Kelabe, who was monitoring the navigation station hollered, “The instruments have all gone dead. I don’t know where we are!”

The ship abruptly went into what could be described as a freefall. Before, the acceleration made it feel as if there was some sort of gravity. Now the ship felt all wrong to them.

“Has anyone seen a Rawh?” Kelabe asked.

“Why?” Meerjam wanted to know.

“Well, if the Rawh are not responsible for all this, then Creator has ordered it, and we should enjoy the ride.”

No one had seen any Rawh, so they decided that they would relax and enjoy the ride.

The ship tossed and turned for just another few minutes and then settled down; in fact, it had come out of the wormhole. Meerjam, at the throttle, brought the ship to a stop.

Yayhushaw turned to Kelabe. “Any idea where we are now?”

“We are exactly at the place where the Mawlawk told us to be” he replied, almost flatly.

“How?” Meerjay asked. “Well, I know how; our Father guided us. But, it seemed like we were so far off course.”

Meerjam gently reminded her sister, “If our Father charted the course, then we were right on course, even if we didn’t know where the course was taking us”. Meerjay and the others agreed with her.

“We have a little over one day to prepare to record these special things from Creator.” Yayhushaw announced. “Let’s start getting set up, and if there’s any time left we can relax a bit.”

The stress they felt wasn’t extreme, but it was still more than they were used to. They took about six hours getting the video recorders in place and focusing them. They also had to place themselves in a geostationary orbit so that they would be watching and recording the same place, not a sample of a lot of places. They saw a planet with a lot of water on the surface and

none in a layer above it, so they knew it was one of the planets on which the first parents had decided to follow the Dark One.

There were a lot of places with no people on the surface of this planet, and the ones they did see looked like they didn't know how to spread themselves out to keep from overburdening the resources around them. It was sad to watch these people. They put dirt in the air and dirt in the water. One man seemed to be patting another, but it was too hard. It didn't look friendly at all. The other man fell down and the first man took something from inside his clothing and ran away. They went into and out of little boxes, often spending much more time inside them than outside and ignoring all that Creator had given them. What was in those boxes that demanded so much of their attention? Was this what the Dark One causes people to do?

As they looked some more, they saw a lot of things that looked like they were overdone; eating, drinking, working, even playing. Too much of some things and not enough of another. They decided not to watch again until the time they were supposed to.

Meerjam reflected on their condition. "Even though those people do not know how to live in our Father's love, I am happy to know that there is a place where people can enjoy Him the way they were designed to." The others knew that she was referring to Awdnaw and the other planets where the first parents had resisted the Dark One.

They had just enough time for a short night's rest before they were to start recording, so they took advantage of it. Yayhushaw woke up first. To rouse the rest, he started singing a song about how the stars sing for Creator. It's a boisterous kind of song because the singer also has to make whirring, zipping, popping sounds to accentuate the reference to each star's song. The twin sisters did not do well when they first woke up, so they didn't appreciate such silly noises so early. Kelabe, however, thought it was a wonderful way to wake up. After enduring glares from the women, they all ate something and settled in to watch and record.

So much happened all at once, and they all wanted to share what they were seeing, but they had to agree to take turns and explore everything they had recorded when they got back home. What they saw included a group of thirteen men traveling together. Other groups of people, some all men, some men and women, were following the thirteen. A parade of some sort in which they tore branches off of trees for a man on an animal. Why was the man riding the animal? Did they ride animals a lot on this planet? Later, the man on the animal was seen chasing people from a big building. It looked kind of like the building on Awdnaw where they enjoyed Last Day meals, except there was a covering on much of it.

There wasn't much to see for a few days. Then, at another time the Mawlawk had designated, they started watching and recording again. This time the thirteen men went into one of the boxes with a covering. They were there for a couple of hours before they came out and went to a place with more plants and trees than the rest of the area. The thirteen seemed to spread out, one here, a few there and a few more a little bit farther. One man seemed to go back and forth, as if the rest of them needed extra instructions or something. While the wandering around was going on, they could see, coming from the vicinity of the big building, a large group of people with lights and sticks walking quickly to where the thirteen were. There was some activity going on, but Yayhushaw and his crew couldn't tell exactly what they were seeing; some grabbing and pushing and falling and someone waving something at someone else. But, through it all, the one who had been off by himself seemed to not be troubled by what was going on around him.

The next few days were exhausting for the crew. It seemed as if no one on this planet was going to sleep. The people down there dragged the unruffled man to a large area where a lot

of people were gathered, sometimes just milling around and sometimes lifting their hands high in the air. The crew of the ship couldn't tell if they were praising Creator or what they were doing. Finally, they took the man who seemed to be really in control, gave him and two more men each a large, cut piece of a tree and made them carry the tree parts for a while. Then they fastened them on the pieces of trees somehow and raised them up.

Yayhushaw was checking the recording equipment to make sure everything was working like it should. Suddenly, he started waving frantically for the others to come and look. "Who...Who...is ...that?" he stammered, pointing at the viewer in one piece of observation equipment that shows a wider light spectrum than usual.

"Where?" Meerjay asked, almost demanding.

Yayhushaw pointed to the viewer, but couldn't speak.

Meerjay looked; then her face blanched. When the other two looked, they had the same reaction.

"What is he doing here? Why have they put him on that tree?" Yayhushaw wasn't really asking or expecting an answer.

After a pause that was too long, even to them, Meerjam whispered what the others were thinking. "Ymanyale".

After a while, the light faded and they couldn't see the planet very well for a short time. When the light returned, the three men on the trees weren't moving. Kelabe's eyes widened and his jaw dropped. "Do you see what I see?" he asked the rest of the crew.

They weren't sure how to answer, even though they did see what he saw.

"Are they what is called 'dead'?" Meerjam asked.

Kelabe could only answer with a nod of his head.

They saw some people take the one that they had identified as Ymanyale off of the tree and put Him in the ground. "Why have we come on this mission?" they all wondered. There was more confusion on the planet, then waiting. So they waited in their ship.

A couple of days later, before this planet's sun shone on it, there was a shock wave of some sort that seemed to center on the place where they had put Ymanyale. The women scrambled to peer into the viewer. They could see a Mawlawk talking with some women. Later, the same Mawlawk talked with some men.

A number of times, Ymanyale could be seen walking and talking with different people; sometimes a few and sometimes a lot. Finally, He was seen talking with most of the men who had followed Him. The last they saw of Him this time was when He swiftly rose from the ground and disappeared a few milleyon above the planet.

The crew silently shut down and packed up all of their recording gear. Then they sat and contemplated what they had just seen.

At last, Meerjam broke the silence. "Will the other things we see be like those we just saw?"

Yayhushaw could only shrug a bit. "There's no way to know, but we must do what Creator asks." They all nodded in agreement. "Let's look for the right wormhole so we can move to our next location."

It didn't take long for them to find it and in a matter of an hour they had traveled past a dozen galaxies and ended up just a few hundred thousand miles from their destination. As they made relatively slow approach to the planet, Meerjay was looking for a particular piece of equipment. She thought it might be good to record the planets, rocks and other things they were passing as they made their way to their target.

As they approached the planet, the single Mawlawk once again entered the spacecraft. Taking his form again as a person, he sat on one of the control panels. The searchers all stopped what they were doing, gathered around the Mawlawk, and listened. He began, "The planet you are approaching is one of the six on which the first parents have chosen to believe the Dark One. There is no water above the land. There is much water on the surface. There is much dirt in the water and in the air. But you will not come close enough to be affected by any of it. On this planet, there are some who love Creator and whom He has promised to rescue from this planet's destruction. His love for them is great, and it is nearly time for their rescue. Do not bother to record anything about the planet itself. It will not last much longer. It is a representative planet for your purposes. All six planets will experience the same thing at the same time. When you see it, remember that neither Creator nor Ymanyale are restricted by time or space. Record what happens between the planet and the space behind you. You have one day to prepare. Be ready!"

When he was finished, he looked around as if to see if they all understood. When no one said a thing, he whirled into his cloud form and vanished through the wall of the craft. They started by deciding what equipment to use to record everything. Then they started moving things into place, aiming sensors where they could pick up the most information and pointing cameras to capture every movement. Kelabe noticed a particular land formation and said to the others that when it came into view again, it would be time for Creator to rescue His people from this planet.

They worked until they were exhausted, then they each took a short nap, while the others watched for the key landform to approach. Each one had had a couple of hours rest when Yayhushaw remarked, somewhat nervously, that he could see the part of the continent that meant that a day had passed. There was a quick re-check of all the equipment. Then they waited.

None of them knew that Ymanyale had told people on this planet, and others like it, that no one would know the exact time that He would come to rescue them. So they waited. "Why are we still waiting?" Kelabe mused after another day had passed. Yayhushaw thought for a minute, then said, "The Mawlawk said we had a day to prepare, but he didn't say that the rescue would take place in a day. We may have rushed ourselves."

They all agreed with him. So, each day, for a few hours, they checked the equipment, and waited and watched, and talked about waiting and watching. They knew that they couldn't wait the way that they usually did because they needed to be alert for when the rescue took place. So, they waited.

One day, just over a week after they arrived, the captain mentioned again that the landform was coming into view. They had configured their equipment to start recording when that continental shape came into view. As soon as the apparatus all started, there was the sound of a loud voice and a piercing trumpet blast, which sent them all to the windows. "There!" shouted Meerjam, as she pointed to a brilliant, bright light coming from deep space. When the light got close to them, they could see that it was the leading Mawlawk, Gehbriy'ale, followed by Ymanyale. As Gehbriy'ale and Ymanyale got close to the planet, there was the extraordinary sight of millions of people rising from the planet. With their telescopes, the crew could see that some people were coming out of the ground; some were coming out of the water and others were assembling from many different places. They were gathering around Ymanyale like giant swirls, the kind that look like the Mawlawk and Cherowb but incredibly enormous. Then, they saw more people simply lift off the ground and fly toward them to join the group already in the air.

Meerjam was watching most of this through the viewer of a device that was focused on the surface, where she could see the people. Where the last group of people had been were now just individual piles of clothes. Around them, the people who were left seemed excited somehow,

but Meerjam wasn't sure she had ever seen these kinds of expressions. They could hear some of what was going on as well, but they couldn't listen long. It was extremely loud and sounded much like things they had heard the Dark One say when he tried to turn them away from Creator's way.

After just a few short minutes, the whole cloud turned and sped off through space, disappearing as they went, but not without less than a few hundred people waving to the crew in their ship. The crew waved back, not quite sure of what they saw.

When the cloud had gone, the searchers weren't sure if they should stop recording yet. They sat, looking stunned, not knowing what to say or do.

"What have we seen?" Meerjam wanted to know. She looked at each of the others one at a time. No one seemed to have an answer.

"Ymanyale led a whole lot of people through space, without a way to breathe." Kelabe said plainly.

"But didn't you see the brightness of all of them." Meerjay noticed. "They had something around them that didn't look like regular skin or clothes or anything. What was that?"

"I think" Yayhushaw interrupted, politely "that maybe these are things that we are to share with those at home, and that Creator will explain to us."

"You are correct". It was the Mawlawk. He had evidently been listening to them as they spoke. "It is now time to return home. Please aim your ship to that cluster of lights. You will be home shortly."

They paid no attention as he left this time. Instead, they quickly set their course.

Chapter 19

Duke's Turn to the Dark One

José and Duke had been spending a lot of time trying to repair the *Pilgrim*. It didn't seem urgent to anyone except Duke, and he often would cajole José into helping him, which became more difficult as José liked being on Awdnaw more and more as time went on. Most of the time they had help from one or more Awdnites. They would often do complicated calculations to determine some new line of calibration for the guidance system, but Duke and José could never figure why they nearly always seemed to do them on paper, by hand, especially since the math they were doing was more complicated than anything they had seen done on any computer on Earth. José seemed to feel challenged. "If they can do it, so can I, ...eventually" he would often quip with a grin as the Awdnites worked. Duke would mumble something like, "They just like to make us feel stupid. We're as intelligent as they are; I'll show them!"

One day, as they were doing more calculations, Duke was trying one of the formulas for himself to see if he could do it. Ahmahna, a woman who was the lead Awdnite mechanic, made a soft humming sound, as if to say, "That's not quite right", but Duke interpreted it as "What an idiot!" As he started thinking about her humming noise, two or three dark vapors, The Dark One's Rawh, started rising and swirling around him, buzzing his head, seeming to go in one ear and out the other. It wasn't a big thing, but for Duke, it was the last straw, only because that's what he heard from the Rawh. If he had wanted to, he could have been ignoring them or chasing them away but for some reason, he had chosen to listen, and now they had gotten the best of him.

"Why don't you just go ahead and say it, old woman?" Duke bellowed at her. "I'm an idiot and you just like to rub it in my face".

His words and tone startled Ahmahna. "I never said anything about you being an id... a whatever". She wasn't even sure what she was supposed to have called Duke.

"I did just fine before we landed on this weird rock of a planet. Now you're trying to tell me what to do." As Duke roared at Ahmahna, more Rawh appeared. But, now there were dazzling vapors appearing out of the sky. Soon, it was almost impossible to see Duke or Ahmahna for the mixed cloud of dark and light. "No one's telling me what to do. I'm my own boss. I'm my own god. What do you think about that?"

Ahmahna's mouth and eyes were open, partly in confusion and partly in terror. She had never heard such words or tone of voice before. "Please don't say such things. The Dark One is waiting to devour you, but you can resist him if you want. Creator has sent all of these, His servants, to help you if you will only want them to and ask."

José tried to take hold of Duke's shoulders to calm him down. "What are you doing, my friend? You're risking more than imprisonment in the Valley of the Dark Eyes; you're risking your soul!"

More shadowy Rawh appeared from the ground. More and different bright vapors descended from the heavens. Now, some of the bright vapors, Mawlawk, were buzzing Duke's head, making tiny circles near his ears.

"Don't call me friend" Duke screamed at José. "You've been cozying up to these so-called people for years now. You'd probably leave me on this planet if you got the chance to go home." Lunging at Ahmahna and getting right in her face, he yelled, "And don't waste your breath you old hag. I'm getting off of this rock if I have to steal one of your spaceships to do it;

even if I have to break up that stupid bubble of water you've got up there. I can't stand it and I'm going to do what I want to do, no matter what it does to anyone else."

He slapped her and shoved her to the ground. Then he made a dash for where he thought the Awdnite spacecraft were kept, pushing past the group that had formed around him and knocking some of them over. Just as José starting chasing Duke to stop him, the Cherowb suddenly flashed blindingly bright and surrounded Duke. José dropped to the ground in fear, but kept watching the scene around him.

Then, there was a circle of vapors, the bright ones flashing with increasing brightness and the dark ones seeming to absorb the light from the area right around them. José and the others could see heads and feet and arms of each type of vapor. Cherowb were slowly forming handsome and strong features. These had swords in their hands. The other ones, Mawlawk, were beautiful and had books or scrolls in their hands as if they were reading some message from someone. The Rawh were hard to look at; their features were angular, sinewy, colored black, orange and green like mold and mildew; ugly and evil.

The Dove cooed as sweetly and loudly as He could from a nearby tree.

José crawled a few feet and then crept to Ahmahna, who had stayed where they had been working. Unsure about what to say or do, he asked her, "What's happening?"

"The Mawlawk and Cherowb are fighting for your friend. The Rawh are trying to persuade him to follow the Dark One." Ahmahna's explanation was occasionally interrupted by the activity around Duke. Sometimes he would try to leave the circle of almost visible beings that had surrounded him. Sometimes he would be on the ground with bright clouds near his head, his hands over his ears, weeping and crying, "No, no, I won't! Leave me alone!"

Although José knew some of what she was saying, he simply listened as she continued her explanation. "The Mawlawk are trying to convince your friend to redirect his heart toward Creator, to abandon his desire to follow the Dark One. But, it appears he is not willing to listen." Ahmahna seemed fearful for Duke, though she knew that to put herself in the middle of the battle would be dangerous for her and useful to no one.

Just as Duke got up to try to run again, the vapors all became solid in the way they looked. The Cherowb, with their swords drawn, surrounded Duke. There were ten of them, five facing in and five facing out.

The Mawlawk, ten of them as well, hovered overhead, each speaking for a few seconds. When the last one had finished his message, they flew straight up until they disappeared through the water above Awdnaw. As the Mawlawk were speaking, the Rawh were screaming, as if in pain, and retreating through the ground to the place from where they had come. As if that weren't enough for José, as he looked in his friend's face, he saw his eyes do the most terrifying thing. The light went out; there seemed to be no life in them at all.

"Duke! Duke!!" José yelled. He began weeping as he picked up a stick and began waving it at the Cherowb, as if to scare them off, even though he knew that it was not the right thing to do. And, besides, it wouldn't have done him any good. He realized that he didn't dare try to break through the circle of Cherowb but he approached them as close as he dared. He was miserable and had no idea what to do. "What have you done?" he wailed. Then he retreated and fell to the ground, sobbing for his lost friend.

Soon, the only sound was a very faint breeze. The Dove sat silent. It was quiet for a few minutes, then one of the Cherowb announced to Duke, "You have been increasingly defiant of Creator, His creation and His ways. You have deliberately done your own will without any petition to Him for guidance. You have also taken the life of one of His creatures."

José knew then that the red on Duke's hands the day of the duck races was blood. "What did you do with the duck?" he demanded of Duke, incredulously.

Duke knew that there was no use lying. The Cherowb and Creator knew what he had done.

"I wanted chicken, but since there weren't any chickens, I had a duck instead." Duke stated it flatly, this time not like a professional space pilot, but like a man who had lost all conscience, and all hope.

"Where did you cook it?" José wanted to know.

"I didn't."

"You ate it raw?!" José couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Yeah, I didn't want to get caught by building a smoky fire."

"Well, you're caught now, aren't you?" José's sadness for his friend had been replaced with anger. Out of the corner of his eye, José noticed a single dazzling haze sweep down from the sky, circle his head a couple of times and then return upward. He had heard something and simply said, "Yes, now I know. How can He stand it when someone turns from Him?"

The largest of the Cherowb called to Ahmahna, "Tell Maugrab that Michael Washington is to go to the Valley of the Dark Eyes. Maugrab is to send four of his guards immediately to accompany us".

José yelled to Duke, "We won't forget you". Then, he tore off to tell Ian and Susan. He ran to the last place he knew they were. "Has anyone seen Ian?" he yelled at anyone he saw. No one seemed to know, so he sprinted in the direction of the shining pond where the ducks had raced. As he went, he would ask anyone he met where Ian or Susan was. After more than a dozen negative responses, one boy pointed toward the large Last Day meeting area. Before he even reached it, he was shouting, "They've taken him! They've taken him!"

Ian, Yaleah, Susan and a few others had just gathered some fruit and nuts for evening meal. Ian recognized José's voice and ran toward him. When they were just a few yards apart, Ian said, "Now calm down and tell me, who's taken who?"

"Duke. They've taken Duke!"

"Who has?"

"Those big bright guys with swords. The.... the Cherowb. And they're getting four guys with clubs to go, too!"

"What's the excitement about?" Susan asked as she and Yaleah joined Ian and José.

While José caught his breath, Ian explained, not quite believing it himself. "The Cherowb and some Awdnite guards are evidently taking Duke to the Valley of the Dark Eyes."

"How can that happen?" Susan asked anxiously.

"I don't know" Ian responded incredulously.

"What are we going to do?" José wailed.

Yaleah had heard their discussion and seemed tenderly concerned. "It's not a good thing for Duke to be taken there. But for us, it is better."

"You've got to be kidding!" Susan snapped.

Ian was thinking the same thing, except that he had been getting to know Yaleah fairly well and knew that not only was she not kidding; she had a good reason for saying what she did.

Yaleah took Ian's hand and put her other hand on Susan's shoulder. José was across from her and she looked him straight in the eyes and said, with knowledge and compassion, "Your friend has made his choice. If he were permitted to remain among us, he would contaminate us

all. He will not die there, but he will have a hard life. The work he does will not be easy and there will be no friends there.”

“But how do those Cherowb know for sure that Duke won’t change his mind again?” José asked plaintively. Ian and Susan muttered their agreement to the question.

Yaleah now took both hands and lifted them simply to the sky and said, “Creator knows our hearts and has seen your friend’s eyes go dark. It may make us sad, but we know that Creator has no other choice when we a person makes such a choice as Duke has.” Tears came from her eyes. She held hands with Ian and Susan, who each took hold of José’s hands. Quietly, they stood there weeping softly until a bright vapor came to wipe their tears.

Chapter 20

Duke's Journey to The Valley of the Dark Eyes

The Cherowb had taken Duke, not by any physical force, but by the power of their presence. The Cherowb swords were drawn and flaming, but were never needed to control any person. There were four Awdnite men, two in front of and two behind the Cherowb and Duke. They didn't have any weapons except for their simple club-like sticks; their clothing and disposition clearly indicated that they were on a mission to move Duke to where he needed to go. Ian, Yaleah, Susan and José followed at a safe distance. They could just see where the group was going without being close enough to hear what they might be talking about. They could tell that Duke was arguing with whoever might hear and they could tell that none of them was listening.

Occasionally, there was an appearance of those strange dark clouds of vapor that seemed to come from nowhere. It looked like they were trying to get to Duke, to either attack him or set him free. It was never easy to tell. One or both of the Cherowb would swing his sword at them with great adroitness and the clouds would scatter like flies as the swords became bright with their flames. Duke would recoil in fear and the Awdnites, evidently used to such skirmishes, would simply hold out their hands and keep Duke moving, not roughly, but firmly.

It seems like they walked for miles. As the sun started to set, the Cherowb evidently told the Awdnites that they would stop for the night so they could gather some food and prepare a place to sleep. Two of the Awdnite men went to gather food and bedding while the other two stayed with the Cherowb and Duke.

Duke finally addressed one of the Awdnites directly. "How far is this place you're trying to put me?"

"You will be put in the Valley of the Dark Eyes. It is a journey of thirty-nine days from here" the closest one replied.

"We'll never make it," Duke complained loudly. No one listened, except Ian and the others.

They looked at each other apprehensively. "What are we gonna do?" José wanted to know. "We can't follow them for thirty-nine more days. They'll notice us eventually!"

Susan and Yaleah could only nod sadly in agreement. Ian motioned for them to follow him. He led them a couple dozen yards back toward Nadtsarett, but not on the path. "Looks like there's nothing we can do" Ian started. The faces of the other two Earthlings said the same thing, "We can't leave Duke here!" As if he could hear them thinking, Ian replied, "This is the law; it's Creator's law. I know that I haven't come this far, physically or spiritually, to start questioning Creator's laws or authority."

They discussed going back to see if they could motion some sort of goodbye to Duke, but they finally decided that if he did see them, he wouldn't care, and if the guards saw them, they might be in real trouble. Sadly and slowly, they headed back to the village.

The following morning, Duke was led by his sentinels on to the Valley of the Dark Eyes. They didn't speak, except rarely to each other concerning what to do with Duke in some situation or another. This went on for exactly thirty-nine days.

During the last three days, there was no sign of human life. In fact, there didn't seem to be many, if any, animals. Even the plants seemed to be without flowers or fruit or any real

beauty to them. It's as if life was being reduced to its bare elements the closer they got to the Valley of the Dark Eyes.

At the end of the thirty-ninth day, they reached the mouth of the Valley. It was about half a mile wide and the sides of the mouth were nearly vertical. They made a simple camp for the night. Up until now, Duke didn't seem too concerned about what was happening to him.

As Duke tried to sleep, he heard what sounded like a coyote or a wolf howling. The lupine animals on this planet did make howling sounds, but they weren't despairing cries like what he was hearing. Then he heard something that made the hair on his arms stand on end. A scream so raspy and piercing that he knew it couldn't be human. But, it was using words, Awdnite words. There was a cacophony of screams and growls that made him understand for the first time the horror of his destiny. As quickly as it started, it died away. Now, the silence was as terrifying as the commotion he had just heard.

Duke seemed to be totally aware of what was happening, what he had done and where he was going. "Look" he said to one of the Cherowb, "I'm really not such a bad guy. I've just been going through a bad time and my temper got a little out of control. What do you say we just go back and forget the whole thing?"

The Awdnite men looked at each other as if they just might believe Duke, but after a few seconds, they shook their heads as if to say, "Sorry, we've heard all kinds of excuses before, and this one won't do anyone any good either".

Just then, a small cluster of dark shadows swirled around Duke's head. "What?!?" he screamed. From the dark clouds could be heard the sound of mocking laughter. "I thought you guys were helping me get off this rock of a planet. You mean you were plotting to put me here all along?!" He continued ranting through clenched teeth at them and himself and the Cherowb and Awdnaw and Creator and his friends. Duke spent the night fluctuating among raging against everyone, weeping and moaning, muttering about what he should have done and simply staring silently into space. The Cherowb would chase the Rawh away every once in a while, but they would soon be back to torment Duke.

In the morning, the Cherowb commanded Duke to stand on his feet. Duke could see the sun rising in the east, over the mountains at the far end of that Dark Valley. He could also see another bright light coming from somewhere to the south of the sun's rising. The Cherowb stood in a line behind Duke; the Awdnites moved to either side of him, all facing this other bright light. As it approached, Duke had to cover his eyes, and when it got within a few feet of him, he couldn't stand it at all and started to fall to the ground. A Cherowb behind him caught him and held him up. The Dove lighted on a branch nearby.

Duke heard a voice, powerful and full of love and pity. "Michael Washington. You have rebelled against me consistently. I have tried to redirect you towards me, but you have refused. Tell me, what more could I have done to keep you from this punishment?"

Duke was silent.

"What act of love or generosity or mercy or providence was it that drove you away?"

More silence.

"Do you deny any allegation against you?"

Duke silently, almost imperceptibly shook his head "No".

"I must send you to the Valley of the Dark Eyes, where you will continue to live, but you will be no more threat to my children here who want to follow as I lead. I love you, but I cannot tolerate disobedience and rebellion. You wanted life without me. You now have your desire."

When he had finished, Duke fell to the ground and said simply, “Ymanyale, You are the Ruler”.

Then, the Dove flew away, the extra light that had accompanied Ymanyale faded and Ymanyale Himself walked away and disappeared out of view.

The Cherowb gestured for the Awdnite men to stay where they were. Then, they signaled Duke to stand up and ushered him with their swords toward the mouth of the Valley of the Dark Eyes.

There was a line of Cherowb stretched across the mouth of the valley, about twenty yards apart. If they had been human guards, the distance would have been far too great to do any good. But, since Creator’s servants could be anywhere instantly, they acted as more of a reminder to the inmates in that Dark Valley that they were indeed prisoners there.

The Cherowb who had brought Duke had to wave away a large crowd of onlookers inside the valley who were crowding around to see who was coming. The other Cherowb at the entrance stood aside to let Duke and his guards through. Duke could say nothing, but his face was frozen in fright. As soon as he was delivered inside the valley, his guards turned to vapors and escaped to the sky. Duke was alone among hundreds of dark, grimy, foul people.

The four men that had helped guard Duke returned. They were allowed as many days as they needed to pray and allow Ymanyale to refresh them. No one is asked to do such a duty more than once, since it takes a lot out of a person.

Chapter 21

Yaleah's Confession and the Mutual Proposal

Some months later, Yaleah and Ian were out one evening, watching the stars and eating some fizzy-fuzzy fruit, talking about things, important things and silly things, simply enjoying each other's company. Ian got quiet a minute, then turned to Yaleah and said, "This is such a great place to live. If we stay close to Creator, it seems fairly easy to resist any of the Dark One's lies and ploys. Many days go by and I don't think at all about the Valley of the Dark Eyes. Do you think at all about that horrible place?"

Yaleah was quiet for a minute. "No. I concentrate on our Father's good things; things He does and provides and tells us and shows us. The wonderful way He just.....is."

It was Ian's turn to be silent.

A wonderful thing had developed between them. They could tell when silence was for thinking and when it was just a pause. Ian had come to a pause, so Yaleah asked, "What do you really want to know?"

"Well, sometimes it all seems so simple and easy with no complications or anything. Does anyone ever become tempted enough to almost become a dark eye, but, you know, come to their senses and return to Creator?"

Yaleah's silence was definitely the thoughtful kind. "When I was younger, just over a hundred, I got it in my mind that I didn't need anyone telling me what to do at all. Yes, the dark vapors put the ideas there, but I was the one who decided to listen." Assuming a puffed up stance, she continued, "Don't tell *me* what to eat! Or where to sleep! Or how to do my learning! I am over a hundred years old and I know just about everything I need to know. Besides, I want to be creative, like Creator."

Resuming a more normal posture, she explained, "The worst thing was, I was trying to make it OK because I said I wanted to be like Creator and do things differently. What I didn't understand was that I could be creative without being rebellious. And I could be rebellious without being creative. The Dark One can't be creative at all, so the suggestions I was getting from the Rawh were just upside-down ways of doing truly creative things. I tried eating things that Creator said I shouldn't and doing my lessons some weird way that my teachers said would not work."

"That doesn't sound so bad" Ian interjected.

"That's what the Rawh told me." Yaleah may have missed what Ian really said; he was agreeing with the Rawh. Ian's face flushed as he realized what had come out of his mouth. But, Yaleah went on. "I hadn't tried to destroy life or violate marriage. It was just food and lessons. But, the food I ate made my stomach hurt and my parents had to ask the Father to restore it. The lessons I learned the wrong way had to be re-learned and it took three times as long the second time. It wasn't until I went on a fresh view and saw the Mawlawk dance in the curtains of light that I knew how much more Creator knew than I did and how much He loved and cared for me. When my mother explained how the lights were formed, I realized how much the rest of those who were older than I knew. When everyone, I mean everyone, kept telling me to be careful and wise, I accepted that I should submit to Creator's ways and the care of those who loved me."

Ian was curious. "What was it about the dancing and the lights that made you realize Creator's love and wisdom?"

“It wasn’t anything in particular, just the real awesomeness of it all. I couldn’t imagine how to even start to think about how it was done, let alone begin to do something like that myself. I’ve got to tell you this, though. It took a few days to really *feel* that what I did was right, but I’m glad I returned to Creator’s care because my feelings are now lined up with my decision.”

Ian wasn’t sure what to think or feel; he had such a choice of good feelings to choose from. He was so glad that Yaleah had chosen the life that Creator had designed for her. He was glad that he was now part of that life. He admired Yaleah’s wisdom; he knew he had a long way to go. All he could do was smile and stroke her long hair and beautiful face with the back of his fingers as he gazed into her emerald eyes. Then he offered her more fizzy-fuzzy fruit.

Susan and Onayasim had been spending a lot of time together. José had been learning from many people. One evening at Last Day meal, as they Earthlings and some of their friends sat together, Ymanyale approached. By now, it was a regular occurrence, but Ymanyale had an especially pleased look on His face. He started talking to them as a group in general, asking about their day and any new discoveries they might have made on their searches. Then He asked Susan and José to stand up. As soon as they did, Ymanyale held out His arms as if He wanted them to come to Him for a group hug. They cautiously went to Him, not that they were afraid or anything. It just seemed to them to be somewhat of an odd thing to do.

When they came within His reach, He gave them a firm hug, and then turned each of them around to face the rest of their group. José started to say something about ‘show-and-tell’ but quickly caught himself and listened instead.

Ymanyale took a deep breath, smiled and said, “I have been watching you”. José and Susan weren’t sure what that meant. On Earth, it could have spelled trouble, but here, especially with Ymanyale smiling, they could only wait to see what He had to say. “I have been watching you, and I have seen you do things that few people have done. Your friend Ian was the first I have seen on this planet.” Now, even though they weren’t entirely sure, they had an inkling of what it might be. They looked at each other, grinned and shrugged.

Ymanyale caught their look and laughed right out loud. Even though it was a very important and life-changing occasion, it was still tremendously joyful. “José Rodriguez and Susan McGuire, I have seen your love for the Father, your unabashed and joyful desire to live the way He designed you to live and your relentless warfare against the Dark One. It would be impossible to make your eyes any brighter, so now I declare you Bright Eyed ones. If you continue on your journey the way you are now, you will have the love and joy of the Father as your reward.”

This process of declaring a person to be Bright Eyed had now been done only three times, so absolutely no one knew what to do. Should they cheer, clap, sing, propose a toast? A voice began, a few tables away, to sing a wonderful, simple praise song to Creator, Ymanyale and the Dove. In seconds, everyone was singing it, including the Earthlings, since they had heard it many times before. It happened to be one of Susan’s favorites and it seems she may have sung it the loudest with her pure, sweet voice. It made sense to sing to Creator since it was He who enabled them to gain their Bright Eyed status.

After the song, everyone around them went back to their feasting and fellowship. José and Susan were still standing beside Ymanyale. A look came across his face that Ian recognized, but he wasn’t sure who it was for. Ymanyale bent his head and whispered in Susan’s ear, “That Onayasim would make a wonderful husband, don’t you think?”

Susan blushed and looked at Onayasim with an inquiring look; Ian laughed; José heard most of what Ymanyale had said and looked relieved that no one had suggested marriage to him yet. Ymanyale gave Susan and José a gentle nudge that indicated that they should sit down again. The rest of the evening was full of joy and kidding and laughter.

Later that evening, Onayasim and Susan were sitting and talking. Susan hesitantly asked, “Onayasim?”

“Yes” He could tell that she wanted to say something important.

“Is it right... I mean.. Is it... Oh!... Do women ever ask men... I mean, can a woman ask a man to marry her on Awdnaw?”

He wasn’t sure how to respond. Was she asking him or just curious about the asking process. He decided that a straightforward answer would have to do. “Yes” was all he could say.

“Does it happen very often?”

“Once in a while, I suppose. I don’t really know.”

Susan was not encouraged. She could see that somehow she had gotten them into a conversational quagmire and she couldn’t see how to get out.

Without quite knowing why, Onayasim suddenly blurted, “Were you thinking about asking me to marry you?” As soon as the words came out of his mouth, he blushed. It wasn’t necessarily an embarrassed kind of blush. He was mostly surprised that he asked the question out loud.

Meanwhile, Susan was busy blushing, too, and mumbling, “Well, I...That is...not, well maybe not today...um...”

“I do love you, Susan, and the idea of us marrying has crossed my mind. In fact it has settled firmly in the front of my thoughts.”

That was actually a relief to Susan. She knew that Onayasim was very fond of her, but hearing those three special words confirmed it warmly in her mind and heart. “I love you, as well, Onayasim.” Coming from her mouth, those words sounded very strange. She had said them before to other men, but they had meant so little then.

They had been looking deeply into each other’s eyes for a few minutes, saying what words could never communicate. Then, as if on cue, they heard each other say, “Will you marry me?”

They were both surprised by what they heard. As a smile sprang to their lips, they said in unison, “Yes!”

“We’ll need to talk to Ymanyale about it,” Onayasim said, to remind him and Susan about the proper order of things.

“Will we need to talk to your parents about it?” Susan wondered to Onayasim.

“Since I am as old as I am, it wouldn’t be necessary, but it’s always wise to consult them.”

“Then we will” Susan said, in evident agreement with her new fiancé since his head was nodding at her statement.

There was an awkward pause while they wondered who they should talk to about Susan.

“Ian and José are as close to family as I have right now,” Susan offered. “In fact, since I’ve been here and learned about Creator and who I really am and all, they’re really closer to me than any of my natural family on Earth. I know I can trust them for wisdom. We’ll talk to them”.

Onayasim stood up, extended a hand to Susan and said, with pretend impatience, “What are we waiting for?” Susan jumped up and they both walked briskly to find the ones they needed to advise them.

Chapter 22

The First Interplanetary Wedding

A proper amount of time had passed since the marriage proposals. Onayasim and Ian had made their rings. That was an unusual lesson. Neither one of the future grooms had done anything like jewelry making. Ian was mechanically inclined, but when someone is trying to form liquid metal, familiarity with machines doesn't do any good. And the rings were so small compared to anything he had usually worked with. Onayasim took a little longer than Ian did, but his progress was surprisingly steady. He had a better mental concept of it from having done a lot of cerebral work before. It only took a couple of weeks, but both men had wonderful, unique and personalized gifts for their respective fiancées and, when the time was right, their respective wives.

Ian's engagement ring for Yaleah was made of the shimmering Chel. Prominently, yet delicately, on top of the ring was the most deep and lustrous piece of Owrah, carved carefully from the purple and pink piece that he had acquired for her. No one could say they had ever seen a piece so beautiful. Its size and shape were a perfect fit for Yaleah's graceful finger. The wedding ring itself was like the engagement ring, but without the Owrah. On it, Ian had carved two hands clasping as his and Yaleah's had done so many times.

Onayasim's rings for Susan were equally beautiful. The engagement ring was somewhat different and had the green Owrah. The wedding ring had Susan's and his names spelled out on it using ancient Awdnite symbols. It had delighted Susan even more than anything else Onayasim could have done, because the ancient symbols were things of creation that Susan loved so well, like the birds and flowers and moon and stars.

Ian had had time to build a 'house' for him and Yaleah. Just as on Earth, a wife-to-be on Awdnaw has ideas about what a home should look and feel like. But, unlike many soon-to-be-wed couples on Earth, there were very few disagreements, and the ones that did occur were resolved by tackling the problem instead of each other. They understood the importance of letting the other know that whatever they thought was legitimate and that disagreements were not grounds for attacking a person's dignity. In the end, love won out and all their decisions were the best thing for both of them.

From the outside, their home looked much like the others, but inside, there were special features that could only be found on Awdnaw. Earthlings had come to rely almost exclusively on electronic devices and tools so that a power outage left virtually everyone in the area helpless. Awdnites had many of the same conveniences, but they were built in total harmony with creation so that nothing was abused, wasted or hoarded.

There was a place to heat food with sunlight and another device to store the sun's heat temporarily for cooking at night. There was a special closet for whatever special clothes they would wear. Yaleah arranged things so that they would be not only easy to find and work with, but so that they'd be miniature works of art, adding a pleasantness to their home. She was quite good at it, too.

Together, they spent a little extra time on their private area, what would be called a master bedroom on Earth. It was comfortable and private and included some romantic touches from Yaleah that Ian had never seen or thought of.

The guest area, or living room, was large and opened onto a patio of sorts. That way, they could sit out under the stars and still have access to whatever they might need from inside. A few times, Ian had to remind himself that they needed no protection from rain or thieves. In a number of places at the back side of the house were places reserved for adding rooms for children and a guest or two. Ian and Yaleah had worked hard on their nest and were both pleased.

One day, when they were almost finished, Yaleah had been busying herself with some details in the eating area, what Earthlings would call the dining room. There were some heavy vines, like very old grape vines, that she was training to form a sort of window to frame a view of the countryside. One vine in particular was not doing what it should be; it kept trying to grow across a corner of the frame and would be distracting. She was just about to call Ian, when she heard him beckon her.

"Sweet face, can you come here for a minute?" he called. Yaleah thought he sounded a bit different, even mischievous in the way he spoke. She had to find out what he wanted, not as much because he called, but because of the way he called.

"Where are you?" she asked. Maybe she could get him to speak again.

"Over here, in the living area".

It sounded just as unusual as before. "Yes?" she said as she came around the corner.

"Would you take a peek at this little ledge I built?" It was made of an interestingly shaped piece of glass. "I liked the structure of this little slab. It was a cast off from one of the projects I was working on earlier. It's not too big, but it should be big enough to hold something interesting, don't you think?"

She moved closer to see this little detail that had him so enthralled. "Well, it looks cute enough. Do you think it might....Oh Ian!" She saw the little bit of something that he had put on it already. "Is that...is that...?"

Ian took it off the shelf and gently slipped it on Yaleah's finger. "Yes, it's the engagement ring I made for you."

She smiled at him, tears welling up in her eyes; then she examined the ring, twisting her hand to see it from all angles. She slipped it off to see more closely how it was made. "Oh!" she suddenly gasped and put it quickly back on her finger. "Am I allowed to take it off? I'm not quite sure what's supposed to be done with an engagement ring."

"I've never heard of anything bad happening or a wedding being called off because the bride-to-be took her ring off to look at it."

She was comforted by his words. She smiled again at him, then gave him a close, lingering hug.

The two of them worked for another week or so and got everything just right. The day they finished, they stood together admiring it, Ian with his arm around Yaleah's waist. "I've built a lot of things in my life; a tool shed or two, who knows how many tree houses and an addition to my sister's place, but I've never built anything like this. I think it's the best project I've ever been a part of. I'll be glad when we're married and can move into it together." Turning to his bride-to-be, he cooed, "And I'm glad I had such a great architect to design and organize it". The comment had a double meaning. It was Yaleah who generally decided on what went where, but they both knew that the ideas had all come from Creator Himself.

Yaleah could have responded and explained things. Instead, she simply rested her head on Ian's shoulder.

* * * * *

Yaleah and Ian had discussed many things with each other and with Ymanyale that would prepare them for a long, happy life together. Marriage on Awdnaw, except for when one spouse was sent to the Valley of the Dark Eyes, was truly permanent. There was no backing out if one of the two decided they had made a mistake or that they were no longer compatible. With the help of Ymanyale, Maugrab, Austare and a few other leaders in Nadtsarett, Yaleah and Ian examined and investigated and decided many things. In the end, they discovered that they could and should and would be married. They did, indeed, truly love each other.

The day for the wedding finally came. This event would be as unusual to the Earthlings as anything they had seen yet on Awdnaw. Still, they would feel very much at ease with what would happen. Everyone in Nadtsarett had gathered, along with some friends and relatives from nearby villages. The ceremony was held in the Great Hall where they enjoyed meals for Last Day and other important events. It was decorated with an incredibly dazzling array of fragrant flowers and fruit, lights that looked like a soft glowing sort of candle and garlands of at least a dozen shades of green. Birds and insects that resembled butterflies had arranged themselves in a brilliant display of color around the very top of the walls. The background of the white marble made it all the more stunning.

Unlike an Earth wedding, the wedding party was already in place near where Ymanyale entered the room when He visited. There was a portico with columns and planters that made a nice, semi-enclosed presentation area. Ian stood to one side with José and Susan, who were as much his family now as anyone on Earth had ever been. Yaleah stood to the other side with her parents and siblings, all twenty-three of them. One of Yaleah's sisters, Ahotanna, was a special bride's maid of sorts, dressed in a gown with long, wide sleeves and a short train that made her resemble the Dove. She led the procession of other bride's maids as they threw not only flower petals but delicate smelling spices of all sorts.

Ian was dressed in the Awdnite version of a tuxedo, a sort of drape around his shoulders and a kilt-like thing. In keeping with Earth tradition, it was all black with just a splash of color, though Yaleah and others couldn't understand why he wanted to dress so drably. They knew it had nothing to do with him expressing any preference for darkness of any sort, though some of the Awdnite leaders did ask him about it.

Yaleah, on the other hand, was dressed in the most stunning cape and sash, all pink and lavender with trim made from simple, contrasting gems. On Earth, the gems alone would have been worth a small fortune, but its value here was that it was a labor of love for her mother to have collected the stones from different places on the planet over the last hundred years or so and then to have sewn them into the garments. She had flowers and spices in her hair. She even had on a bit of what could be called make-up, but it was very faint and sparse and only noticeable up close.

The music was very different. On Ian's home planet, there was usually an air of formality and elegance in the music most people chose for a wedding. On Awdnaw, the music expressed the hearts and lives of those getting married and included all sorts of music. The Awdnites played a wide variety of instruments. Some reminded the Earthlings of horns and things they had seen before. Others had an almost comical appearance. But, together, they provided the most beautiful music they had ever heard.

Yaleah had written a song for Ian. In it, she expressed the way that she felt cared for and special when he was with her and how she knew that even when they were apart, Ian was thinking about her and wanting her near him. She sang most of it. Then, there was a part in

which she played a flute-like instrument that had two barrels; one had lots of holes and the other had a few holes and provided a drone part. When he heard Yaleah's song, his eyes filled with tears, something that rarely happened to him. In fact, Yaleah was the only person he could remember that could make him cry, for joy or for sadness.

Ian also wrote a song for Yaleah. Ya'akobe had helped him build his own Manayabell. He had spent many months practicing it so that he could play and sing for Yaleah at their wedding. Part of it went like this:

*In your emerald eyes, I see your heart
And I see your heart loves me.
In my eyes, you can see my heart
And how you're loved by me.*

*The time we spend is always sweet,
No matter what we do.
Your smile says more than words sometimes.
Our fingers in each other's twined
Epitomize our love so I'm
Resolved to cling to you.*

When Yaleah heard Ian's song, tears of joy streamed down her face. She wiped them away only when they had started running down her chin. She thought her heart would burst with happiness, but she didn't say a thing.

Each song reflected the disparate tastes in music that each one had, but both songs were touching and beautiful. And each one contained a clear sense of gratitude to Creator not only for making them, but for bringing them together from such distant places and making it possible for them to meet and marry. Even though the *Pilgrim* had landed on Awdnaw, there would have been no guarantee that Ian and Yaleah would have met. There were, after all, many billions of people on Awdnaw. They knew that, when someone is in the Father's will, there are no coincidences.

Instrumental music started playing. There were three processions of other attendants, including, as Ian's gift to the wedding ceremony, a ring bearer. The processions all happened at the same time. Each line of attendants walked, or rather, glided down the many aisles so that they passed everyone in the assembly. Even though it took a while, everyone attending got to see everyone in the ceremony.

When the music ended, Ymanyale appeared at the entrance that only He used. He came and stood between the bride and groom. In fact, He stood there for quite a while. Ian began to wonder if Ymanyale was going to change His mind about allowing them to be married or something. The Dove came and rested on Ymanyale's shoulder. Then Ymanyale smiled, and as He did, the whole room filled with the most brilliant, warm and joyful light. Everything in the room became more intense in its color and presence. The colors in the guests' clothing took on a powerful vitality. Yaleah and Ian looked at each other with a sense of contentment they had never known before.

As everyone was basking in the presence of the Son, He began to speak. He described the joy that He felt when He celebrated the first wedding in the first garden. Then he illustrated what

the relationship between a man and a woman should be when they commit themselves to one another. “A man may be whole when he is just himself. Creator has given that gift to a few. But when a man finds a woman with whom he can spend his life, with whom he can share his whole self and from whom he can receive the benefits of friendship, encouragement, care and love, he is whole as nothing else could make him. A woman may be whole, as well, if Creator has given her that gift. But, when a woman discovers a man with whom she can share the innermost details of her life, a man that will support, encourage and surround her, a man who will love her totally, she is the model of completion as when a person is in harmony with the Father.” Then Ymanyale declared, “I believe Yaleah and Ian have found each other just that way. Creator has designed humans so that there are a great number of possibilities for each man and woman to find a spouse with whom they can share their lives.” Then, He looked tenderly at Yaleah and Ian, “But when two, like these, have found each other, they can imagine their lives with no one else”.

He made special mention of the extreme thrill He had when he pronounced that not only had Ian’s eyes become light, but Susan and José’s eyes had lost their residual darkness as well.

Then, He turned to face Ian and asked him to come to where He was standing. He asked Yaleah to do the same. Yaleah and Ian were now standing, facing each other. Ian had each of Yaleah’s hands in his. They smiled at each other, not big, amused smiles but quiet, contented, love-filled smiles.

Ymanyale then asked, “Ian, do you vow to do all that Creator will ask of you?”

“I do”, Ian, replied. Saying ‘I do’ sounded right to him, but the question about doing what Creator asked seemed odd to him. He figured that it was part of all Awdnite wedding ceremonies and let it go at that.

The Son then directed the question to Yaleah. “Yaleah, do you vow to do all that Creator asks of you?”

Yaleah answered, “I do”. The question seemed natural to her, and she had no reason to expect any particular questions at her wedding since there was no such thing as a usual Awdnite wedding. They were all different with different questions and a different order of things. After all, it was Creator asking the questions.

Ymanyale then asked them each if they would commit themselves to each other as He had described moments before. They each said that they would. On Earth, there is mention of sickness and death and poverty in the marriage vows. Here, there was no such mention. But, there are questions about protecting each other from the Dark One and his servants. The end of Ymanyale’s comments did include a strange reference to the end of things as they are. Most Awdnites took this to mean that Creator would change their planet somehow, but they weren’t sure. Some of them wondered about it, but no one asked since they trusted Him so completely. Anything He did would be for their good, and they trusted Him to tell them when, and what, the end of things would be.

Ymanyale called the ring bearer, Yaleah’s youngest brother, a child of about forty years old. He presented the rings to the Son, who, after a few appropriate words, had Ian place Yaleah’s on the ring finger of her left hand, and Yaleah place Ian’s on his left hand ring finger. Ian had asked if they could do the rings this way and, since they had never done it at all on Awdnaw before, and Ymanyale thought that it would be good. He knew that the rings and the fingers they were placed on did not matter in themselves, but He was glad that Yaleah and Ian wanted the whole planet to know, just by looking, that they were husband and wife.

After Ymanyale finished with the rings, He stood still for a few, long moments, just as at the beginning. Then, with a big, joyful voice, He announced, “These are, from now until the end, husband and wife – equal partners – a new, blessed and unique union.”

With His smile, there was a new emanation of that warm, joyful light. The Cherowb and Mawlawk, as bright swirls of light and color, danced all over the building. The musicians played enthusiastically as Ian and Yaleah, hand in hand, ran from the congregation to the outside and danced for joy.

Just as on Earth, food was a huge part of a wedding celebration. The happy couple didn’t go too far since they knew that there would days of celebrating taking place before they were allowed to leave for their honeymoon. It seemed that everyone who could cook at all in their village had made something for the banquet, and there were a lot of people who cooked. Among the foods were a few that had taken more than a decade to age and cure. Some had a rich, somewhat musky flavor. Others were pungent, almost like wine. To the Earthlings, some of the food seemed to taste a lot like good aged beef, though they knew that it was all made from plants. Maybe the taste of meat wasn’t wrong; it’s just that people on Earth had forgotten how to make it from plants.

Yaleah had asked for a very special food for their wedding. It was made from beans that came from trees that lived only near the equator of Awdnaw. The beans would be roasted and ground and then could be made into any number of varieties of flavors and textures and forms.

For this celebration, Austare and some of her friends had put Yaleah’s bean-food, as a thick liquid, into a fountain about four feet tall. From the top, this delicious fluid ran down four different courses, each one a different color and flavor variety. People dipped different fruits and nuts in this luscious liquid. That would have been delectable enough. At the bottom of the fountain, each flavor ran into one of two pools. One pool simply collected and recirculated what it collected. The other pool had small separations filled with another light brown bean curd. When the gooey liquid filled one of the sections, it was cooled so it became solid, and could be eaten, as the Earthlings thought, like a candy bar. Like a chocolate and peanut butter candy bar.

“Is this chocolate?” Ian whispered to Yaleah after trying some of each flavor.

“Could be” she replied, also in a whisper, and with a coy grin. “What is chocolate?”

“Well, it tastes a lot like this!” Ian wasn’t sure why he had been whispering. It could be that he didn’t want to share this experience with anyone else but Yaleah. He thought the whispering sounded silly to him when he thought about it, but then he remembered that Yaleah was whispering, too.

“I’ll tell you its real name later,” Yaleah cooed in his ear. Then, lacing the fingers of her left hand in the fingers of his right, she winked at him, kissed him long on the mouth and then wandered off, pausing long enough to turn and wave.

There were an enormous number of people to meet. Among them were the people from the village of Sher’mekome where Yaleah and Ian had gone on their first Fresh View and played in the water and gone in the canoe together. Yaleah and Ian had simply planned to strike out in a direction that neither of them had gone very much, just to see and enjoy whatever they might find. But, these people had come to offer their community for the honeymoon. It didn’t take long for the newlyweds to abandon their original plans and choose this fantastic offer. The entire village would go on a Fresh View so the newlyweds could enjoy the whole place by themselves. Ian and Yaleah were thrilled to be able to live and play there again, if only for a little while.

The crowd was mostly people, but a few animals were at the celebration, too. Among the animals were the ducks that had raced across the cewik seolfar pond, the bird Yaleah had chatted

with on her first Fresh View with Ian and a few of his family, some amphibian creatures that had a part in guiding the *Pilgrim* on its landing on Awdnaw and the horses that raced around the Red Mountains.

As the celebration went on, people simply rested where they could for as long as they needed. And, even though there was a lot of eating and drinking, no one ate too much or got drunk on anything, even the good wine that came from the southern area. Awdnites knew that overindulgence was a slap in the face to Creator, who made everything for them to enjoy, not abuse.

Toward the end of the third day of the celebration, two of the horses, Swiffan and Dancierre, came to Ian and Yaleah and made a rare offer. No one on Awdnaw forced any of the animals to work for them. Occasionally, some of them would offer to help; sometimes, Creator would direct them to help; and sometimes, they would help when asked, politely, by people. But, no one forced an animal to do anything. Even though they were not spiritual beings, they had emotions and intellect and their individuality. And, even when animals worked for people, it was an absolutely rare thing for anyone to ride an animal. But these two horses offered to give Yaleah and Ian a ride to their honeymoon location. Of course, they were pleased to be offered such a gift, and made plans for their departure.

The following morning, the whole crowd gathered to see the newlyweds off. The horses asked them about which one would carry who. Ian favored Swiffan and Yaleah favored Dancierre, so that settled that question. The children at the wedding took special interest in seeing the people ride the animals since some of them had never seen such a thing. They started riding slowly and somewhat unsteadily. Ian had ridden horses before, but not this kind of beast.

After a few hours, they got very comfortable on these animals' backs. Ian asked Yaleah if she'd like to go a little faster. After a brief pause for thought, she said she would. Ian just started to raise his feet to give Swiffan a gentle nudge in the ribs when his horse asked him what he was doing.

Ian dropped his feet and let out a tumultuous roar of laughter. Yaleah looked startled, as did the horses as they stopped in their tracks. "I'm sorry", he said, after he had composed himself. I was about to give you a soft kick in the sides to urge you on".

"Why would you do that?" Swiffan asked. "You only have to ask and we'd go faster, or do whatever else you'd like, for that matter."

"I'm so sorry. I really am" Ian said more softly. "You would think that after all this time on Awdnaw that I'd understand that there's no need for violence or even force to make people or animals do something. Please forgive me."

The horses nodded and, giving each other a wink, whinnied at Ian. They used their simple language, the so-called normal horse sounds, when there were no complex ideas to communicate. This was a simple joke and a simple reply in one response.

Ian understood the joke; he had expected them to act like Earth's horses, and now they were acting like one just for him. He and Yaleah laughed and the horses nodded their heads hard in agreement.

Yaleah ventured the question to the horses, properly this time, "Dancierre, do you think we might go a little faster, now?"

"Of course" she answered. "Just let us know if we start to go too fast for you". With a gleam in their eyes and a joyful song, the horses went from walk to trot to canter to gallop within a minute. As they did, Yaleah and Ian both clung tightly to the animals' manes, neither one wanting to admit that maybe the horses were, indeed, going just a little too fast for comfort. After

a short while, the riders discovered that the thrill was worth the bit of nervousness they were feeling, and even began to loosen their grips and enjoy themselves.

The rest of the trip was uneventful. They spent three nights in different places. Even with their swift mounts, it was still a good distance away. When they arrived, they agreed to meet the horses at a certain place and let them have a holiday while the happy couple enjoyed theirs.

They played in the water and paddled the canoes like before. They spent hours just walking and talking. Evenings were spent cooking fun foods on the fire. When night had fully fallen, they would lie out under the moon and stars, with Yaleah's head nestled on Ian's chest and Ian's arm around Yaleah's shoulders like a pillow. Their whole time there was full of the joy and pleasure of marriage.

One day, as they were walking around the lake, they spotted something very unusual. Ian turned to see what Yaleah would say about it, since he had never seen anything like it. But, instead of an explanation, Yaleah said, "I wonder what that is".

This part of the lake had a somewhat odd shape. It had a main body, but on the far side was what could be described as a small pond attached to it. There was a small strait connecting the two but it was still a different body of water. It was in this small pond that they saw what looked like patches of flame, as if there was gasoline or something burning on its surface.

"You mean you don't know what that is?" Ian was somewhat surprised.

"No...." Yaleah looked like she was going to offer some guess as to what it was but decided not to.

"Well, then, let's go see". Ian was certain that whatever it was wouldn't or couldn't hurt them. Yaleah agreed by taking Ian's hand and leading the way to it.

They had to go through some brush, crossing the pond's feeder creek on the way. When they got to the far side of the pond area they found a clearing. As they stepped into it, they heard a voice say, "Don't come any closer!" The voice sounded familiar, but much sterner than they were used to. "Stay where you are. The ground you are walking on is holy ground."

Yaleah and Ian looked at each other quizzically and mouthed the word "Ymanyale".

The voice continued, "I am Creator. Do not look at each other. Each of you, take seven steps away from the other." When Creator spoke, the shimmering on the water rose and fell with each inflection. They each obeyed, straining not to look at the other, and moved the required distance apart. They stood, awestruck at the sight of the water, waiting for something, but they weren't sure what.

Finally, Creator's voice resumed, "Ian". Then, a pause. "Yaleah". And another pause. Then He announced, "There are times approaching that will be unlike any ever seen on Awdnaw. Those in the Valley of the Dark Eyes will have an opportunity to be reunited with the rest of you, but only after a long struggle and fight." Yaleah knew what a struggle was. People did that to resist the lies and tricks of the Dark One and his Rawh. She could only guess that a fight was like a struggle, only worse.

"Ian, you will go to the Valley of the Dark Eyes and share the message I sent through Ymanyale when He was on your planet." Ian's face froze with his eyes wide open. "Do not be afraid. The Dove will be with you. There will be Mawlawk and Cherowb to inform and protect you. And Yaleah will be with you to help you."

At this announcement, Yaleah's face was as filled with misgivings as Ian's was. Creator now directed His comments to her. "Yaleah, you are now one with Ian and will share in this journey and mission. When Ian has exhausted himself with speaking and ministry, you will speak and minister in his place. When you are wearied, he will work in your place."

There was a long pause. Neither Ian nor Yaleah knew if Creator was finished speaking or what they should do. They saw the most incredible display of Cherowb encircle the area where Creator and they were speaking. They drove out all of the Rawh and made such a barricade around them that no evil could get in, from any side, above or below. Among the Cherowb were Mawlawk, singing softly.

Finally, He said, "Come together now and take each other's hand." They moved quickly to rejoin each other and firmly held hands. It was as if they'd been apart for days. Each needed the other's presence for reassurance. The Dove, who had been high in a tree, came and rested on their clasped hands. Creator then addressed them both. "The Mawlawk sing to keep the Rawh from hearing what I tell you. You will travel to the Valley of the Dark Eyes and do your work only when I tell you. It will sometimes be for an hour or two, a day or two or a week or two. In the times to come, there will be opportunities when the Rawh will be without the influence of the Dark One, and those in the Valley will hear you more readily. There will be times when the Rawh will simply be so angry that they will cause some to try to hurt you and those who are listening to you."

Ian looked concerned, but Yaleah was more bewildered since she had never heard of such violence before. Ian squeezed her hand and put a brave look on his face to help calm her fears. Creator saw their faces and spoke again. "Do not be afraid. I am with you." When He said that, they both were encouraged. "Do not speak of this to anyone until the time I tell you" Creator warned. He also reassured them, "You will have many days to enjoy each other and the ones you usually live with. There is plenty of other work to be done as usual. But, be ready when I call you to minister to those in the prison of the Valley of the Dark Eyes."

As soon as He was finished, the flames on the water spun up through the sky. The Dove flew above Yaleah and Ian and, after circling a couple of times, soared away as well. The Mawlawk sang even louder as they and the Cherowb rose in a giant swirl of light and disappeared out of sight high above them.

Ian and Yaleah could see no one, though they knew that somewhere nearby was at least one Cherowb to watch over them. And they could feel the presence of their Father, even though they couldn't see Him. They stood, looking at each other, not knowing quite what to do or say. Then, without warning or provocation and for no known reason they both started giggling. The giggling grew to a full belly laugh. What a joy to be chosen by Creator. They laughed for a few more minutes. Then, when they had settled down, they wrapped their arms around each other and headed back to where they were staying.

Chapter 23

The Other Big Wedding

Susan and Onayasim were getting married as well, but they decided to wait to have their ceremony a few weeks after Yaleah and Ian's so that there wouldn't be so many preparations all at once. Onayasim said it would be good for him, too; he could spend a little more time getting their home ready. He was excellent at many things. However, building wasn't one of his strong suits.

He and Susan had chosen a great site for their home. Onayasim kept asking Susan what she'd like as features for it, but Susan didn't understand that her husband-to-be was only doing what every other husband-to-be did; make sure that his bride was happy. She kept saying things like, "Whatever you do will be fine" and "It's your house, too".

Frustrated at the situation, Onayasim paused a moment to collect his thoughts. Then, he simply put his arm around Susan's waist and led her away from the home-site.

They didn't say anything until they met Austare, who greeted them, "Are you getting ready for the wedding?"

Susan burst into tears. Onayasim looked confused and a bit frightened. Austare's face reflected Susan's anguish. Then she smiled a bit as she led Susan away from Onayasim a few steps. She put her head close to Susan's and asked, "Are the plans different from what you expected?"

Susan sniffed and nodded. Austare wiped away the tears.

"What were you expecting?" she asked Susan in an even voice, not accusing, but gently leading her to an answer.

"Well, I didn't think I'd have to be an architect or something. He keeps asking me what I want in the house and where I want it and what color I want it and how big I want it and I don't know what I want - just a nice house is fine as long as I'm with him."

Austare smiled, put her arm around Susan's shoulder and led her back to where Onayasim was standing. "Susan, here is the man who would give up everything he has, or is, or does, except his relationship with Creator, so that you will be happy and comfortable in your new life and home. On Awdnaw, it is the privilege of the bride-to-be to determine what her home should look like. Will you forgive us for not introducing you to this idea before now?"

Susan nodded, not daring to talk for fear that she would start crying again.

"Most young ladies on Awdnaw spend time daydreaming about their home from the time they are old enough to understand marriage, and often change their minds many times about how they want things to be. Perhaps Onayasim will wait until you have decided what you want." As she spoke this last sentence, she gave Onayasim a knowing glance, and he nodded his agreement.

Susan held out her hand and Onayasim gladly took it. "Will you forgive me for not cooperating?"

"I don't think..." he began. But, after a quick look from Austare, finished, "Yes, yes, of course!" as he enveloped her in his arms and held her close. After a couple of minutes, he said softly, "Please let me know when you are ready to guide me in making our house an ideal home."

Susan smiled, took Onayasim by the hand and led him away, talking quietly as they went.

It didn't take long for them to find Yaleah and Ian near their house. It was time for a light afternoon meal and they invited Susan and Onayasim to sit and have a bite. Onayasim sat and chose one of the fruit that was there. Susan, however, asked if she could look around the house for a minute. Yaleah said, "Of course." and motioned for her to help herself.

Susan made a frame with her hands, the way visual artists on Earth had done, and looked very carefully at most of the rooms. Yaleah noticed that she was in there for what seemed like a long time, not that she was worried. But she was curious what Susan was doing, framing each room the way she was. Walking toward the house she called, "Susan!?"

"I like the way this doorway frames the pathway and the hills in the distance." Susan was unaware of how long she had been looking around, or of how puzzled Yaleah was at the way she was acting. "Did you plan it this way when you were helping Ian decide how to make your home?"

"Yes," Yaleah replied, smiling wide. "What *are* you doing?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Onayasim and I were trying to plan our home and, well, I got frustrated at all the questions until your mom explained to me that it wasn't a chore my sweet guy was burdening me with but a privilege. But, I had never thought much about it, and...well... it all sort of got to me and I thought to myself, 'Hey, self, who better to see how they had done their house than Yaleah and Ian' so I walked Onayasim this way so I could see. See?"

Yaleah smile. "Yes I do. Anything else I can show you?" she asked, motioning for Susan to see more.

"Well...there is a room I didn't look at."

"I'll show you what we did. I think you'll like it." Yaleah winked as they walked into the couple's private area.

After Susan had seen the Ian-Yaleah home, she asked Onayasim to take her to see some more houses so she could get an idea of what she might want to do. Susan wasn't blind or slow; she did have a sense of taste about her surroundings. She just never paid much attention to exactly what made them good, bad or otherwise.

After just a few days of looking, she had assembled quite a few ideas and had nearly driven Onayasim crazy with her enthusiasm. "I'd like the living area to be just like Yaleah and Ian's except that we'll face it west so we can watch the sunsets; I think they're beautiful. And the eating area should be just like your parents' except that it will need to be bigger so we can have that ever-growing bunch of cousins of yours all at once. That should be lots of fun! And I want to make sure that there isn't anything between the eating area and the gathering place; I like that big, open feel". And on and on she went, but Onayasim just grinned and made notes about what she wanted as fast as he could while trying to figure out just how to do it all. He knew he'd have to ask Ian and Ya'akobe and José to help.

After a few more months of waiting and preparation, the big day arrived at last. The arrangement of bride, groom and attendants was basically the same as most other Awdnite weddings. Among her bride's maids was Rhayah, the one who taught her about cooking on Awdnaw. Without her, she wouldn't have been able to cook Onayasim's favorite foods, or much food at all. She would have only been able to serve whatever she could pick, raw.

The Dove flew in just before Ymanyale entered and stood, beaming, between them. His instructions to them were unique as well. He told them that they were to explore the wonderful changes that had come over the bodies of those who had come from Earth to Awdnaw. Since the three of them, Ian, José and Susan, had been declared to be Bright-Eyed Ones, their bodies had been miraculously reprogrammed not to age. Whatever few gray hairs they had started to grow

returned to their former colors; lost hair was replaced; wrinkles, bags, sags and other signs of age faded. Ymanyale wanted the Earthlings to know what His original design was for their bodies. They knew all too well what usually happened to a person on Earth, but they would be amazed at how people's bodies were designed to live and regenerate themselves.

When the ceremony was over and the celebrating began, the three Earthlings, even Susan, gathered off to one side, Susan and Ian with their spouses. They were all wondering the same thing.

“What about Duke? Will he continue to age, or what?” José said, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

As soon as he verbalized what they were wondering, Ian expressed, without saying a word, what they all knew they should do. He motioned with his arm to guide them toward Ymanyale. As they approached Him, Ymanyale turned from speaking with someone else, faced them and nodded.

“Your friend knows the grace that the Father gives, because, like you, he will not die. Very, very slowly, he will experience the pain and degradation that those on Earth acquire. But he will not grow to be feeble.”

The five of them were startled at first, because they didn't ask anything, but Ymanyale knew what they were thinking, even before they thought it. “Your love for your friend is commendable, but do not let it deter your calling. Please, now is the time to celebrate this new couple.” Then, as if to shoo a bunch of children to go play, He waved them away.

As they left, they soon realized that nothing should dampen this festivity, so they ate and danced and laughed and drank and celebrated for many days.

Chapter 24

The Beginning of the End

Duke had been in the Valley of the Dark Eyes for a few years. It was a couple of weeks before the day change on the long side, that is, the vernal equinox. Ymanyale had contacted Maugrab and Layshonau during a Last Day evening meal and asked them to attend a meeting of all the community leaders on the planet. There would be more than six million leaders at this meeting. They were to meet at the place where Awdaim and Shavau, the first people on Awdnaw, were placed when they were created. They would meet in a very long and wide river valley. Actually, it was a set of four rivers that made up the valley with the original garden in the middle of them. They would all fit very comfortably in this area at one time, especially for a short time. And they would be able to find plenty of food and comfortable places to sleep. Ymanyale would speak to the leaders of the largest communities and then delegate special Mawlawk, appearing in human form, to speak the same message. The trip would only take a few days, but it was a very important meeting. There had been only a few meetings like this in the history of the planet. An early one that included all of the leaders was about the establishment of the Valley of the Dark Eyes.

Maugrab called everyone in his community together one evening to tell them about the meeting and the trip. "Creator wants us all to meet for a while so He can tell us something. He has instructed me to tell you to wait while Layshonau and I are gone. I should return in time for the next Last Day meal. There will be no fresh view at this day change. Do all that you can while you wait."

With that, he and Layshonau got in a smaller version of the long distance vehicle. There were only two others on board, a pilot and navigator. They would land about thirty miles away from the meeting site and the two leaders would walk on in.

Ian, Yaleah, Susan, Onayasim and José had been standing together as Maugrab made his short speech.

"What did he mean by, 'do all that you can while you wait'?" Susan wanted to know. "Either we can do something or we can wait. I didn't think we could do both".

Austare, Maugrab's wife, heard them talking. She approached the group and asked Yaleah, "May I describe this to them?"

"Of course, Mom" she replied.

"Waiting is not the same as resting or relaxing. Waiting involves contemplating what Ymanyale has said in the past, especially about whatever you are waiting for. In this case, we aren't sure, so we must contemplate those things that have meant the most to us, which sometimes is not easy. We must also be aware of whatever messages Creator may be sending by way of the Mawlawk. We may come to know more if we listen well. We don't talk much with each other and some abstain from food and sometimes even drink so that they may wait better."

"Whoa!" came out of Ian's mouth before he could stop it.

All Susan could say was, "Sounds real spiritual to me". Ian and José immediately gave her a look that was a question. Was she being deceived by the Rawh into slipping back into her old mystical habits? "No, no, wait" she countered defensively. "I know what you're thinking. I mean, it sounds like this waiting really is more than wasting time while something else happens.

A person could really get in touch with what Creator is like and what He's thinking and doing this way." She looked like she had surprised herself by what she had said.

José was impressed by her words. "I've heard of people doing things like this for short periods of time during a religious retreat, but not for days on end."

So, for the next six days they waited, even the children over about fifteen years old, which to an Earthling would seem to be just a toddler. There were a few mothers with very young children who stayed in another area so that their youngsters wouldn't bother the rest. They exchanged places with others so that they could engage in the waiting, too. Even so, the Earthlings tried doing without food and water for a while, but they had to have some drink a few times a day. This kind of discipline was too new to them. However, they did have a few Mawlawk whisper in their spirit's ear. The first few times it was hard to hear what they were saying. They eventually settled into an easy rhythm of thinking, reflecting and listening.

Then, when it seemed that they had begun to master the art of waiting, there was a faint hum as the craft that Maugrab and Layshonau rode in came over the tops of the trees. The Earthlings started to cheer their approach, but quickly, and embarrassingly, stopped when no one else said anything. Instead, everyone rose quietly to their feet and waited for the two to disembark. When they had, they motioned for everyone to gather around them and move in close so they could all hear. He sent a few people to bring the mothers with very young children so they could hear as well.

When everyone was there, Maugrab stood silently, looking, it seemed, at everyone individually, as if he were reciting their names as he saw each one. Then he began, very hesitantly, but not with any sort of stutter. "Children of the Father. We have met with the Son and His servants. He has revealed to us a mystery and a view of the future."

Mysteries were not new at all to Awdnites. In fact, they were part of life. Every now and then, people would run into a situation that needed explained and they would go to the Son and ask for help in discovering the mystery. Sometimes, Ymanyale would give hints; sometimes, He would ask questions to guide whoever needed help to the answer. But, no, mysteries were not new to them. The word future was a rarely used word, though. Time meant very little to them.

When someone from the *Pilgrim* would ask about an Awdnite's age, it took the native a little while to remember it. And thinking about tomorrow or many days or years in the future was not a usual process. So, when Maugrab spoke about the future, he waited until everyone got their thoughts together about what it meant.

"The mystery is this," he continued, "As you know, we are not alone in the universe. There are thirteen planets on which Creator has put life. On seven of those, people live as we do, most of them in harmony with Creator and His ways. Those six other planets like ours are also under attack daily as we are, and have dealt with those who have deserted to the Dark One the way we have, by putting them away. There are six more planets that have been subdued by the Dark One." With that announcement, the whole crowd gasped. Some started weeping, many with a look of sadness and confusion since many of them had never wept aloud like that before. "Do not do that", Maugrab implored, not knowing how to console someone crying that way. "There is a way that many can be put back into harmony with Creator." He was quiet after saying that to let the idea sink into their minds a little. He also had to collect himself so that he could tell them what the way was, but it would not be an easy job.

"On those planets that have been subdued by the Dark One, the Son has gone as a human, with flesh and bones like we have." He continued to pause now and then to let this new set of ideas sink in. The people weren't alarmed; they were mostly perplexed. "He appeared at the

exact same time on each planet, under the same circumstances. He was born to a woman on each planet who had not yet been married or shared married intimacy with a man.”

A woman in the front of the crowd asked Maugrab, “Can you explain that to us?”

“Creator has chosen to keep the part about how Ymanyale was born to a virgin a deep mystery. As for the rest, He is not confined to time and space as we are. If He wishes to appear in many places at one time, that is very possible for Him. When He visits us in the evening, He is also visiting people in other places on Awdnaw and on the other planets like ours. On each planet that was overpowered by the Dark One, He was there for only thirty-three years. Because the Dark One had subdued those planets, people would stop living after only forty or fifty, and maybe even seventy or eighty years. When a human or animal creature stops living, it is called *dying*.”

Maugrab waited for people to get their mind around such a thought. To be those ages on Awdnaw was to be only a child. Some cried a little more, others simply looked sullen, and a few were puzzled.

Maugrab continued. “The Son was loved by some, but hated by some as well.” Once again, Maugrab knew he had to explain himself. “To hate is to lack the love that our Father shows us and allows us to share with Him and each other. People show this hate by refusing to help or care for each other and by causing some to be hurt or even to die.” Here, Maugrab had to wait longer than usual for the people to understand this idea. By now, he knew that he could not explain the whole mystery to the people; they would not be able to bear it all. He had permission from Creator to explain just the necessary parts of the mystery, but he knew that those parts might be the hardest of all to hear and understand.

“When the time was right, the Father asked the Son to die for everyone that had rebelled against Him, so that they did not have to go to live with the Dark One when they died.”

With that statement, the faces of everyone, except the Earthlings, went blank. This whole concept was totally new, foreign and even repulsive. “When the others died, they either went to live with Creator or with the Dark One, depending on who they chose to believe and follow. The ones whose eyes had been dark on those planets and who now chose to follow Creator were saved from the darkness. If they refused to follow Creator, their eyes remained dark and they went to live where the Dark One and his servants live, though they would never get to see anyone again and it is very hot and uncomfortable and painful there.”

The Awdnites knew the concept of pain, if only relatively mildly. Occasionally one of them would be injured; the equivalent of cutting a finger or scraping a knee. But, just like Earthlings, they didn’t fully understand the pain of hell that Maugrab was describing.

Then, as if at a sporting event, Maugrab raised his hands and exclaimed, “But I have good news. Wonderful news! Marvelous news! There is a way that the people in the Valley of the Dark eyes can regain the light of Creator in their eyes again!”

Susan, Onayasim and José had come to stand beside Ian and Yaleah. This little group was standing so that they could see Maugrab’s face as he spoke and the people’s faces as they listened. When Ian saw the faces of the crowd, somewhat bewildered and somewhat fearful, he felt sorry for them, and said to the others with him, “Do you think that, in all the time they have been on this planet, that they have had to endure so much contradiction of deep emotion. First, the worst, darkest images. Now, the possibility of loved ones being restored. They must have a lot of ‘what if’s’ going through their minds.” The others nodded in agreement.

Maugrab gestured for Yaleah and Ian to step forward. Susan and José still didn't know exactly what was happening. They imagined that Maugrab or someone would offer some sort of parole or pardon to those in the Valley of the Dark Eyes.

As they started toward Maugrab, he gently pulled Ian and Yaleah to either side of him and put each of his hands on one of their shoulders. At the same time, there was a subtle flurry of dark vapors that huddled at the feet of José and Susan, like a wolf crouching to attack.

Maugrab announced that these two would be going to the Valley of the Dark Eyes from time to time to tell its residents about what Ymanyale had done on the planets that had rebelled to bring them back to fellowship with Creator. As soon as he had finished speaking, the dark vapors engulfed José and Susan. José mumbled "Yeah, why him? I could do that just as well."

Susan sputtered, "Just 'cause he's a man. A woman could do it, even better."

After a few more seconds of this attack, Ian stepped toward them and demanded, "Who will you listen to? Who do you trust?!"

They suddenly looked at each other and exclaimed, "We trust Creator." Then they turned their attention to the Rawh around them and simply said, "You are not welcome at one of Creator's temples."

Immediately, the Rawh plunged through the grass into the ground, shrieking deplorably as they went.

Maugrab, and the rest of the crowd that could see, watched earnestly as this whole scene played out before them. Ian returned to his place beside Maugrab and said plainly, so that those who saw it could hear, "It is called jealousy. The Dark One has used it innumerable times on Earth to disrupt Creator's work."

Maugrab responded to Ian's explanation, "We have experienced that here as well. And you have handled it so that Creator is pleased. His love shows brightly in you, all three of you." As Maugrab spoke, Yaleah had slid around behind her father and slipped her arm in Ian's. His strength under fire had pleased her, too.

After a few minutes, to allow the crowd to settle down, Maugrab continued, "Please remember to mention these two to Ymanyale when He comes to visit. They will be among us for a great deal of time, but when Creator calls them, they will need to go."

Maugrab waited for what seemed like a very long time before he spoke again. People chattered for a few minutes, then quieted to a still hush when they became curious about why Maugrab was taking so long to say anything again. Were they to leave; what should they do?

When the silence seemed deafening, he spoke. "In a very short time, in a matter of days, the Dark One will be bound with a chain and put in a bottomless pit. He will not be able to deceive anyone for a thousand years. His Rawh will become less dangerous because they will be without a leader and they do not have a sort of mind that could direct them. They will fight among themselves and be only an aggravation to us for that time, but you will still need to be on your guard against them."

He waited a minute for that idea to sink in. People were very happy and repeated the good news to each other. Maugrab finally held up his hand to get their attention. "But" he started, and paused. "But, the Dark One will be set loose at the end of that time. During the time that he is confined, we must teach all those that are born without the threat of the Dark One how he can deceive and steal and kill and destroy. For us, it is not just a rest from him, but a time to prepare those that are coming so that they can resist him. It is also a chance for those in the Valley of the Dark Eyes to decide for themselves whether they will follow Creator or remain in

their darkness. So, now, when the Dark One is absent and his underlings are around, we must still be vigilant to make those who are born later aware of his tricks.”

The Earthlings were about to see something that they had only had glimpses of up till now. The available technology on Awdnaw was vastly superior to anything anyone on Earth had ever dreamed of. Four Awdnites stretched a huge piece of special cloth between two trees and secured it, so that the surface was perfectly smooth and tilted a bit so that the top leaned forward toward the crowd just a little.

Maugrab motioned to Onayasim, who was standing off to his right. He brought a tubular piece of equipment about a foot and a half long and eight inches across. It was made of three layers of metal so that each layer was exposed for a couple of inches. The effect was that whoever made it couldn't find enough of one metal to make the whole tube. In reality, the layering served as the antenna to receive signals from a broadcast station six thousand miles away. Onayasim placed it on a simple wooden stand and aimed one end at the cloth screen between the trees. Then, he twisted one end and, with a flicker of light, an image of other people on a peaceful beach showed up on the screen.

Maugrab pulled a device from a box beside him and spoke into it. The impression it gave the Earthlings was of an older model cell phone, except they knew that there was absolutely nothing like a cell tower nearby, at least where they had been.

José quietly approached Onayasim and asked, “How does that thing work?” He was going to add something about there not being a cell tower but he didn't want to have to explain.

“It's quite simple, really” Onayasim started. “The cross-matched laser beams are bounced off of the lower side of the upper water. If the signal needs to travel further than a single bounce will accommodate, there are other water or land surfaces reserved for bouncing the signal. We can talk to anyone anywhere on Awdnaw this way.”

“Why didn't I think of that?” José asked, mostly as a joke.

Maugrab said a few more things to whoever he was talking to, then raised his hand to get everyone's attention. It took a few minutes, but everyone was finally quiet. “There is something for you to see on the broadcaster. It will explain what Ian and his friends have known from being on Earth. I know that we have seen and heard many wonderful things from this machine, but what we will see and hear today is ...” Maugrab had to pause a minute to find a way to say what he needed to say. “What we will see and hear today is not what you are used to. Please watch and listen very carefully.” He pointed to Onayasim, signaling him to begin the broadcast.

Over the telecommunications device, Maugrab called the crew who had been on the reconnaissance mission to observe Earth from two and from six thousand years away. Yayhushaw and Meerjam stepped up to speak for the other two, though they didn't appear to be very eager. Maugrab asked them what they saw.

Yayhushaw started. “What we saw of the planet looked as if whatever light of Creator there was had dimmed, like a night when the moon hides. There is light from the stars, and one can see, but there isn't enough light to run and play. I could see a few people who seemed to have light in their eyes, but it was dimmed somehow. I could not understand what many of them did most of the time. They struck each other and grabbed from each other and left each other by themselves.” His voice trailed off as if he was still trying to comprehend the hostility among humans on that world.

Meerjam continued for him. “Then we saw a man being struck terribly so that his blood ran more than all the injured people I have ever seen on Awdnaw.” By now, whoever was speaking had to stop after nearly every sentence so that the people could comprehend what was

being said, and so that the speaker could regain a sense of composure. "Then...then, they fastened him on wood that had been torn from the ground."

"The wood was dead. And then, the man was dead."

"But, we believe we know who it was."

Here, there was a very long pause. No one dared ask because everyone could tell that it was going to be difficult to say who they saw.

Finally, Meerjam simply said, "Ymanyale".

After a few minutes of eerie silence, Maugrab spoke a few words of encouragement to Meerjam and Yayhushaw. Through the video machine, they looked at him, and as they did, he smiled. They seemed to be comforted by that smile and their faces relaxed a bit. Then he asked them, "What did you see after that?"

With that question, their faces lit up and they both wanted to answer at the same time.

"There were Mawlawk at the place where they had put His body" Meerjam started.

"But just before that, we saw Ymanyale come out of that place, full of the light and wonder that He usually has", Yayhushaw added.

"There were some Cherowb who came and rolled the stone away from the hole in the ground, but Ymanyale was out already."

"A woman came to the place where He had been, and Ymanyale spoke with her".

Yayhushaw seemed impressed by this action since the other things that they had seen suggested that women weren't respected as they are on Awdnaw.

"Then more women came" Meerjam said, completing the thought. "Then a couple of men ran to the hole in the ground. They seemed surprised to find Ymanyale had gone".

"There was more activity over the next few weeks and lots of people got to see Him and talk to Him, though, of course, we could never hear what they were saying..."

"But everyone seemed to be so pleased that he wasn't dead anymore."

"Yes, and the last thing we saw from that planet was when Ymanyale met with just eleven men on a hill. Then, He raised His hands just a bit and rose off the planet."

"Zoomed right past us, like it had just happened!"

Everyone had now caught the idea. Ymanyale had defeated this death thing that was introduced to them. There was no need for anyone on any planet to stay dead or to be ruled by the Dark One.

After everyone had quieted down some, Maugrab continued, "It is sometimes necessary to hear a thing from more than one person. Although it is extremely rare for the eyes of someone who has a position of responsibility here to go dark, sometimes it happens, and an extra voice or two helps to reinforce what was said. What you have heard was, at times, so dark, that Creator thought it was a good idea to have these four go to see for themselves and report to you."

"Now you know how it is that people who are now in the Valley of the Dark Eyes can regain the light in their eyes and their freedom. And now, there is another thing to tell you. Because of the planets where the people chose to follow the Dark One, and where Ymanyale had to die and live again; because of the darkness that shadows them all the time, Creator must replace His creation with a new one. He will replace it with a creation that is even better and more wonderful than anything we have known or seen or even thought about."

Once again, he had to wait a few minutes while the people chattered about what he had said. They weren't being rude, and Maugrab knew that. There had just been so many new, and truly strange, things for them to hear and comprehend.

“Now, these things won’t happen right away. I am telling you now, so that you may have time to understand what is coming. I know that you will all have questions about these things to come, and I know that Ymanyale will delight in telling you all that He can about these things.”

People all started talking at once, some trying to ask questions of Maugrab or any of the others standing near him. José could see a number of dark clouds slithering along the ground around the feet of the crowd from where he was, as well as an equal number of bright vapors chasing them away. Maugrab finally put up his hands as if to defend himself from the questions and said, quite loudly, “Quiet!” As if in a wave, the silence spread from his mouth to the far side of the crowd. “Everyone, go home; think about what I have said. Compose your questions for Ymanyale, and decide who among you will be the last to ask. If you listen carefully to Ymanyale when He speaks, He will possibly answer your question when He answers someone else’s. Please go home now.”

There must have been a precedent for such crowd dispersal, because they all went quietly to their homes. The Earthlings had found that their jaws had tightened and their necks were sore from the tension. Yaleah was a bit flustered, but she had been through one or two of these situations before.

“What happened here?” José wanted to know.

“Yeah?” Susan added.

“Was it dangerous or just a little too loud?” Ian asked, trying, unsuccessfully, to figure it out himself.

Maugrab explained. “It was never dangerous. No one would have done anything dark, unless they were already about to become dark. The Cherowb were all around. It was mostly just a little too loud, as you said, Ian. Whenever there is too much curiosity in any place, it can become disorganized. Creator doesn’t like chaos and everyone understands that. When I called for quiet, they all knew what I was doing. We all need reminding about how to live in Creator’s way and that’s all I was doing; reminding them.”

The rest of them took Maugrab’s direction and went home, too.

Chapter 25

First Missionaries to the Valley of the Dark Eyes

It had been nearly a year since Ian and Yaleah had been given their commission by Creator to go to the Valley of the Dark Eyes as emissaries for Him. Life had carried on fairly normally. Many of the people in Nadtsarett had completed successful searches, made wonderful inventions and fashioned beautiful songs and paintings and sculptures and other works of art.

One day, Yaleah, Susan and a few other women were discussing the latest fashions. Even though the clothes they wore were simple and mainly for decoration, that didn't mean that they were dowdy and without style. The fabrics, colors and arrangements on their bodies changed, though it might take a century or so. There was no fashion center, as there was on Earth, declaring what the new trends would be. Fashion changes happened when people around Awdnaw's globe simply felt like trying something new.

As they talked and gestured and positioned, Onayasim approached with a no-nonsense look on his face. Susan started clowning, acting coy and embarrassed by his presence. Onayasim smiled a bit and nodded at her. He didn't want to ignore her, but he had no time for niceties or chitchat.

"Yaleah" he said, interrupting her in the middle of demonstrating how a new shade of Pinky-purple went with her hair. She shot a look at him as if to say, "How rude!" She would never have said it, but it was loud in her mind.

Her thoughts changed abruptly when Onayasim added, "Maugrab has had word from Ymanyale. He has sent for you. You and Ian will be going to the Valley of the Dark Eyes in three days. Go, now, and wait for me at the entrance to the Great Hall."

Onayasim smiled and winked at Susan before he turned to go tell Ian the same news. Yaleah handed Susan the cloth she was holding.

She started to speak but Susan interrupted her. "Um, what's the hurry?" She wasn't being impertinent, just inquisitive. "You have three days to get ready. There's nothing really to pack....is there? Ian has told you the story about Ymanyale". Susan paused, a long awkward pause. "Sorry, Yaleah. I didn't mean to sound like I was questioning what you were doing. I guess it's just another thing for me to learn.

"And I will be glad to teach you" Yaleah said with a grin. "There haven't been many times that people have had such a calling. There was one time, about three thousand years ago, that two brothers began to listen to the Rawh. Not only would they have been sent to the Valley of the Dark eyes, but they could have taken hundreds of people with them by misleading them. Two pairs of people were chosen to speak to each brother. They all spent three days meeting with Ymanyale before they went to talk to the brothers. Without that time with Ymanyale, they would have been vulnerable to the same Rawh that were tempting the brothers."

After Susan paused a bit to let what Yaleah said settle into her mind, she asked, "What happened to the brothers?"

Yaleah shared, "One brother continued to listen to the Rawh and now lives in the Valley of the Dark Eyes, but he didn't take anyone with him. The other chose to listen to the two who

came to talk to him and returned to following the Father. Of course, there were Mawlawk and the Dove speaking to the brothers as well, but the two who were sent had to know what to do and to do it the way Ymanyale instructed them to.”

“That’s so...”. Susan started to say “cool” but she didn’t want to have to explain slang just then. “...wonderful” she finished.

“Not only that, but many of the people who live for hundreds of milleyons around are descendants of his.”

“Are you?” Susan blurted.

After a short pause, Yaleah replied, “Yes, I am. So, Ian and I need to prepare, to meet with Ymanyale before we go. If the ones who visited those brothers hadn’t prepared, it’s almost certain that I wouldn’t be here.”

“Please, go prepare. Prepare well. We will all fill you in on whatever important fashion decisions we make”.

Yaleah and the others caught the joke and, in between giggles and comments, managed to say goodbye to Yaleah, each one encouraging her to prepare well.

Meanwhile, Onayasim had found Ian, who, with José, was learning from Admawa how to uncover the mysteries of a new plant without doing any more than studying a single leaf. Admawa was the same gardener who taught José to trim trees during his first Fresh View. He was just explaining how they could tell about the root system, flowers and fruit from certain characteristics of the leaf, when Onayasim approached.

José saw him coming. “Onayasim” he called excitedly. “Did you know that you can tell all about a plant just from a leaf?”

“Yes” Onayasim responded, politely and simply. He smiled and nodded as he answered. Just as with Susan, he wanted to acknowledge José, but he had more pressing business to take care of.

Onayasim’s unusually curt manner took the botanists by surprise. “Is something wrong?” Ian asked.

“No” Onayasim answered, his face and shoulders relaxing a bit. “It’s just that Ymanyale has sent word through Maugrab that you and Yaleah are to make your fist visit to the Valley of the Dark Eyes and you must leave in three days, so there is a lot to do.

Ian spoke, though José was thinking the same thing. “What’s there to do? Even when I had a bunch of stuff to pack, it didn’t take three days.” José nodded in agreement. Neither of them was being flippant; it just seemed odd to be so urgent with three days to prepare.

Onayasim became somewhat annoyed at the ignorance he was encountering. He stepped close to Ian and, with his nose about two inches from Ian’s, demanded, “Do you know what Ymanyale will say to you in the next, very few, days?” His question bordered on being condescending, as if Ian was an adolescent, not quite a hundred years old.

Ian, flustered and flushed, stepped back a large step and stammered his answer, “Um,.. well, no.”

“Then you will do well to listen to Ymanyale and prepare.” Onayasim regained his composure and now, as if giving a sports team pep talk, continued, “There are many dangers. You must be strong and brave and wise!” He motioned for Ian to follow him, which he did.

Ian’s stomach had more than a few butterflies. It almost hurt. He was beginning to understand the magnitude of what he and Yaleah had to do.

Ian’s beautiful, brave wife was waiting at the assigned location. Onayasim led her and Ian across the Great Hall, which seemed even larger without anyone in it. They came to the door that

Ymanyale came through when He visited. The Dove flew in and perched above the door on the wide lintel. On one side of the door was an intricately detailed table made of white marble with gold inlays. On it was a bowl and pitcher of the same white marble, carved delicately thin so it wasn't heavy when it was being used. There were two pure white towels on silver rods at each side of the table. Onayasim only had to make a simple gesture with his hand toward the table; Ian and Yaleah knew what to do. Ian lifted the pitcher and poured water over Yaleah's hands as she washed them. Then she did the same for Ian. Then he took the bowl full of water and put it on the floor. He gently took one of Yaleah's feet, washed and dried it and then did the same with the other foot. When he stood, Yaleah returned the service.

Neither one was sure how to look or act or even feel, but as Ian helped Yaleah stand, their eyes connected the way they do and they smiled at each other. Onayasim motioned for them to go through the door. The Dove led the way, followed by Yaleah, then Ian. There was no door in the doorway, but the light that shone from the room beyond the door obscured whatever or whoever was more than a few feet beyond it. Onayasim watched them walk until they were absorbed by the light.

Ian and Yaleah spent the rest of that day and all of the next meeting with Ymanyale, preparing for their mission. About mid-morning on the third day, the three of them emerged. The two missionaries had a faint glow and a look that was hard to describe. Maugrab, Austare, Susan, Onayasim, José and others were there when they came out and could only describe them as looking more able, strong and wise than usual, almost like a Cherowb.

Maugrab and two Awdnite guards took them to a waiting airship. Quite a crowd was waiting, but no one dared to get too close. They weren't afraid; they were showing respect for Ymanyale and for the work He had commissioned Ian and Yaleah to do. Ymanyale gave Yaleah and Ian a simple hug. Then the five of them, Yaleah, Ian, Maugrab and the two guards, boarded the craft and took off.

The trip was virtually silent and relatively short. The air ship sped along at the speed of sound. This was no picnic, no Fresh View. Scenery was a blur. This was a mission trip and there was no time for enjoying the ride; it wasn't part of the journey this time. Yaleah and Ian quietly held hands and mentally reviewed the plans Ymanyale had laid out for them. This trip was just an announcement. They would be saying, by their arrival and presence, "We have come to show you the way out of the Valley of the Dark Eyes, the way to regain the light in your eyes. The Father still loves you and there is hope. Let everyone know that we are here for you."

The ship landed right in the center of the entrance to that Dark Valley. This would be the safest place to enter since either side of the entrance had too many places for people to hide. None of them had any fear of physical harm, but they would get more done if there weren't any distractions from skirmishes with the enemy.

They set up a rudimentary camp and, since it was nearly sundown, gathered supper. They talked quietly as they ate. Even the guards, who always seemed so stoical, joined the conversations about Creator and the beauty and wonder of all He had created. After a while, the conversations faded away.

The area outside the valley, where they were staying, didn't smell like the rest of the planet. There was no abundance of fruit or nut trees, even though there was a small grove of trees supplying simple food for the missionary group. It seemed out of place among the rest of the bleak landscape, but the visitors concluded that this was a special provision by Creator just for them.

There wasn't much of anything else in the plain outside that Dark Valley. The grass was dry; the trees were squatty. It smelled like clay dust, especially when the wind blew in the wrong direction.

Usually, there was a gentle breeze that carried sweeter smelling air in from the woods farther to the east, but the odor of dirt was always in the background. And the better air never made it into the Valley of the Dark Eyes, either because the Cherowb were in the way or some natural phenomenon prevented it from getting in. Either way, Creator had determined that those who remained in that Dark Valley would never smell sweet air again.

As they were trying to go to sleep that first night, there was a very unusual sound that came from the Dark Valley, a wail or a scream. The mission team was startled, but a Mawlawk came and stood by them while a small group of Cherowb came from above, swooping above the heads of those who guarded the Valley's entrance and chasing any of its inhabitants back far enough so that none of them could bother the group camping outside. Yaleah drew close to Ian as they heard the sounds of suffering fade away. The Mawlawk told them that there would be no danger, no noise and no interruption of their rest. Soon, everyone settled down to a very deep, restful slumber. And, indeed, there was nothing to disturb them all night.

The following morning, they were awakened by the sound of the Dove, cooing softly from a nearby tree, where He had been all night. They ate some breakfast they had brought with them since food was so scarce on the plain where they were. Then, the guards escorted Ian and Yaleah to the entrance of the Valley of the Dark Eyes. Maugrab stayed near camp to be sure he had food picked for them and supplied them with whatever they might need. The Awdnite guards spoke to the Cherowb safeguarding the entrance in the most beautiful angelic language. After a brief discussion, the Awdnite guards ushered the missionaries into the Valley between two Cherowb. As they passed by, they could see all the armor the Cherowb wore – sword, shield, helmet and other gear. Normally, the way they glowed hid much of the details of their armament.

The valley where the dark-eyed convicts lived was, itself, dark, as if a cloud was partially obscuring everything, even though the sky was clear. It was, in fact, the large number of Rawh flying overhead that caused the large, deep shadows. Yaleah took Ian's arm as they surveyed their surroundings. They both smiled and pointed when they noticed the Dove in a nearby tree. He had evidently been with them all the time, even though they hadn't been aware of Him. As they looked around, they could easily see dozens of people already. But, as they kept looking, they saw dozens more hiding behind rocks and in trees and around scrub brush.

Yaleah looked at Ian and sadly said, "I don't see him either." They both had been looking for Duke, hoping that he would come. Not this time.

After a short time, Ian took the hand of the arm Yaleah had slid through his, kissed it and gently placed it at her side. She understood, nodded and took a step backward. Ian raised his arms to announce, "The Father loves you and wants to place His light in your eyes once again!" Ian waited a few seconds to see what would happen. Just as he inhaled to speak again, there came a cacophony of derisive laughter, screeches, howls and weeping that lasted for more than half an hour.

Ian could do nothing but stand and wait. He moved back to be with Yaleah after a few minutes and took her hand. When the noise had subsided, there were very few people left, but the missionaries could tell from their faces that the ones who stayed were interested, yet fearful.

That was all they could do that day. It had taken them no more than an hour, from the time they left camp till the time they returned. But, it was enough. At the campsite, they wondered aloud to Maugrab and the guards whether they could have done more.

“What did you do today?” Maugrab asked.

“We announced Creator’s will for them” Ian responded, verbalizing the obvious response to the rhetorical question.

“Is that what you came to do?”

“Well,...yes”

“Then you have obeyed, and succeeded”.

After a moment’s pause, Ian looked satisfied. Yaleah, who hadn’t been as concerned about her success, decided to be satisfied as well and mirrored Ian’s contented look.

After a few minutes of idle small talk, Maugrab suggested that they all take a walk around the north side of the mountain surrounding that Dark Valley. Everyone was agreeable, so they did. The sun felt warm, but something else gave them an odd chill. The plain before them was even wider than the one they were camped in and the desolation was even more profound. It affected them all intensely.

As they viewed it, Yaleah whispered, “What happened?” her voice nearly failing her.

“Sin” Ian whispered back, afraid that if he said it too loudly, the meaning would be too strong for Yaleah to bear.

“The Dark One” one of the guards added quietly.

As a group, they all sat down on the brittle grass under them. Around them, they could see a few dark vapors trying to approach, but the Cherowb were on duty, and there would be no attempts at depression by anything dark today.

“If it’s this sad out here, imagine what it must be like in that Valley” Maugrab finally said. “Maybe your time in the Valley was short today so that we could visit here for a while to feel what they must feel inside. Our obedience can now be a matter of passion as well as duty.”

After another few minutes, the group rose together and headed off quickly for their campsite.

The next morning, the guards escorted Ian and Yaleah to the same spot where they were the day before. As soon as they entered the Valley, there was a swarm of people and dark mists all around them, but none of them got too close. They both strained to see if they might spot Duke among the crowds. If he was there, he was hiding extremely well.

Yaleah would speak this time. “We are brothers and sisters by blood, if not by spirit. I, your sister, have come to show you a way out of this Dark Valley and back into the light of Creator.” She paused to see what their reaction would be this morning. The crowd off to her right and in front of her was a bit sparse, but they seemed to be curious about what she was saying. A tight knot of people to her far left seemed to be mumbling or growling at every word she said. She continued, “There is a time coming when Awdnaw will be replaced by a new planet, better than anything anyone has ever seen or thought of. But, you will not be able to live on it if your eyes are still dark. Creator offers you a new life if you will refuse to follow the Dark One.”

Ian crept quietly up beside Yaleah and touched her gently on the arm. “Look” he whispered “but not too obviously”.

Yaleah slowly turned her head to see where Ian was looking. There, in the crowd to the left, was Duke, cowering behind an earthen mound. He was surrounded by a sizable group of mostly men, all muttering at what Yaleah was saying, sneering and rolling their eyes in contempt like unruly juveniles. Ian and Yaleah smiled at each other. Even though he didn’t seem interested now, Duke was there, hearing the good news, which meant that there was always hope.

Yaleah continued her speech for just a few more minutes. Then, a Mawlawk swished around her head and vanished again into the sky. “We will be back in a while to tell you more. But, please remember what I said. The Father loves you and wants only the best for you.”

With that, they both left that Dark Valley and returned to camp. It was not quite noon, so they all packed up and returned to Nadtsarett. This time, they knew that they had done all that their Father had asked, and were leaving the results in His hands.

Chapter 26

The Beginning of José’s Great Adventure

During the next few months, while Ian and Yaleah were going occasionally to the Valley of the Dark Eyes and Susan and Onayasim were studying how the Earthling’s bodies had changed, José had been learning a lot of things from a lot of people including botany, ecological topiary, subatomic mechanics, fourth dimensional trigonometry and a variety of animal dialects. Most of all, he had been traveling.

About two weeks before he started his travel expedition, he was sitting with a group of people at a Last Day meal. Among them was a man who had recently come from a village about two hundred miles to the northeast, a place that none of the Earthlings had visited much. His name was Khaylek and part of his searching involved traveling to see how people lived and to share what he had learned with the next group he visited. He and José talked for hours about just the sheer thrill of travel, not to mention all the people there are to meet and new things to see and learn.

José had told Khaylek, “Many years ago, the people from my part of Earth, a place called Spain, traveled and explored many parts of our planet, but not always for good reasons. I suppose that exploring by journeying is just in my blood, so to speak.”

“You may be right. It seems that everyone, except those that the Dark One has deceived, has a curiosity about what Creator has made for us. But some would rather spend their time in a small area looking at the tiny things we can’t see with our eyes. That’s very important, I know, but it’s just not for me.”

Khaylek shared hours of stories about his travels and what other people were doing, their preferences for food, or colors for clothing, or housing styles; things that were a reflection of the imaginative nature of Creator.

He also talked about the different ways people said things on different parts of the planet. Sometimes it was an accent, sometimes a different syntax. He liked to pay special attention to the way the young people toyed with the language. There was only one language on the whole planet, the one that Creator taught Awdaim and Shavau in the beginning, but there were variations that developed over time that made it possible to tell where a person either grew up or had been living recently. All of Khaylek’s stories made José long to see more of this marvelous planet. He checked with Ymanyale to be sure it was a good idea for him to explore with Khaylek. When he knew that it was all right, he found his friend and asked him, “Where are you going next?”

Khaylek knew that José wasn’t just curious; he wanted to go along. “Where do you think I should go next?”

“Well, if it was me, I’d head off in that direction” he offered, pointing almost directly south. “I haven’t been that way very far at all. Have you?” His face showed that he wanted to know if that part of Awdnaw was a possibility for them.

“You know” Khaylek said thoughtfully “I haven’t been that way in a long time, either. I’d like to see what’s happened, especially in a town called Myfflaway. It’s a really wonderful place.” He paused a minute, teasing José. “What do you say, should we go check it out?”

“When do we leave?” José asked, excitedly rising on his toes.

“I have a few more people I’d like to talk to here. Let’s plan to leave the day after tomorrow.”

José nodded, shook Khaylek’s hand, said a quick goodbye and went to tell Ian and Susan and anyone else who would listen about his upcoming adventure.

On the appointed day, José was up early and had to keep reminding himself that there was no real need to hurry; but his insides really wanted to. After a few goodbyes, they each picked up their small backpacks that contained not much more than a journal, a few writing sticks, a couple of cooking utensils and a small cloak in case they traveled high up a hill, and headed off.

In order to keep some sense of direction and purpose, they set their sights on the location of a sea next to a range of mountains that were tall by Awdnite standards. They couldn’t see them from Nadtsarett, but it gave them a goal, and something for José to watch for. Myfflaway was next to the sea at the base of the mountains.

It took most of a year for the two investigators to get close to their destination, not that there was a rush to get there. They had been observing and recording all the many things they saw. Lots of people were glad to see Khaylek and had to spend time with him to hear the news and to get to know their new friend, José.

During their travels, they had been through what seemed to be slow-moving swamps. No water is stagnant on Awdnaw. The water cycle there, though different from Earth’s, kept all the water fresh. There were animals that reminded José of alligators and turtles and manatees and cranes. He even saw what looked like a mosquito the size of a hawk. Khaylek laughed when José ducked as it whizzed past, but he had to restrain José from swatting it.

“Sorry” José apologized. “I’ve been here long enough to know better. Some Earth habits die hard.”

Khaylek just smiled and said, “Glad I’m not the object of any of your old Earth habits!” José appreciated his friend’s grace.

No one lived in this swamp, though there were a couple of villages near its edge. People weren’t supposed to eat most of the plants that lived there, so it was just a place to visit; a tourist attraction of sorts to display more of Creator’s handiwork.

They had also been through a long, lush valley filled with what José would describe as tropical plants and animals; trees resembling coconut palms, saw grass that wasn’t sharp. A small river coursed through its center, giving a home to fish of all sizes and color combinations. At night, they could see one that had phosphorescent scales that changed color as the fish changed position. Among the animals, they found a wide variety of mammals, some that looked like seven-foot-tall mice and a species of monkey with zebra-striped fur.

The food in this valley was exquisite. Some of the fruit was sweet and sour, like a good Chinese dish, but all inside the same skin. It had sections like an orange, with one section sweet and the next one sour. Khaylek picked some one day to show José. “Here, try some of this” he said handing José one of the sweet sections of the pink and green striped fruit.

“Oh, that’s good” José gushed. “Really good. A nice sweetness to it.”

“Try another” Khaylek offered, this time handing him a sour section.

“Whoa!” José’s face crinkled up and his lips pursed out like a fish. “Is that the same fruit?”

“Why, yes”. Khaylek looked at José as if he might have been offended that José would doubt him. Then a broad grin crept across his face.

“What’s going on?” José wanted to know. He knew that Khaylek was up to something.

Khaylek laughed so that it rang through the valley. José joined him, though he wasn’t sure what they were laughing at yet.

“Here, look” Khaylek said, holding the fruit so that his friend could see. “This section is sweet, and the one next to it is sour. Some people share it, with one eating the sweet and the other eating the sour. Some like the taste of it all together.”

“But how can you tell the difference?”

“The sweet sections are barely pink and the sour sections are barely green. But sometimes in the sunlight you can’t tell and it turns into a guessing game that everyone wins because the whole thing is good.”

“You’re right. Let me try one of each now to see what they taste like.” Khaylek handed him the fruit and José chose two next to each other and popped them in his mouth. After he bit down and chewed a few seconds, he mumbled around his mouthful, “This is the way I’ll probably eat this, this.... What is this called?”

“Maysik Berakaw. It means that it’s a mixed blessing.”

“Aptly named. We’ll have to take a few with us for later.”

As they traveled, they came to three towns in this particular valley, one of them quite large. Its leaders were discussing what to do about the size of the town. It seems that the town had grown too large; the land would not be able to support many more people with food, housing, work or play space and especially waste disposal. As people had done so many times before, they would follow the example of a honeybee hive that had grown too large. Some of the leaders would lead about half of the townspeople to a new location. José was a little startled when he heard that they were in a bit of a hurry. They only had ten years before things started to become intolerable.

He laughed to himself and shook his head at the remark. And the irony. On Earth, a hurry involves ten months or even just ten minutes. He liked the way they hurried on Awdnaw.

The smallest of the three towns that they visited was the last one in the valley. It was beside a wide river. Off in the distance were some high bluffs that shone in the sun. Food there was plentiful and varied; there was even some fizzy-fuzzy fruit and its cousin, pop-spot fruit. Maybe it was because this town was different from the rest on their trip, or maybe it was most like Nadtsarett, but José thought it was the most perfect town he’d seen.

But, one day as they visited there, he noticed a woman being led away by two Cherowb and four Awdnites. “What’s happening?” he asked Khaylek rhetorically. He knew what was going on; he’d seen this before. Khaylek just looked at him and saw that they both knew the answer. “This place is so wonderful” José said, not quite believing what he saw. “Why would anyone want to jeopardize their citizenship here by listening to the Dark One and his Rawh?”

Khaylek watched the woman and her guards turn a corner as he spoke. “Some people would rather make themselves the center of their lives instead of Creator.” Khaylek’s tone was partly sad, but mostly angry. “Some day” he snarled between his teeth “that Dark One and his hordes will be prevented from deceiving any more people!”

José hadn't seen much anger on Awdnaw, but this was legitimate. He thought for a moment. "I remember some things that Ymanyale had said to people on Earth. He said that the Dark One would eventually be sent to a place where he couldn't affect anyone ever again."

Khaylek looked pleasantly surprised. When José saw his expression, he was quick to add, "But I'm not sure how that would play out here on Awdnaw". He wasn't sure if the same thing would happen on both planets. José's caution didn't dampen his friend's hopes, though.

A few days later, the two explorers continued their journey up a long, gentle slope, about fifteen miles long. They were still quite a way from the top when they decided to investigate a hollow off to one side, a bowl-shaped depression five or six miles across. It seemed a little strange as they entered; somewhat overgrown and messy and, because of the way it was oriented to the sun, a little dark.

They hadn't gone in more than a hundred yards when something flew by Khaylek's head. "What was that?" he asked, not really expecting an answer.

"Maybe a bird" José suggested.

"Don't think so." Before Khaylek could explain, a stick hit José in the back

"Let's get out of here!" José yelled as he headed back the way they came. Khaylek was close behind, and was hit on the back of his leg by a blob of mud.

They found a large tree to hide behind and catch their breath. After a few minutes, José tried to ask, "What... or who...?" but he couldn't finish the question; such violence was extremely rare on Awdnaw.

"Don't ask me. I know what you're trying to ask and I have no idea. It seems like something a Dark Eye would do."

Realizing the truth in what he had said, he motioned to José and they both climbed as high as they could into the tree they had been resting against. What they saw from their vantage point made their blood run cold.

The darkness they saw wasn't the result of lack of sunshine. The sun shone brightly on a cloud of Rawh that were hovering above and swirling around the whole area. It seemed like a miniature version of the Valley of the Dark Eyes. There were Mawlawk and Cherowb that kept trying to reach the people but they kept running away, screaming to be left alone.

"We need help," Khaylek said, almost frantically. José joined him as he raised his hands and cried, "Father, we are here, and the Rawh are here and there are some here who need help and deliverance from the Rawh". José agreed in Awdnese.

Immediately, there were dozens of Cherowb circling the hollow, then dozens more behind them. They disappeared beneath the outside edge of the hills and reappeared at the base of the hills inside the hollow. They were unmistakable as they flew, their swords and shields glistening as they routed the Rawh, who went screaming into the ground. The Cherowb stood guard, keeping all the Rawh at bay, not allowing them to show themselves at all. Sometimes it seemed as if the Cherowb were striking the ground with their swords, but they were really assaulting the Rawh.

José and Khaylek quickly clambered down the tree. They were delighted to find Ymanyale waiting for them at the bottom of the tree. They hadn't seen Him arrive, but they were relieved to have Him there. He smiled and said, "You have done well. Now, quickly, go see who still have bright eyes. If they do not have bright eyes, leave them. Although some may change their hearts in other places, these will have made their final choices".

They ran into the hollow as fast as they could and were met by three younger people, two girls and a boy. José mentally compared them to teenagers, though he knew that they were much

older. He and Khaylek looked into their eyes. Their eyes were still bright even though their faces had been marred by worry.

“Come with us” José said, even if it sounded more like a demand.

Their eyes flew open and they started to back up, then, realizing what they were doing, crumpled to the ground and began to cry.

“What’s the matter?” José asked, kneeling down to raise their heads with his hands.

“Don’t you want to get out of here?”

“Yes” one of the girls whimpered.

“But, we don’t know what’s out there” whispered the boy, as if someone might hear his ignorance.

“Does it matter?” Khaylek wanted to know. “It’s all Creator’s gift to us. There’s nothing to be afraid of as long as you stay focused on Him.”

“How can we be sure?” the second girl sobbed. “No one that we know of has ever been outside this hollow. This is all we know,” she whimpered.

Khaylek and José looked at each other in disbelief. Then, José clenched his teeth and furrowed his eyebrows as he picked up the two nearest teenagers and started carrying them out to where Ymanyale was waiting for them. Khaylek took just a second to realize what his friend was doing, and then followed his lead.

“Look here” José scolded. “We’ve been all over out here and there’s nothing to be afraid of. Look, there’s Ymanyale. He’ll take care of you”.

The young people were left in front of Ymanyale while Khaylek and José went back in to see what else they could do.

Ymanyale said softly, “I know who you are, but I haven’t seen you lately”. He reached out to lift each of their chins so that He could see their faces. He continued talking to them, reassuring them that they had nothing to fear.

The two travelers had gone deep in the hollow and had seen two more people huddled by a large rock. Khaylek had never seen such a boulder on Awdnaw before and was almost sidetracked by it. They could see right away that these two were dark-eyed. The man and woman looked to be worn out, though not truly old and appeared to be staring straight ahead, even though their eyes would dart to the side, trying to get a peek at the strangers in their land.

“What are you doing here?” Khaylek asked, as gently as he could.

The two continued to stare.

“What tempted you away from the Father’s love and care?”

At the mention of Creator, they cringed. “We are afraid” the man finally answered, in Awdnese. The woman scowled at him and muttered something under her breath.

“What are you afraid of?” Khaylek motioned around him as if to say, “I see nothing to be afraid of here”.

“Them” the man replied, pointing to nothing in particular. “We don’t see them now but we know they’re there.”

“How long have they been there?”

“Long time. Since we came from the trees.”

“What do you mean?”

“Some of us used to live in the trees, with hair all over and swinging, like that!” He pointed to branches swaying in the breeze.

Khaylek started to continue to talk to them but José waved his hand to indicate that they should stop talking and move on. “He has started to talk nonsense. Their dark eyes have darkened their minds and voices.”

“You’re right,” his friend agreed. “Let’s go see who else might be in here with bright eyes”.

They scoured the whole area, looking and calling. Sometimes they had to chase some of them down. Eventually they found almost a dozen other people, most of whom had dark eyes. They rushed the ones they found that still had bright eyes out to Ymanyale as quickly as possible. They thought that some of the ones with dark eyes might try to follow, but none did. They actually ran farther into the hollow and hid among the brush and trash.

When Khaylek and José had finally located and identified everyone in the hollow, they made their way back to where Ymanyale was. He assured them that they had succeeded in their mission. He was also very glad to have these saved from the immediate threat of the Dark One.

“What was the source of the darkness in that hollow?” Khaylek asked.

“And why didn’t everyone’s eyes become dark?” José finished the query.

Ymanyale’s eyebrows were furrowed and his lips tense. “That Dark Devil had them bound in chains of fear. The Rawh tormented the people in this area terribly at first, causing a few to become Dark Eyed Ones. But, after a while, the Rawh didn’t need to do anything except tell the people that things had always been that way, that no one had ever left the hollow and that if they did, dreadful things would happen to them. It would have been a terrible thing for the Rawh; the people would have learned that they had been lied to! Those who kept looking for me kept their bright eyes. Even though they were in terrible danger, I made sure that they were protected. If they had been in the middle of a giant fire, if the flames had been hot and destroying other people and things, I would have been there to protect them from being consumed, as long as they looked to me for protection and not something they tried to provide for themselves. It’s the same as you have experienced, only this was much more intense.”

Ymanyale motioned for them to start walking. “Let’s continue your journey to Myfflaway.” He made sure that those who were just rescued were close by. José and Khaylek could see a small group of Cherowb around them to keep the Rawh away. Those devils weren’t at all happy that some of their potential victims had been snatched from their control. They walked at an angle up the hill, so that their path would take them as quickly as possible away from that dark hollow and toward their destination.

When they crested the ridge, they saw, beyond the wide, gentle slope that lay before them, a huge expanse covered in trees and bushes and flowers of all sorts. It wasn’t quite a forest; the trees were too scattered. And it wasn’t a plain; there were too many trees, and it was far too green, especially when José thought of the plains he’d seen on Earth.

Those who had been sequestered in that hollow collapsed to their knees; some started weeping.

“Why are you crying?” Ymanyale asked, with more compassion than either Khaylek or José had ever heard.

One of the older ones replied, “I remember this place. We have been lied to for all this time, and we have been afraid of nothing for too long.”

“Why didn’t we remember this beauty? How could we have forgotten Creator and His gifts to us?” a woman beside him added.

Some of the rest of them said similar things. The younger ones were simply overcome by the beauty of the sight, never having seen it before.

Ymanyale listened for a moment; then He said, almost sternly, “The Liar, that Dark One, has stolen many things from you. I will restore all things to you, each in its good time. This gift that you see is a sign that I will fulfill my promise. Please get up and let us go celebrate your release from the clutches of the Dark One and his Rawh.” He helped a few of them to their feet, then He smiled a smile at them that seemed to light up the entire area around them.

The whole group, José and Khaylek included, dried each other’s tears and encouraged each other.

“Can we get to the edge of that beautiful place down there before we rest for the night?” a younger woman asked.

Ymanyale, Khaylek and José all looked at each other as if to say, “Are you up to it?” Then, without a word, they all nodded and started the group down the slope. It would take some serious walking, but everyone wanted what the girl had suggested, a chance to sleep in that picturesque setting.

As they descended the slope, they weren’t paying too much attention to what was on it, that is, mostly grass, with some berry bushes and a few trees. One of the younger men slipped on a part of a large leaf and landed some twenty feet down the hill, having slid all that way on the leaf. He kept a lookout for what kind of tree had such a large leaf. When he found one, he motioned to a friend beside him and they each picked one to see how far they could slide.

Whooping and hollering like kids, they slid nearly a hundred feet down the hill. The others saw it and imitated them. They all regrouped where the first two had stopped.

Ymanyale asked, “Does doing this endanger anyone?”

Everyone shook a head, “No”.

“Does it endanger any of Creator’s gifts?”

Again, everyone shook their head, “No”.

“Well then”, Ymanyale said with a wide grin, “let’s find the best way to ride these things and get to the bottom of the hill!”

The one who had ridden the farthest, the fastest, showed everyone else how to put the top side of the leaf against the grass because it was smoother and to put the stem out in front of them like the runner on a sled and to use it as a rudder.

“Just be careful not to run over anything”, Ymanyale reminded everyone as He led the way downhill.

Riding the leaves was a lot faster than walking. The last rider got there not long after the first and the whole group was able to prepare comfortable places to sleep and collect a marvelous variety of food from the area they had admired from the top.

After they had eaten and refreshed themselves, they explored a bit. Ymanyale waited at the campsite. He wanted to see how they reacted to what they experienced. He could do that from anywhere and didn’t want to influence their reactions.

The animals here were not large, but extremely colorful. A beast something like a moose the size of a dog, with pink, purple, and light blue swirls in its fur, walked up to them and asked if it could help them find something.

“What did you say?” one of the younger men asked, looking around to see who might answer. The others just looked around, too. All except José and Khaylek, who tried to hide their grins.

The little moose stepped in front of one of the others, the young lady, so she could see his lips move. “Hello there” it started, in its best pronunciation of Awdnese. “Can I help you locate something or tell you something about where you are?”

She yelled in fright. The others yelled. The moose looked startled and perplexed. Then the girl squealed. By this time, Khaylek and José were laughing out loud.

“Don’t you remember that the animals can talk to us?” Khaylek asked as he walked over to the moose creature and stroked its neck. “I’m sorry that we were so rude, but these people have been....” He struggled for the words, not wanting to embarrass them. “They’ve been somewhere else where there aren’t any animals and just needed to remember what it’s like to have fine creatures like you speak to them.”

“Ah, well, that explains it. My name is Ahleyith and I’d be glad to be your guide around this area.”

“We’re just going to stay the night.” Khaylek explained. “We need to help these people find a new home.”

“I know a good place to start. There’s a town just a few milleyon away, next to a sea, that way” Ahleyith pointed with her nose. “Before it gets dark, may I show you the singing trees?”

Everyone seemed agreeable, so Ahleyith led them a few hundred yards away to the western edge of the woods. There, they saw trees that were about a foot wide but no more than an inch thick with thin edges. They grew in large clumps of a dozen or more. When the slightest wind blew, they vibrated like grass between a child’s fingers when he blows on it. But, instead of a screech, the way the grass sounds, the trees made wonderful, mellow sounds in odd harmonies and in a wide range of tones.

The wind blew just enough to hear a short song. Everyone was astonished at the beautiful sound. There were just a few notes that seemed somewhat out of place.

When that breeze subsided, Ahleyith said, “Soon, some people will come from the nearby town and tune the trees”.

José was intrigued. “How do they tune a tree?”

“I’m not sure how it works, but they trim some of the branches at certain places to make the trees vibrate just right.”

Just then, the wind picked up again, stronger than before. They were treated to a superb tree symphony. This time, the wind was strong enough to make the lowest notes thunder and the few out of place notes sound like good jazz. Everyone stood, in awe, just listening, many with their eyes closed. When it finished, they all applauded. As the wind died down, the trees settled down as well, but it seemed as if they might be bowing slightly, grateful for the ovation.

Just before dark, Ahleyith led them back to their campsite. It was a good thing she was there because there was no moon that night and the trees’ canopy made it a little difficult to see. They thanked her for her help and arranged to meet her the next morning. Then, without a word, she went to her family.

Ymanyale was eager to hear their report about meeting Ahleyith and hearing the singing trees. He laughed more than once as He was told the tale. Creator thrilled in delighting His children with talking animals and musical plants. Soon, everyone was worn out enough to sleep.

It was late in the morning before anyone woke up. The three youngsters from the hollow made a short venture to gather breakfast for everyone. Just as they were finishing their meal, Ahleyith strolled into the campsite.

“Are you ready to travel?” she asked.

“Give us just a little while” José said with a smile.

The area was soon returned to its original state. Even Ahleyith couldn’t tell that anyone had been there.

She led them across the green, treed plain, not in the straightest of courses, but along what could be called a scenic route. Along the way, she showed them where her family lived and introduced them to her five small children. They stopped what they were doing just long enough to greet the humans, and then continued talking, seemingly all at once, about whatever it was they were doing. Perhaps this species is more prone to talking than many others!

She also introduced them to a duck-like animal with an elephant-style trunk, birds that could weave their wings together to make themselves into a giant glider and a small, striped creature that reminded José very much of a skunk, but which would spray anyone who wished with the gentlest perfume.

Soon, they emerged from the trees. Ahleyith announced, “There, just over that rise, is the town where you want to be. It has been good to be able to help you. I hope we may meet again.” With that, she nodded her goodbye and returned to her family.

Everyone waved goodbye to her and then turned their attention to the destination she had pointed out. With it in sight, they wandered across the last few hundred yards of the plain to a town called Mauksey that was near the north shore of the same sea on which Myfflaway was located. At night, if people from each town were on their shores, they could see the lights from the other’s fires.

The people there were excited to see Ymanyale and those that came with Him. He made sure that the bunch that had been rescued stayed close.

After a few minutes of greetings and talking, one of the leaders of that town exclaimed, “I know you” as she pointed to one of the liberated ones. “And you.” She ran to greet them. “How you’ve grown! You and your parents left for a short family Fresh View more than fifty years ago. We went looking for you, but we never could find you. Where have you been?”

Her enthusiasm was genuine, but she didn’t know that the story would be hard for them to tell.

“Let’s let them rest and eat a bit”, Ymanyale answered for them. “You will find out all you need to know tomorrow. If they want to tell you any more than that, it will be their decision.” The townspeople found suitable lodging for all the new ones by simply taking them into their own homes.

After everyone who needed shelter was provided for, Ymanyale called the elders of the town to meet with Him. He told them about the ones they had left in the hollow and how they were dark-eyed now and would have to be taken to the Valley of the Dark Eyes. They would have to send four guards back to the hollow to gather those dark-eyed ones and help the Cherowb escort them to that Dark Valley. It had been a long time since anyone from this town had been required to perform this duty.

When Ymanyale had finished telling what needed to be done, He stood and waited for a few minutes. Everyone else had either raised their heads to the sky or closed their eyes and faced the ground; they were waiting for direction, eager to do what Creator wanted them to do despite the difficulty of the job. After a short while, three men and a woman turned their faces toward Ymanyale and stepped in His direction. “Thank you” He said, pleased with the outcome of His request. Then He spoke that powerful language that called six Cherowb. They appeared behind Ymanyale, who motioned to His four volunteers to join them. After a quick goodbye to their families, they joined the Cherowb and all ten of them silently left town.

It may have been only a few minutes, but it seemed like an eternity passed before anyone moved or said anything. Since all of the ones that were sentenced to the Valley of the Dark Eyes had been residents of this town, many of the people there were visibly sad; some were crying

openly and some were somber faced. Ymanyale allowed them time to grieve for now. He knew that some would also grieve more later.

When people started stirring and talking again, someone suggested that they all gather beside the sea for supper and an evening celebration; some who had been lost were found again! Food and drink were collected as well as a few toys, like circular tossing wings, to throw around. Before long, the beach was crowded with revelers.

Ymanyale quietly told Khaylek and José that He was leaving for now, but that the Dove would be there. Khaylek and José heard the Dove adding to the festivities with His song, and looked to see where He was perched. When they looked back, Ymanyale was gone. The two men smiled for a second, then ran to join the party on the beach.

After a while, people had gathered in smaller groups to talk and share. José, Khaylek and a few others had found a place to lounge. The long slope and lush plain was behind them as they reclined and looked out to sea. To the left, that is the east, was more of the same lush plain and the far end of the mountain range that held the hollow they had just traveled from. To the west was even more of the same, except it seemed to be in larger proportions. At first glance, everything seemed to be the same size, but people looked smaller walking under the trees and beside the animals. Even the flowers seemed larger.

Beyond the oversized plain were the bluffs that overlooked Myfflaway. José had closed his eyes and was thinking to himself how great it would be to explore that area tomorrow. Suddenly, he felt a strong gush of air and saw, even with his eyes closed, a huge shadow pass over him. He sat bolt upright and yelled, "What was that?!"

He saw Khaylek and the others duck while they laughed. "That" Khaylek explained, "was a Gadlofe".

"Yeah, but it's so...big" José replied, astonished. "And look, it has purple fur on its back and bare orange wings!"

"Yes, that's the way it looks" one of his other companions confirmed for him.

"But, is it a bird...or...what?" José could only picture an archaeopteryx or pterodactyl or some other dinosaur-type flying creature that he'd read about in school. Most people on his home world, for some strange reason, believed that people never saw such things because they lived so long ago and had all died out before there were any people on Earth.

"It's like a bird because it flies and it's like a reptile because it has the leathery skin and it's like a mammal because it has fur. So, it's a 'what'" Khaylek said through his big grin.

The Dove added His joyful song to show His joy that José's mind was becoming wider.

José was about to ask how long they had been on this planet, but then he realized that he already knew the answer. If Creator made everything just as He did on Earth, then these Gadlofes were here on Awdnaw all the time. But just as José was deep in thought, the Gadlofe swooped over them again, this time making a squawk like a giant, deep voiced chicken, only laughing. It skimmed the surface of the ground for about a hundred yards, then, raising its head and flapping its wings three times, it shot straight up in the air. As it started to slow a little, he threw his head back and did a couple of loops before diving straight into the sea, making only the slightest blip of a noise and the slightest splash.

José tried to say something, but no words would come to him. Then he noticed everyone else buzzing about what they had just seen.

"It's one of his better flights" someone near him commented.

"You mean he's done this before?" José asked.

"Oh, about once every dark moon. But, wait, he's not done!"

Everyone stood silent, holding their breath. Then, some of them pointed to the edge of the water. The Gadlofe darted out of the surf and barely missed the tops of their heads as he pumped his wings for altitude. Everyone applauded his aeronautical adroitness. He kept flying and wheeled around behind a hill. He appeared again and gently landed beside the crowd. They all congratulated him with applause or words.

The Gadlofe trundled over to José and made sounds that sounded like speech, but in a foreign language. José looked baffled and could only shrug at it. “Anyone speak Gadlofe?” he asked, not sure if he should expect an answer.

“I do”. It was the one who had commented that it was one of his better flights. His name was Lewts.

“Oh, could you interpret for me?” José was surprised at his own words. He was asking someone to interpret the sounds of a huge but attractive bird thing.

“He asked you, ‘How did you like it?’”

“Why, it was one of the most fantastic things I’ve ever seen, including the multiple rocket launch from the moon... Earth’s moon...Oh never mind.” José found himself star-struck with the Gadlofe.

Lewts translated to the Gadlofe, which chortled in its own nasal way. Then, he bowed, walked away a few feet and took off easily, dipping its wings as it passed over once again and disappeared behind a far hill.

José and Khaylek wandered down to the edge of the sea. José noticed that there were no seashells. There were countless varieties of different sea creatures, each sporting a beautiful suit of calcium clothing, but no empty shells. “Of course!” he thought to himself. “Empty sea shells come from dead former occupants. They’re all still occupied!” He shook his head and giggled to himself.

“Did I miss something?” Khaylek wondered to José.

“No, I’m just still remembering where I am after ...how many hundred years?” He saw his friend look perplexed. “On Earth, sea creatures die after a while and their shells litter the beaches. People pick them up to take home because they’re so beautiful. Your marine life is still using their shells, so we have to admire them while they wear them.”

Khaylek looked sad when José mentioned that something died on his planet, but his face revived when José finished. He didn’t speak; he just nodded his head, still not sure why José thought it was funny.

There was a splash, not too loud, which neither of them paid much attention to. Then another. Finally, a scaly green beast crashed onto the shore. Not that it was necessarily clumsy, Khaylek could see right away that it wasn’t very old at all.

Khaylek was merely surprised by the splash and sudden appearance of the little animal. José was almost frightened by it. “Why, that’s a...a...” he blurted out. “What is that?” he finally had to ask.

“That, my friend is a Leyvatheem.” Khaylek answered. “But, this one doesn’t live up to its name. It’s only a very young one.”

For just a second, José was afraid of meeting the angry, protective mother of this creature. He could picture a giant version plucking him off the beach in one gulp. Then, he consciously relaxed his shoulders and mumbled, “There I go again.”

“Where?”

“Searching for my Awdnaw mind. His mama wouldn’t hurt us at all!”

Khaylek thought he might be beginning to understand what José meant by all the re-thinking he was doing. He walked toward the little beast and started talking to it. “How are you, little one? I guess being on land isn’t so easy yet.” He motioned for José to join him.

“Hey, little dude” José said as he reached to stroke its long neck and bumpy back. It reminded him of a stegosaurus, but its head looked to him to be a little oversized or something and it had what looked like wings that were probably used for flippers; they were too small to allow it to fly through the air.

The little Leyvatheem was enjoying the attention, and as it turned his head into the sun, the glare caused it to sneeze. Fortunately, neither of the men were in front of it, because a flame as big as a hand came out of its nostrils.

“Whoa! Man!” José yelled. “That was weird!”

“Yes, I know” Khaylek said. “I told you it didn’t live up to its name. The flames of an adult can be as long as three men.”

“You mean it’s supposed to do that?”

Khaylek looked mystified. “Why, yes. I thought that’s what you meant.”

José held out his hands as if to pause the conversation. “OK. Creatures on Awdnaw can sneeze fire. Am I correct?”

“Yes.” Khaylek was wearing a smirk.

“This Leyvatheem is a little Leyvatheem and so can only sneeze what you call little flames.”

“Correct again” Khaylek’s smirk grew to a grin.

“So, somewhere, there are more like this that can blow humongous flames.”

By now, Khaylek was sporting a huge grin. “You pass the Leyvatheem test.”

“On Earth, we heard stories of such animals, and some had claimed to have seen them, but most people thought that they were just made-up animals, like unicorns or something.”

“What’s a unicorn?”

“It’s like a...I bet there’s some of them here too. They’re like those horses but with a single horn from its forehead.”

“See that forest over there?” Khaylek asked, pointing just beyond where they were to travel tomorrow. “I’ll introduce you to some there.”

José didn’t look so surprised this time. “What are they called?” he wanted to know.

“They’re called Reemeem.” The Dove sang a soft, happy song again.

Just as they turned their attention back to the little Leyvatheem, they heard a thunderous crash of water as the little one’s mother came out of the sea. She meandered up on the shore, her long neck hanging over the two friends, dripping water and pieces of seaweed on them. She opened her mouth as if to roar, but, instead, out came a silky, baritone song. Her baby immediately replied with a much higher song. As José and Khaylek watched and listened to them for a minute, Lewts wandered over to join them. He had seen the Leyvatheem come out of the water and had an idea that he might be needed again.

The mother Leyvatheem was saying something else as Lewts approached. Khaylek and José nodded at him to recognize his presence there. When he had come close enough, he sang something, in as rich a tone as he could muster, that mama Leyvatheem seemed to understand.

“She wanted to know if you had been showing her baby the ways of walking on land.” Lewts was quick to interpret for them “I told her that you were just enjoying his company. Her baby is a boy Leyvatheem.”

By now, it was getting dark. Through Lewts, the mama Leyvatheem said that she and her boy would need to get back to their lair for the night. Some of the others had collected some firewood so they could make a snack before going to bed.

“Quick”, Khaylek said to Lewts. “Ask her if she’ll light the fire for us.” He winked and pointed slyly at José.

Lewts held his hands up to ask her to wait. Then he sang a series of mellow notes and odd clicks.

Flaps on the head of the mother Leyvatheem stood out; she inhaled deeply and seemed to hold it for half a minute. Then, she blew a short, confined flame, straight as an arrow onto the wood and lit it to perfection. It was almost as if she had spit a ball of fire instead of blowing a flame. Those around the fire cheered her efforts. She bowed graciously and, nudging her boy ahead of her, headed back into the sea.

José, Khaylek and Lewts joined a couple dozen others around the fire. Everyone talked quietly, except when someone just had to laugh. It was a pleasant end to an exciting day. José, though, wasn’t talking much. He just sat and thought. After a while, a few tears trickled down one cheek.

“What’s the matter?” Khaylek asked quietly.

José wiped away his tear, took a deep breath to speak, but, instead, just sighed pitifully. He took another deep breath and was successful in telling his friend about his condition. “Creator has supplied absolutely everything we could ever need or want; food, clothing if we want, shelter for privacy and work, work that is enjoyable and fits who we are, challenges that let us use the knowledge and wisdom He has given us, love and fellowship of other people, entertainment and fun foods and security and peace and the power to repel the Dark One.”

He smiled a bit when he had finished that list. But, just as quickly, his smile faded. “But, if I was on Earth, I would be chasing away bugs, worrying about being robbed or injured, wondering if it would be too hot or too cold as I slept out here or if it would rain or storm. I probably would be hassled about some aspect of my work tomorrow. I am just so sad that people on Earth will never know all of the Father’s love and care like this. Many of them will join the Dark One in his punishment. And those who follow Him will have to wait until they die and join Him in heaven. And even if I could get back to Earth and tell them what I’ve seen and experienced here, they would think I was crazy; they wouldn’t believe me. I’m happy and sad at the same time, but I guess mostly sad right now. Sorry”

Just then, the Dove came and rested in front of the two men, facing them. A Mawlawk came into view, his face and hands barely visible; the rest of him appearing as a robe of shimmering light. He stood at Khaylek’s side and gave him a message. José was distracted by his sorrow so he didn’t see or hear the Mawlawk as he spoke to Khaylek. After a few seconds, Khaylek nodded, his face becoming taut and determined. Then he turned to his friend.

“Don’t be sorry” Khaylek offered. “Creator has brought you here for a reason. You have a heart that wants what He wants; that’s why you weep for the people on your home world. You must now trust that Creator is doing everything for them that can be done. But, let’s talk to Him about it.”

José nodded. Then they raised their hands and faces to the sky and José began, “Father, Ymanyale, please hear my heart. I love you so much, just because You are You, and I appreciate how deliriously, wonderfully You have provided for me. Please keep working in the lives and hearts of those on Earth to show them how much You love them and want to provide everything,

including the chance to know You and follow You. Help me to trust You now with my request. Thank You.” Then, they both whispered the Awdnese word for “Amen”.

José took one more deep, refreshing breath, and smiled. Just as he did, the Dove sang a soft, encouraging song and flew off, heading nearly straight up. The two men leaned back in their own spaces and watched Him ascend. When He was nearly out of sight, it looked like He exploded into a small cloud of stars.

Everyone else had settled in for the night. Neither of the two friends said anything else that night. José watched where the Dove had left His trail of stars. They hadn’t stayed in place, but had disappeared. Maybe they were a sign of some sort. He lay there for more than an hour, just looking at the stars. Tonight, they seemed to be closer and brighter. It seemed that he could make out constellations that he had never seen before. They hadn’t crossed the equator, so that wouldn’t account for it. Even though he was exhausted, he couldn’t close his eyes for the longest time. If Creator was speaking to him through the stars, he didn’t want to miss it.

Chapter 27

José Finishes His Great Adventure

As soon as it was light the next morning, Khaylek and José said goodbye to everyone and, with a blessing from the leader of the village, started on their way. They would get breakfast as they traveled because they needed to get going if they were to reach Myfflaway before dark.

As they traveled, they got to see a group of dragonfly-like insects that were nearly four feet long and had a wingspan of about five feet. When they saw their human visitors, they did a quick air show for them and then, one by one, passed low over their guests' heads and flew away.

"The animals all seem to like to show off for people" José commented.

"You noticed that, did you?" Khaylek replied. "There are actually some who aren't so quick to impress us. But, they do like to be talked to anyhow."

José hadn't noticed, but Khaylek had led him to the place where the unicorn-like beasts called Reemeem were.

"In fact, there are a few, now," he said, pointing to five majestic, shy animals, each with a different, uniquely colored coat. The hues were very deep blues, maroons, indigos and greens. Their manes had large, easy curls. And the horns were like ivory and fit their heads well.

They looked up from their grazing and whistled. "Hello" Khaylek greeted them. "I have a new friend for you to meet."

A few took just one more bite before joining the others as they wandered over to meet José. "Who this?" asked the one that had a deep indigo coat and white mane. Evidently, they couldn't speak human so well or they didn't want anything lost to their thick accent.

Khaylek introduced José. "This, my friends, is a man who has come to us from very far away. He is not from Awdnaw, but from a world so far away you cannot see it from here, even with the machines we use." Khaylek had to speak to them simply; their grasp of some of the things that humans did was somewhat limited.

"Which way?" the indigo one asked.

Khaylek and José looked at each other, trying to figure out which way to point.

"Any idea?" Khaylek asked.

"I've lost my bearings over the years." He made a good guess and pointed. It really didn't matter; the unicorns just wanted somewhere to look to see what they could see.

"You right" admitted another animal, this one with a deep forest green coat. "None of us can see it."

"He would like to get to know you a little better" Khaylek said, in an effort to redirect their attention back closer to the ground. He looked at José, suggesting that he ask them something.

"Oh, OK". José wasn't sure what to ask. "What's it like to have horns like that?" he ventured.

His question was met with blank stares, as if to say, “We’ve always had horns. Never thought of not having them.”

“What...that is...yeah...what I meant was. What can you do with your horns?”

“We polish them on the trees,” one younger one offered.

“I can pick fruit to offer to another” a taller one said, pleased with his ability.

“Sometimes we tap them together to make a rhythm,” said another. He turned to his friend and demonstrated. The sound wasn’t like just two sticks or antlers clacking together, but rather had a tone like fine wooden wind chimes.

“That was good!” José encouraged. Then, as an aside to Khaylek, “They weren’t too shy about showing off a little.”

Khaylek smiled and nodded; José was right. “Let’s ask one more question. Then we have to be going.”

José thought for a minute. Then, his face lit up and he asked, “Well, what do you like the most?”

There was a few seconds of silence, then a cacophony of answers. The two humans couldn’t make out most of it, except for the frequency of references to Creator.

“Wait, wait, wait” José called out, his hands up as if to repel the onslaught of voices. As he did, a Mawlawk, as wispy as he could appear, spun around José’s head and whispered something so soft and brief that José wasn’t quite sure what had happened. Then he pointed to the unicorn that was the farthest from him. “I haven’t heard what you have to say, yet. Tell me your answer.”

The creature stood still, as if composing its answer. José noticed that as it stood, a nearly invisible swirl of light circled its head and disappeared in the canopy of the trees. “I just like the way Creator made us so many pretty colors. I also like the way He made so many different stars, and how, if I look really close, I can make out pictures; but I don’t know what they mean.”

A chill went up and down José’s back and the hair on the back of his neck stood up. How strange that this lovely beast would mention the stars to him. Why did he choose that one to ask? Was that what he heard from that mist that he thought he saw? Just then, he saw the Dove, cooing in a nearby tree. “Of course” was all that José could think.

“More about the stars” Khaylek pointed out to José.

“Of course” he repeated, more to himself than to Khaylek.

“We must leave now or we’ll never get to Myfflaway before it gets dark.” It was one of the rare times that José had seen an Awdnite in a hurry.

“Will you take a boat?” asked the one who talked about the stars.

“A boat?” Khaylek wanted to know. “Someone must have built some since the last time I was here.”

“Yes, they are at the new little town. I will show you.” She started walking. The two men said a quick, fond goodbye to their new friends and fell in behind their guide.

“Do you have a name?” José asked the unicorn.

“Oh, yes. I am called Abyguul.”

“We’re glad to meet you, Abyguul, and we’re glad you volunteered to help us.”

“It’s what Creator wanted”.

José wasn’t sure if she had a knowledge of something like right and wrong, or should and shouldn’t. Or, maybe a Mawlawk had spoken to her. Either way, he was glad she was obedient.

They only had to walk about twenty minutes before they reached the sea’s edge and the little town called Kefawneeyah. It consisted of about a dozen houses and a rudimentary shipyard.

They weren't in business to build ocean liners, just boats that people could use for special purposes, and then only when necessary.

To their right was a river that fed the sea. Across the sea, they could see the bluffs next to Myfflaway. By foot, they would have had to walk upriver a few miles, cross at a ford, walk back downriver and around the edge of the sea to their destination.

"José, it might only take us until the sun is high to cross the water!" Khaylek was thrilled.

"We'll have to paddle hard", José reminded him.

"Not if the tane will pull you", Abyguul offered. "Let us find someone to tell us about the tane". Abyguul was very nonchalant as she wandered toward a dock where a man was working. "Hello, sir" she said quite politely.

The man looked up from his task, gazing beyond Abyguul to see who was speaking.

"You do this every time I come, Kephus. It was funny the first ten times. I will laugh again if it will make you feel good" Abyguul let out a pitiful artificial laugh. Kephus started to laugh; then Abyguul couldn't help but laugh for real.

Kephus was the steward of the boats. He had met Abyguul many years before when he needed to find certain wood for the boat designers to use to build the boats. The unicorns knew all the secret places in the forest and showed him where the best wood was. Abyguul was among the first to lead a human to the new boat docks and Kephus was the one she introduced them to. But, she used the wrong word the first time and asked Kephus to take the people under the water instead of across the water. Kephus was always "looking for someone who knew how to talk" from then on.

When Abyguul had finished her laugh, she asked, very carefully, "Kephus, will you please arrange for a boat to take my new friends *across* the water? They would like the tane to be able to help, too."

"I would be glad to help."

Abyguul called José and Khaylek. "This is my friend Kephus. He will arrange for a boat and for the tane to pull it for you."

After the men talked a little about where they were from and where they were going, Kephus motioned for them to come to the end of the dock. He pointed to what looked like a giant straight trumpet with its bell in the water.

"I've seen some cool stuff on this planet, but, this...this... What *is* this?" José asked as he walked around it, looking closely. He saw what looked like a trumpet mouthpiece at the end of a very long cone about eight feet long. "May I?" He gestured to Kephus that he wanted to be able to touch it.

"Yes, but please don't try to play it. It's one of the ways we communicate with the tane. When we need to contact them, we blow a certain set of tones, but not too loudly, so we don't hurt the ears of other sea creatures. It takes a certain knowledge to be able to play it just right".

"I suppose it would" José said, realizing all of the acoustics and physics involved in such a means of communication. He inspected it and ran his hand over the finish of the instrument. He was quite impressed.

"Let's see. There's just two of you, right?" Kephus was assessing how many tane they would need. "And, where are you headed?"

"Myfflaway" Khaylek said. "How long will it take us?"

"Well, the tane are wonderful creatures. They have three fins on each side, besides the dorsal and belly fins. The fins on the sides work alternately so that they are always in motion, and it's smooth, not a start and stop motion like many water creatures." Kephus saw that

Khaylek was listening, but not as patiently as he could, so he got to the point. "Because the fins are always moving, they travel three times as fast as most animals like them, so you should be there before the sun has traveled far from its highest."

"That will be great!" Khaylek exclaimed.

"Yeah!" José agreed with a smile.

"Let me see which tane we can find for you today." Kephus took a deep breath and blew on the trumpet; one short tone, followed by three more, longer and spaced evenly apart. Then, after another few seconds, he blew two more very short notes.

Kephus stood up, craning his neck to see which one might come. The other two joined him, not really sure of what they were looking for. They waited for about fifteen minutes before Kephus whispered, "There!" and pointed to their left. From deep in the sea to their left came a dark, swiftly moving swell. It veered hard to the right and made a huge circle about thirty feet from the end of the dock.

"What a fish!" José exclaimed.

"I liked its speed," Khaylek added.

Kephus blew a couple of short notes into the trumpet again. The tane treaded water where it was. Then, Kephus helped them get settled in the boat, showed them the particulars of using the oars and told them how to get positioned so the tane could pull them. They paddled out to about twenty-five feet behind the tane. Then, José took the harness and, jumping overboard, drug it out in front of the tane.

As he swam by it, he could see that it wasn't a huge creature, not like a blue whale or anything like that. He figured it was about fifteen feet long, about three times his height. And he could see that the fins looked like they were a little large for its size, and very muscular.

When he got the harness in place, he waved to Khaylek, who whistled and slapped the water the way Kephus had shown him. The tane eased its way into the harness. As it did, José hurried back to the boat. He wasn't sure if the tane would wait for him. It didn't. José scrambled for the side of the boat as Khaylek grabbed for him and pulled him in, just in time.

"Looks like the process needs a little tweaking" José gasped as he caught his breath. After he explained 'tweaking', Khaylek agreed.

The tane accelerated like an old steam engine; a little shuddery at first, then smoothing out as it gained speed. At its fastest, Jose estimated it was doing about thirty knots, a lot faster than they could have paddled.

The two men didn't say much as they crossed the open water. It seemed that there were few places on the water that you couldn't see land, or evidence of it. There were birds that reminded José of gulls and terns and pelicans; and there were others that were fascinating, some even comical looking.

They could see a number of fish and other sea creatures come near the surface of the water to see who was traveling across their space. They weren't threatened, naturally, just curious.

Just as they seemed to be relaxing too much, the tane reduced speed. Kephus had said that the last part of the trip would be a little tricky. The tane would have to slow down enough without stopping so quickly that the boat would run over the powerful sea creature. When the boat had slowed to maneuvering speed, Khaylek jumped into the water and relieved the tane of its harness. Then he petted the creature profusely, thanking him for such a swift crossing. José slapped the water and waved at him as well.

Soon, they had the harness stowed in the bow and had paddled their way to the dock at Myfflaway. A small group of people greeted them, including a woman named Ruwauth. She was just over two hundred years old, but, of course, looked no older than José. He found her to be totally irresistible. She was only as tall as he was, and he wasn't but about five feet, nine inches.

Khaylek looked relieved to be in Myfflaway. It was some time just before evening meal, and long before sunset. The Dove was there to greet them, as well, and sang something, to which Khaylek nodded in agreement with a smile.

The greeting party invited their guests to join them in their modest feast on the shore. Their revelry lasted until the sun had set. José and Ruwauth would talk for a while, then José or Ruwauth would feel obliged to mingle with others, but it never took them long to be talking with each other again. As the stars came into view, they settled on the beach, not really next to each other. They didn't want to presume any familiarity, but they wanted to be sure that no one would interrupt them as they got to know each other.

"The moon is becoming dark," Ruwauth said, meaning that it was on its wane.

"Yes" José agreed. "I like it not so bright sometimes so I can see the stars better."

After a short silence, Ruwauth agreed "Me, too" She paused for another minute. "Have you seen the signs in the sky lately? They're a little different than usual."

Their conversation was interspersed with what some might call embarrassing pauses, almost as if they weren't quite sure what to say next. Quite the opposite was true. They were taking the time to hear each other and to enjoy the other's voice. The silence in between their sentences was as much a part of their conversation as the words; each one was demonstrating to the other that they were comfortable just being together.

José responded, "I've seen some of the signs, but even when I was on Earth, I couldn't tell much about what Creator was trying to say".

"I could teach you".

"I'd like that. What's my first lesson?"

"This isn't a lesson so much, just a bit of what I like. Have you ever seen a sparkly streak?"

"I'm not sure. What do they look like?"

In the comfortable pause, the Dove sang a simple song.

Then, Ruwauth whispered loudly, "It looks just like that!" as she pointed to a shooting star that whizzed across the sky.

It really did sparkle a lot more than one would on Earth. José figured that it had to do with the upper water that it had to go through first and then the extra density of the atmosphere causing extra friction. Then he paused, putting the science out of his mind, and just enjoyed its beauty.

"I could get used to watching those things," Jose said softly. "Do they happen very often?"

"It depends on what time of the year it is."

By now, the others either had gone to sleep or were deep in conversation, out of the open air. Ruwauth and José had each lain down on their backs with their heads about a foot apart. Their feet were much farther apart so that they made a sort of V shape. They couldn't see each other unless they turned their heads hard to one side and looked askance over their own foreheads. But they weren't looking.

Ruwauth continued, "Do you see that group of stars over there, the one with the three in a line and a V at the bottom?"

José wasn't sure, but he said, "Yes" anyway.

"That's the shield and belongs on the warrior"

"Cool. And look, is that another sparkly streak?"

"I don't think so. It's not.....sparkly enough"

"The stars seem to be shifting, or multiplying or something."

"I see it. There's another...whatever ...over there."

It seemed as if there were small areas of the sky in which the stars would shift and swirl, get larger or disappear. Then the sky would return to normal.

Ruwauth and José weren't scared, but they were unsure of what was happening. They sat up and swung their legs around so that they were sitting next to each other.

"This is exciting!" Ruwauth exclaimed in a loud whisper. But, by now, it didn't matter if she whispered. Quite a few of the people who were still awake had seen some of it, too, and were whispering loudly their appreciation of the sight.

José nodded. When they looked again, it looked like the stars were really bunching up and getting extremely close, so much so that the two stargazers pulled their heads down to avoid them. Then, their mouths flew open as they saw bright, deep pink lights appear, falling fast out of the sky, mixed in with the bunching, swirling stars. These were about as close to real falling stars as they wanted to be.

They flung themselves on their backs again just as the pink lights were a few feet from their faces. Next, there was a violent downdraft that came in about a dozen bursts.

Suddenly, José swatted at something. "What IS that?" As he waved his arm, he connected with something that let out a small squeal.

After a moment, they sat up and could see what had happened. Giant, crystal clear insects, more like butterflies, had plummeted off the bluffs high above them. Their wings were like crinkled glass so that the light from the stars refracted through them and reflected off them. Their bodies were shaped like cylinders, tapered at each end, and as shiny as the best mirror. The only part they could see was the eye shine from their deep pink eyes. José had only clipped the tip of the wings of the last one to fly over, but hadn't hurt it, only startled it.

José looked relieved that he hadn't injured the flying wonder. Ruwauth had a much more amazed look on her face.

"I have heard about these!" she started. "They go to a place every hundred years or so where they live for a while. Then, they have their young. The parents leave the young ones as caterpillars that travel and eat. Then, for the last few years of their time before they get their wings, they hide in a cocoon. When they emerge, they fly away to start the process again."

"Whoa! You mean I was just spooked by a bunch of really big butterflies? I've got to remember to tell my friends back in Nadtsarett about this."

Suddenly, Ruwauth had a catch in her gut, an odd kind of emotion on Awdnaw. José thought he saw a dark shadow at her back. As softly as he could, José demanded, "Creator wants none of you here". With that, the shadow disappeared into the dirt.

"Will you be going back to Nadtsarett? When?" she asked. Something about her tone caught José's attention, but he wasn't sure what it was.

"I don't have to go right away" he said gently, trying to calm any uneasiness she might have. "There are lots of things I want to do here. And, you have to teach me all you know about the stars."

His new friend heaved a sigh of relief. Then she said, "I wonder how far those butterflies will get tonight."

In the morning, Khaylek took José aside and told him something very interesting. “You know that I had been a little anxious to get here before sunset yesterday.” José nodded. “Well, Creator wanted to be sure that you were the one with whom Ruwauth shared the experience of the stars and the big butterflies. The Rawh had been tormenting her, trying to distract her from her study of the stars. No one else in this town has the passion for them like she has. Now, you will develop that same enthusiasm. And, I think you will find she will make a good wife.” José looked surprised. “But, all in Creator’s time. For now, be content that you are where Creator wants you to be.”

José spent more than a decade in Myfflaway. In that time, he and Ruwauth spent quite a bit of time together exploring the stars; their positions, compositions, movements, effects on other stars and solar systems and a lot of other complementary things. All of their knowledge would be useful later, but for the time being, it served to expand what they knew, and provided a romantic activity they could share.

José proposed marriage to Ruwauth on a Fresh View that her village took to the southern hemisphere. The stars they could see, of course, were totally different from those they could normally see, but they noticed something interesting that was happening in both hemispheres and they would have to explore its meaning for the next few hundred years before they would understand it all.

Their wedding was conducted by Ymanyale and was as wonderful as Yaleah and Ian’s. Ymanyale said that he was truly pleased that certain travelers from Earth were able to become part of the family on Awdnaw. After a honeymoon on top of a high hill, for a better view of the stars, they settled in Ruwauth’s village because they had a large area dedicated to study of the stars.

They were particularly interested in the stories in the stars. When Creator spoke everything into being, He put history in the stars so that people could see what had happened and have glimpses of things to come. After Creator had brought Shavau to Awdaim and they had lived and explored for a short while, Ymanyale asked them one evening what they saw in the stars.

“We see your creativity,” Awdaim had answered immediately.

“Thank you.” Ymanyale replied. “You will see some of what I did out there, but never all of it.”

Shavau had been more pensive. “I see your love for us. You could have simply put ordinary lights, but these are so wonderful. You did more than just what was necessary.”

“Thank you” Ymanyale had said again, smiling. “You will now see how wonderful”.

He had gone on to show them a constellation that portrayed how He planned for them to begin to fill Awdnaw with people. After another space of time, He showed Shavau, Awdaim and their children another piece of the story in the stars. At first, each time He came to show them more, he would say, “I have something new to show you in the stars.” After a while, He would ask, “Do you see anything in the stars?” and the people would tell what they saw. He would often have to correct them or fill in gaps in what they saw, although after a thousand years or so, the people became quite adept at seeing Creator’s story in His stellar display. Now, when there is something new for Him to show the people, He asks, “What do you see in the stars?”

The challenge now was that Creator did not make it very easy to find the revelations of the stars’ meanings. So, José and Ruwauth spent a lot of time looking at the stars and just as much time talking about the pattern that might be there. The main thing they had to remember was that the stars told Creator’s story; it had nothing to do with an individual’s future or

character. They would have a few more discoveries in the heavens and the last ones would be the most perplexing and profound.

Chapter 28

Big Tiny Discoveries

While José was off discovering different places and people and animals and stars and all, Susan and Onayasim were making discoveries that weren't anywhere near as large, but were just as important. They had been working on discovering the fundamental material of which everything is made. Long ago, the people of Awdnaw had discovered atoms and their parts. They also knew about leptons and quarks and such, but they discovered that there were even smaller particles orbiting these.

About a thousand years before, some young people from Nadtsarett were playing on the far side of a hill near town. That was nothing unusual. But, they found a very unique cave. When they first saw the entrance, it didn't look like it led anywhere, until one of the more ambitious boys decided to take a closer look.

What they found led them to believe that perhaps Creator had built it for some very specific purpose, rather than as a usual type of cave. The entrance veered off hard to the left and made a long arc back to the right, as if tracing a circle. Directly opposite the entrance, at the other side of the circle, and hard to the right, was an enormous circular room about fifty feet across. Its ceiling was almost twenty feet high and spherical so that the room looked like half of a ball. The floor, even of the passageway, was level and easy to walk on; not polished, but flat.

Still farther back, directly across from the big room, was a long, straight hallway about ten feet across and ten feet high and fifty feet long. It went nowhere and, for centuries, no one knew what it might be for. It was used for a little while as storage as they set up some new equipment. After that, it was used as a sort of bowling alley, handball court and a number of other things.

The whole cave complex had natural ventilation so it was never stuffy inside. But, artificial light had to be used everywhere.

Then, a few hundred years ago, the quest for the fundamental material became more complicated than could be attempted outside. They needed somewhere that could be made pitch black when they needed to. This cave worked great for that. Searchers set up tracers and microscopes of all sorts, trying to find "those tiny things" as they liked to call them.

Onayasim had been part of the team for many years before the *Pilgrim* landed on Awdnaw. Susan had joined it just a couple hundred years or so ago, just when the team had really started to use the equipment in the cave. Now, they had been using the large room to try to see this elemental substance through a series of microscopes, but it wasn't working the way they wanted it to.

A young searcher named Rekaboum had been developing a new super-microscope that would amplify an enlargement many more times than had been done before. He hoped to enable his colleagues to actually see what these super-minute particles looked like, not just trace their trails. And not only that, his design would display it on the ceiling for everyone to see. Previously, only one or two at a time could see what was under the microscope.

He had made use of the long, unused hallway, lining the series of devices along one wall. The strange thing was that he was very reluctant to share any of his work or ideas with anyone.

Ever since people could remember, anyone who found or invented or improved anything was given second credit for it, after Creator, of course. After that, things were spoken of using the person's name. When Onayasim invented a new kind of clock, it was called 'Onayasim's clock'.

Onayasim met with Rekaboum one day purportedly to check out some new material to study. They really could have used something easier to examine, but Onayasim wanted to talk to his friend about his quasi-secrecy.

"I'm glad you're working with us to try and find those tiny things", Onayasim started. "It can be a real challenge sometimes".

"Yeah, sometimes even I can get a bit frustrated," Rekaboum said as a small bit of a Rawh swirled near his feet like so much dust.

Onayasim liked to take a diplomatic approach and realized that being sensitive would probably be the best method for this situation. So, he asked, tactfully, "Do you ever see those small clouds that swirl around your feet or buzz next to your head?"

"Yes" he replied, as if he was hoping that no one would see.

"Do you know what they're doing?"

"They're trying to bother me, I think"

"No, not really". Onayasim looked straight into Rekaboum's eyes. His diplomatic approach was slipping away fast.

"No?" Rekaboum looked somewhat relieved.

"No. They're trying to kill you!" Onayasim's voice rose just a little and became somewhat staccato as he continued. "They're trying to tear you away from Creator and all that He wants to give you and do for you! They hate you! They want you completely dead!"

Rekaboum was shocked. "Well, ... uh... are you sure?" He could see from Onayasim's face that he already had his answer. "But, a lot of the time I think they're right."

"About what?"

Rekaboum didn't want to say, and Onayasim was patient, even though he could see dark shadows nervously playing at their feet.

"Creator is in charge here!" Onayasim declared to the Rawh, which scurried back into the dirt. Rekaboum looked ill at ease when Onayasim ordered them away. He had become comfortable with their presence, even though he knew they didn't want anything really good for him.

Rekaboum finally answered, "Everyone else seems to know how to do so many different things. All I studied was what I'm doing now. I'm not as good as the others."

Onayasim stopped him with a harsh look. "Anything, anything at all that they say, is either an outright lie or is simply not good for you! Will you remember that? Tell me what I said!" He was angry, with the Dark One for sending the Rawh to try to destroy his friend, and with Rekaboum for listening to them. "Say it."

"They are.."

Onayasim interrupted him, "Who are?"

"The Rawh, and the Dark One, are trying to kill me. They never say anything that's good for me." He stopped and looked at Onayasim to see if he had said enough. He had.

Onayasim took a deep breath, relaxed his shoulders and looked at Rekaboum's face. Then, he mustered a friendlier expression and suggested, "What do you say we get back to work? Doesn't look like there's anything out here that's any better to test."

Rekaboum smiled and followed his mentor back into the cave.

The work went on for about another week. Rekaboum tried to ignore the Rawh when they came around. He even tried telling them to go away, but with limited success. His friends kept watch out for him, chasing the Rawh whenever they were spotted, but they often came to Rekaboum when he was alone.

The searchers called Rekaboum's microscope the 'super-scope'. Rekaboum had a fancier name, but he reluctantly consented to use super-scope. The day before its first test, Susan, Onayasim, Yaleah and Ian stopped by Rekaboum's parent's home to see him. The visit was to encourage him, not only about the super-scope trial but also about keeping the Rawh at bay. What they found was Rekaboum cooking the evening meal. This wasn't just any ordinary meal. It included dishes that he had been aging for months, almost like fermentation, but not quite; special dishes that took special skill.

He invited them to stay to eat. His parents, of course, were more than happy to share. He had made lots of food, hoping that they would drop by.

"Why didn't you just ask us?" Susan wanted to know.

"I...I wasn't sure... after some of the stuff that happened... you know."

"We're your friends" Ian reassured him. The others agreed.

"Thank you," he said, with his head down a bit. "Give me just a minute and I'll serve it up."

While he was working, Onayasim motioned for the others to come to one side. "I have an idea" he began, and then proceeded to give them the short version of it.

Just as he finished, Rekaboum called everyone to the meal. He gave thanks to Creator and they started eating. Everything was delicious and they all told him so.

As they ate, Yaleah noticed a bear-like animal wandering toward them. Since she had her mouth full, she nodded in the bear's direction so everyone else would know it was there.

"It's a cub," Rekaboum told the others. "It looks like you are hungry," he said to it in bear-speak, as a parent would speak to a sad child, "but this food isn't good for you. Where are your parents?"

It looked at Rekaboum, surprised that it could understand what Rekaboum was saying. "Let me see what I can do to help you find them". He spotted a large bird in a nearby tree. He whistled at it and made some other clucking sounds. It flew off and climbed higher as it circled wider.

"What did you say to the bird?" Ian asked.

"I just asked it to see if it could find the bear's parents. Why?"

"We just didn't know you could speak bear, or bird. That's all", Onayasim said, pleased with his discovery. It would play well into his plan.

In just a few minutes, the bird was back and gave Rekaboum an answer in whistles and clucks. Then, Rekaboum turned to the bear and said, in bear-speak, "Your parents are up the hill in the grove of Maysik Berakaw fruit trees. They're waiting for you."

When the bear cub heard that his parents were waiting for him near his favorite food, he scurried off.

"Well done," Rekaboum's father said. Everyone agreed. Onayasim winked at Susan.

The next morning was the time for the big super-scope test. On his way to the cave, Rekaboum was bothered by the Rawh. For a while, he tried to repel them, but they kept coming, swirling around his head and whispering to him. When he reached the cave, the Rawh left him alone because they knew that the others would drive them away for sure.

They started the power-up and each began to make last-minute adjustments. Rekaboum had to go to the far end of the tunnel to fine-tune the initial reader. While he was away from the others, six Rawh took advantage of their opportunity and swarmed all around him.

Onayasim needed to ask Rekaboum a question about an adjustment he was making. When he approached Rekaboum, he noticed that he was adjusting the microscope to be just slightly out of focus. He also saw the Rawh. Immediately, using the authority of Creator, he ordered the Rawh to stay still. They cowered in a corner, teeth and claws often evident, appearing and disappearing. Sometimes they would squeal or giggle as if this was some kind of game. Usually, they were driven away, but now they were intent on staying.

The rest of the team had heard the commotion and approached, but, seeing what was going on, kept their distance, waiting, and communicating with Creator.

Then he turned to Rekaboum. "Is that the way it's supposed to be?" Onayasim demanded. He was too much aware of what Rekaboum was up to.

"Oh, well...that is, if I started ..."

"Don't give me that! You've been listening to the Rawh again." Onayasim took a deep breath to calm down. The Dove was nearby on a piece of equipment, singing a somber song. Onayasim was listening intently. He came nose to nose with his troubled friend. "Listen to what I am saying. You are about three minutes away from being declared to have dark eyes. Is that what you want? Do you really want to spend the rest of your life listening to the trash they want you to believe?"

"No", Rekaboum said through tears.

Onayasim looked up and said, "Father, we are here, and the Rawh are near and my friend needs Your power and wisdom".

Before he had even finished, the Dove ruffled His feathers; three Mawlawk appeared in full attire, books and pens at the ready; ten Cherowb materialized in full battle armor, gleaming from head to toe. Three of the Cherowb dove below the floor and the rest surrounded the Rawh on all sides and above. They were trapped in all three dimensions and could not escape. Now their squeals turned to shrieks.

Just then, Ymanyale walked in. "Silence" he ordered the Rawh. The Son then turned around and confronted Rekaboum. "It is your choice if you wish to follow the Dark One. I have provided a way for you to choose to follow me, and your friend has some things to show you as well. After that, you shall make your decision. By the end of today, you will be mine or you will belong to the Dark One."

Ymanyale then addressed Onayasim, "Please talk to your friend".

Now the Rawh were frantic. They couldn't help but screech and scream. Using their claws and fangs, they lashed out at the Cherowb, who poked at them with the points of their swords or pistol-whipped them with a hilt. "Ymanyale has ordered silence" the lead Cherowb commanded. The Rawh quieted down, though it took a short minute.

"Rekaboum", Onayasim started, carefully choosing his words. "Yesterday, we came to your house just to see you for a little while. But, instead, you served us a most excellent meal. While we ate, you took time to show compassion to a lost beast, by speaking not one, but two animal languages. Now, let me ask you, did you attach the super-scope to the walls in here?"

Rekaboum nodded, "Yes".

"What kind of drill did you use?"

Rekaboum looked at Onayasim, fearful, as if he was being interrogated at a criminal trial.

"Yes, please answer me." Onayasim encouraged him, even if it was sternly.

“I...I used a semi-reciprocating drill, powered by a triple-action foot pedal.”

“Very interesting. And, what kind of bit did you use?”

“A double helix with interposal edges and a self-cleaning lead plane.”

Onayasim thought for a minute, and then waited another minute to make sure that he had Rekaboum’s attention. “I have counted at least six skills that have absolutely nothing to do with the science in which you trained.” The Rawh were murmuring now. They had been exposed. Onayasim stared at Rekaboum. “Who tells you the truth, and who lies to you?”

Rekaboum waited a minute. He knew the answer, but he needed to muster the nerve to talk to the one he needed to address. He took a deep breath, gulped loudly and, facing Ymanyale, said, “You have the words of life. There is no one else that I will trust. I have nowhere else to go.”

Ymanyale beamed brightly and the whole room shone with His brilliance. He waved His hand in the direction of the Cherowb and their charges, His face stern with determination. “You Rawh will never speak to this man again. You will not disclose his weakness to anyone.” The Cherowb below the Rawh emerged from their guarding place and joined the ones on top in driving the Rawh deep below them with their swords.

The Mawlawk stood as if at attention. Ymanyale pointed at the Mawlawk and addressed Rekaboum, “These have been recording your actions, documenting other gifts that Creator has given you that you have failed to recognize. Do they need to tell you what else they have seen?”

“No. I know the truth. Your gifts are innumerable and I will acknowledge them all.”

Ymanyale nodded at the Mawlawk and Cherowb and they rose, disappearing through the ceiling. He used his arms to shepherd Rekaboum and Onayasim back to the main room. “I think we have some wonderful things to see now.”

Rekaboum stopped. “Excuse me, I have one last adjustment to make”. He went back and quickly set the initial reader the way it was designed to be. Then, he ran to meet the others waiting in the main room.

When he got there, Susan began by welcoming any guests that had come. It was big news all through Nadsarett and many wanted to see the tiny things, even if they didn’t fully understand what they would be seeing. She continued, “Onayasim and I will try to describe what you see. Then, Rekaboum will describe the method by which you will see it, namely his super-scope.”

“Actually...” he started to say, wanting to let everyone know what his proper, scientific name for it was, but he changed his reason for interrupting. “Actually” he started again, “it was a team effort and I thank everyone who helped”. He smiled and motioned for Susan to start.

She began, “We have been looking for the absolute most fundamental particle, of which everything else is made. Atoms are made of protons, neutrons and electrons. But, what are *they* made of?”

She had set the stage; she let Onayasim continue. “We have discovered that Creator has set the entire universe on a framework. The lines are literally next to each other. We haven’t precisely pinpointed where the lines are, but we know what they do to the tiny things that we’ve found. Susan said that there was a man on Earth that discovered the same grid. What was his name?”

“Einstein, Albert Einstein.” She waited a minute for people to stop giggling. Yes, the name did sound silly to them. Onayasim motioned for her to continue. “Well, what we discovered was that all of the matter, whether it’s solid, liquid or gas, is made up, not of tiny solid things, but of electrically charged light particles, no bigger than a thought.” She went on to

describe their size with a number that had so many zeroes next to the decimal point that visitors became glassy-eyed as she spoke.

When she finished, she looked at Onayasim for help regaining their attention. “You must understand that what Susan is saying is essential to understand what we’ve found. They’re called tiny things because they are very, well...tiny. We’ll take a look at some tiny things in a minute, and what you’ll see is that what they are depends on how they spin in relation to the axis of the grid. First, I think Rekaboum wants to explain his super-scope to you.”

Susan and Onayasim retreated a few steps as Rekaboum stood out. Rekaboum explained, “The microscope that I ... that we built is simply a daisy-chain of microscopes of four different kinds. One magnifies the image of another. The problem was keeping the image sharp through all those magnifications. Enough talk. I want to see it, too. Keep your eyes on the ceiling”.

He and some of the team began turning on the power to the microscope and turning off the room lights. A nearly crystal clear image of a Helium atom appeared. The outside of it looked very fuzzy, though.

Susan explained, “The fuzzy stuff you see are the electrons in orbit. We’re going to photograph the atom at extremely high speed and then slow it down to see what it really looks like.”

She nodded at Rekaboum, who pushed a button. “Done” he said.

“Good. Let’s see what it looks like.”

What everyone saw was the nucleus with its electrons orbiting. They also saw other tiny particles, some orbiting the nucleus; some orbiting the electrons like moons. The protons and neutrons were made up of still smaller particles, so that, in the end, they could see even the most tiny specks, each kind rotating in a particular direction on a particular axis; proton bits one way and electron bits a different way. The whole display was breathtaking and dazzling.

Susan summed up what they were watching, “Every particle is defined not by what it’s made of, but by how it behaves. If it acts the way Creator intended, it will be what it is supposed to be. If it could act any other way, it would destroy itself. But, they don’t have a free will like we do.”

Ymanyale smiled and exclaimed, “Well done! Well done, all of you! That was a wonderful presentation.”

Everyone stayed for the longest time, admiring the depth of the demonstration, marveling at Creator’s genius and the gifts He had given Rekaboum and the others to discover it.

The work of quantifying the tiny bits continued for many years after that. There was so much more to learn. And Rekaboum learned just how much Creator really loved and provided for him.

Chapter 29

Discovery in the Garden of New Beginning

Several hundred years had passed. The Earthlings no longer thought of themselves as Earthlings, except for Duke, who thought about Earth all the time, obsessed with wondering why he ever left. What he didn't know was that his rebellion would have gotten him into as much trouble on Earth as on Awdnaw, only a different kind.

Susan and Onayasim, when they weren't raising children and tending to other responsibilities, had changed the focus of their searching and were discovering the wonderful transformation that Creator had done to their bodies. Atoms, molecules and cells responded to the food they ate, the water they drank and the air that they breathed. Their minds and spirits responded to the deep, all-encompassing presence and peace and joy of Creator. Altogether, it made for a perfect environment for people who were meant to live forever.

José and Ruwauth were studying the stars and other heavenly wonders when they weren't nurturing their young ones. They were convinced that certain constellations and planets were about to line up in a certain way, so that Creator could reveal, through them, the next big event in their history. But they weren't quite sure what the meaning was, or how many conjunctures and other stellar events would need to take place to finish the message. Ymanyale reassured them every once in a while that they were definitely on the right track.

Ian and Yaleah were busy with normal living, and enjoyed it quite a lot. They had no special duties while they were not working in the Valley of the Dark Eyes because the time they spent there was so tense and exhausting. They had a small family and enjoyed raising them and teaching them about Creator. When they went to the Valley of the Dark Eyes, they left their children in the care of Aunt Susan and Uncle Onayasim.

Since the Dark One had been imprisoned, people in that Dark Valley had had a much better opportunity to reconsider whether they wanted to follow Creator or continue being a devotee of the one whose influence now held them captive. For the first couple of hundred years or so, it was slow going for Yaleah and Ian. Soon, a small number of people would choose to accept the gift that Ymanyale had made on Earth, and be reunited with the Father. They would also be reintroduced to the people outside that Dark Valley.

Once, when José and Ruwauth were visiting Nadtsarett, Ymanyale found the stargazing couple along with Ian, Yaleah, Susan and Onayasim sitting together at a Last Day meal. He said that He wanted the six of them to go on a special mission to the Valley of the Dark Eyes. José and Ruwauth had gone along a few times before. So had Susan and Onayasim. But, all six of them had never been there at the same time. None of them thought that there was anything especially odd about Ymanyale asking them to go on this specific trip; they were glad to have the time together.

On this trip, only Yaleah and Ian were allowed to go into that Dark Valley, mostly because the two of them had established a rapport with many of those inside. It also kept the residents of the Valley from being distracted. The Rawh already did everything they could to keep them from hearing the good news.

The other four had plenty to do while they were waiting. They needed to prepare meals, sometimes having to go some distance to find food if they needed or wanted something they hadn't brought. Sometimes a strong wind blew across the barrenness that was outside the Valley of the Dark Eyes. It was an unusual thing for Awdnaw, but when it did, they had to be sure that nothing blew away and the dust didn't get in the food. But, most importantly, they would talk to Ymanyale about what the other two were accomplishing, asking Him to send Cherowb to protect them and the Dove and the Mawlawk to give them direction and guidance.

When Yaleah and Ian entered the Valley this time, they noticed that the general condition of it had deteriorated even more than what they were used to seeing. On previous missions, they had seen lots of dead branches, overgrown places where a field or meadow had once been, and other places where there was lots of mud because the inhabitants hadn't cared for what Creator had given them. They had seen piles of refuse, human and otherwise, as well as piles of rotting food that were there because people had been greedy and tried to hoard it, not trusting that there would be more when they needed it. The so-called houses that the people had built were nothing more than miniature fortresses surrounded by piles of mud with pointed sticks shoved in them to provide some false sense of protection.

But, this time, they also saw plants and bushes uprooted, mud piled for no apparent reason, grass scraped from hillsides and sticks jutting out of the ground in odd places. Foxholes of sorts had been dug around the houses. It seemed as if the whole Valley had gone insane.

On the very first day they were there to share again, as Ian was speaking and Yaleah was watching and waiting the way Awdnites wait, Yaleah saw something peculiar out of the corner of her eye. It was Duke, leading a ragtag mob of people near the edge of the clearing. They appeared to be trying to be stealthy, but it wasn't working. They would quarrel with each other or swat at each other so that they were even more noticeable than if they walked normally. Yaleah took a few steps toward Ian, intending quietly to call his attention to Duke and his mob, but Ian had seen him almost as soon as Yaleah had.

When Yaleah had nearly reached Ian's side, Duke assumed a bold look and brashly led his followers to within ten yards of the missionaries. "We don't know why you keep coming here." Duke said with a hiss and a sneer. "You haven't accomplished a thing!"

The group with him joined in, hissing and spitting their malicious comments, accusing the missionaries of everything from failing Creator, to stealing food from them. None of which, of course, was true.

While they were making their accusations, another group of about eight men and women had made their way out of a stand of trees and started yelling at Duke and his bunch. "What do you think you're doing, making trouble like that?" one of them said, getting as close as she dared to Duke. "They're not doing anything to you!" She was joined by the rest of her group in taunting Duke.

At first, Ian thought that the second group might be defending them, maybe even because they were close to receiving the message they had been sharing. But Yaleah saw the pleased look on his face and touched his arm, shook her head sadly and said, "No, they are lazy ones. They generally don't really do anything bad; it's just that they don't do much of anything, unless it benefits them directly. They want everyone to be able to do as they please, whether it's what the Father wants them to do or not."

Ian was surprised at her description, but he soon realized that *not* doing can be as evil as doing something wrong.

Duke and his bunch countered their taunts with, “Go away and mind your own business. We’re going to get rid of this mess” pointing to Ian and Yaleah “once and for all!”

The whole confrontation between the two groups degenerated to a shouting match, some of it in Awdnese and some in English. The groups came closer and closer to each other as they yelled.

As the melee grew, Ian reached for Yaleah and, holding her close, backed away from the fight. They were too far from the entrance to make a clean escape. Ian started, “Father”, and Yaleah joined him, without missing a beat “we are here, and the danger is very near”. Immediately, they were surrounded by three Cherowb, who stood so that they were close enough to protect their two charges, but far enough apart to allow them to see what was going on. As they smiled at each other because of their unison prayer, a scream from one of the lazy ones startled them.

Duke had hurled a stone in the direction of the other group. It had hit one of them squarely in the side of his face. Blood spurted out and the woman fell. One of her companions grabbed a leaf and tossed it at her and told her to put it on the wound, but did nothing else to help her. Soon, both sides were throwing rocks and sticks and mud, Duke had even fashioned a crude knife from a dead branch. He plunged it toward the gut of one of his enemies, but a Cherowb intervened and softened the effect of the wound. No one was to die on Awdnaw, but that didn’t mean that no one would be injured.

Yaleah hid her face in Ian’s chest and Ian kept a lookout, as if he could really do much to protect them against any attack. He trusted Creator and the Cherowb He had sent, but it was just his nature to stay alert like that.

The fight went on for about fifteen minutes. Flesh was cut, bones were broken, hair was torn out, but no one died, even though some cried out to Creator to take the life from them. When there were not enough on either side who could inflict much more injury on the other, both groups limped or crawled away, back into their own piles of mud and dead sticks.

On the third day of the visit, after Yaleah had told the story of Ymanyale’s love again, some of the people that were hiding came out and approached the missionaries from different directions, wanting to follow Creator again. Yaleah had told the same story before, but this time she had commented on how she would have personally responded to such an act of love. “How could I reject that kind of love and sacrifice? How could I reject that kind of gift? We don’t really know what it means to die, but Ymanyale laid down His life for us, and even called us His friends!”

When the people from the Valley came to Yaleah and Ian, and told them that they wanted to belong to the Father again, Ian and Yaleah weren’t quite sure what to do. Ian had been praying and watching while Yaleah spoke, so he quickly prayed for direction from Creator.

Almost before he was finished praying, Ymanyale approached from behind him and motioned for the missionaries and their potential converts to follow Him out of the Dark Valley. He led them out to their campsite. “You have gathered a crop I see,” He said to the missionaries with a smile.

“Why,...yes” Ian said, nearly stuttering. Yaleah beamed in agreement

“Hello”, Ymanyale said to the newcomers as they cautiously came near. “Will you now follow the Father, as you were designed to do?”

Ian and Yaleah looked at each other, not quite sure what to make of the way Ymanyale got right to the point. Ymanyale knew their thoughts and quietly said, “Is there anything more important to be said to them now?”

As the missionaries looked at each other, their faces showed that they understood His passionate concern for them. They watched as He lovingly welcomed them back to the presence of His Father. But, He didn't pronounce them Bright Eyed Ones. He quietly told them that to say that they wanted to follow the Father was a wonderful first step, but that they would need to prove themselves before they could be declared Bright Eyed again.

"Tomorrow morning, we will go to the Garden of New Beginning," Ymanyale told everyone. None of them had ever heard of such a place. Knowing their bewilderment, He explained, "It is on the far side of the Valley of the Dark Eyes. For now, let's find places for everyone to sleep and enough to eat for tonight."

Everyone was quick to assemble simple bedding and collect a good meal, hoping all the while that Ymanyale would tell them more about this new place. They were not disappointed.

"When the Valley of the Dark Eyes was still the Valley of the Giant Games, it needed special care because it was used so much and could become damaged from all of the rough play. So, on the other side of the valley was a special place for those who took care of the valley. It was called the Garden of Care. When the Valley of the Giant Games was no longer used, neither was that garden. It has been neglected for many years and will need some work when we get there. Let's get some sleep so that we can start early."

It was easy enough to talk about resting, but it took everyone a long time to settle down and actually fall asleep. It sounded like an adolescent pajama party with different ones whispering and giggling.

Early the next morning, they ate quickly and started walking to the Garden. They stopped for a quick bite around noon. José took a minute to figure how long it should take to finish their trek.

He showed his work to a few of those around him. "Looks like we should get there an hour or two before dark, if the Valley of the Dark Eyes is as long as I calculated."

Ymanyale smiled. "The Valley is as long as you think it is."

"But what are you smiling at?" José wanted to know.

Ymanyale just smiled a bit bigger and announced, "Looks like it's time to get going again".

At that, everyone started walking again. As they rounded a corner, Ymanyale stepped back and held his arm out, displaying for them the entrance to the Garden of New Beginning, which, sure enough, looked as if it had not had any care for quite a while.

"Wait a minute!" José exclaimed. "How'd we do that?" Then looking at Ymanyale with a grin, "How'd *You* do that?"

Ymanyale returned the grin. "I knew that we needed time to work on the entrance to the garden, so I helped us along."

"Well, we appreciate it. Someday you'll have to explain to me how you do things like that."

"Someday" Ymanyale said. "Someday". Then, He called to everyone, "Let's clear the entrance to this garden and make it look like the gate to a home". He was referring to an Awdnite home, not an Earthly grand mansion or anything.

They all started working the best they could with the few tools they had and their hands. Ymanyale stopped for a minute, looking as if He were thinking. Then he raised His hands and head to the sky, and spoke loudly in a wonderful language. This time, He was calling some Mawleybid, Creator's servants who specialized in manual labor. Suddenly, there were a dozen bright streaks of light from out of the blue that landed in a rough circle around Him. As they

landed, they immediately took shape, revealing themselves with strong arms and legs and a wide assortment of tools to help clear away all of the excess brush and vines that had clogged the entranceway. Ymanyale spoke again in their language, and then announced to us that they would be helping.

Before long, they had made the entrance more than just presentable. Ymanyale thanked the Mawleybid and sent them back to Creator to wait for something else to do. He called for the ones who had been rescued from The Valley of the Dark Eyes and told them to find a place for the night and to collect some food for themselves and for the others.

Then He turned to the others and said, "You have done some difficult work. And, now there is more to do. You all need to stay with these for a while to help explain what it is to be reconciled to Creator. Being in fellowship and falling out of fellowship are all that these people know. Restoration has not been known until now. You, from Earth, will need to explain all of the strange words that accompany such restoration."

Before they landed on Awdnaw and before they became Bright Eyes, the three Earthlings would have been extremely agitated and annoyed at what Ymanyale had just asked them to do. They would have thought, "What? Doesn't He think we have a life? We have plans! Does He know what He's asking?" Now, they understood that their lives were actually His, and whatever He asked them to do was for the good of the whole family, not just for their own benefit.

Then, Ymanyale ushered them all into their new temporary home. When they had gone in a hundred yards or so, Ymanyale pointed to the center of the Garden. There stood the most beautiful tree. "This is the Tree of Plenty and has been here since the Garden was planted here by Creator in the beginning. When this was the Garden of Care, it supplied the people who lived here with a wide variety of fruit, a different one each month. Each fruit provided a rich diet of all the nutrients they needed. It was a supplement to the other varieties of food available, but was given to them because they worked so hard and often did not have opportunity to travel like many of the others. Those who lived here, of course, were temperamentally well suited for their calling. Every once in a while, a child would tell his parents that he wanted to do something else. They would help him find his calling according to the inclination that Creator had put in him." With a grin, He added, "Not everyone in a family will be suited for the same thing."

"But, as for this tree, you may go anywhere in this garden, but you must always be able to see this tree from where you are. You do not have to be looking at the tree all the time, but you must be able to see it from wherever you are. It is the tallest, brightest and largest tree in the garden, so you cannot miss seeing it, if you are where you should be. If you cannot see it, move quickly to where you can; do not linger away from its sight. It has no special power, but I will be able to tell how willing you are to obey."

Ymanyale led them all over to the huge Tree of Plenty where they all tried some of its fruit. It was more delicious and satisfying than anything they had ever eaten on the whole of Awdnaw. Then, they settled in for the evening. The next morning they all started exploring this wonderful place. Everyone took a few days to find new places for their temporary houses. There were things to search out, plants and animals not common to other parts of this world.

Most importantly, there were lessons in how to live like Creator intended. Most often, it only took a look or a clearing of the throat to convey to a recent returnee the error of his action or attitude. Every once in a while, one of the mentors would have to explain what Creator expected of all of them: love, grace, generosity, etc. It seemed strange to have to put into words what they had simply known in their hearts for so long.

The lessons were going well, for the most part. But, there were two of them that seemed, increasingly, to want to argue with everyone that wanted to help. Nymraod, a man who had been in the Valley of the Dark Eyes for more than three thousand years and Mirilaen, a woman who had been there for less than a thousand. “I can do it myself” and “I know what I’m doing; you don’t have to tell me” were common expressions they would use. No matter how much someone would explain something, they had an answer, a wrong answer, to counter the instruction.

The missionaries asked Ymanyale about it a few times. He replied that they would be given as many chances as they needed to prove themselves, within the time that they had there in the Garden of New Beginning.

One day, a number of the rescued ones were playing, running and chasing and just having fun. Their running took them to a part of the Garden that hadn’t been fully explored yet. In fact, they were running right along the side of a gentle cliff, covered in vines and flowers. As they ran and laughed and called to each other, they discovered that, at a certain section of the cliff, their voices sounded different when they shouted to one another. Nymraod was among them and wanted to explore it immediately. Some of the others thought it would be better to check with Ian and the other mentors first.

So, while one of the others ran to find Ian, Nymraod started tearing the vines and branches away from where the odd echoes were coming from. As he did, the Dove perched nearby, watching and cooing softly, but few could hear Him because of the noise Nymraod was making as he worked.

“Can’t you wait for someone else to help decide what we should do?” one of the other men asked.

“I don’t need to ask anyone” he replied, proudly, matter-of-factly.

“The way you speak, you don’t sound like you’ve left the Valley of the Dark Eyes” his companion replied.

Nymraod just shrugged.

Now he was tearing at the branches, uprooting as he went, a definite sign that he had not regained his appreciation for Creator’s work. As he was destroying the brush, Yaleah, Susan and Ruwauth approached. Ruwauth was normally soft-spoken and mild-mannered, but when she saw Nymraod destroying creation and trying to go where he wasn’t sure he should be, she spoke quite loudly, in Awdnese, and with distinct, emphatic spaces between her words. “What .. are .. you .. doing?”

It wasn’t a complicated or difficult question, but Nymraod answered, also in Awdnese and with audible venom in his voice, “What’s it to you, woman?”

There are two ways to use the word *woman* in Awdnese, just as there are two ways to use the word *man*. One is with respect and tenderness. That was not the one Nymraod used. The way he spoke it was the way he first used it a few months before he was put in the Valley of the Dark Eyes. The word is really the same; there is simply an inflection and a bit of a consonant added to it that gives it the degrading sense that he used.

“I said, woman, what big deal is it to you?” he repeated.

For a second, everyone was shocked. He might as well have used Creator’s name in some disrespectful way. Then, Ruwauth, flushing with legitimate anger retorted, “It wasn’t really a question, Nymraod. I was trying to be polite.” She stepped to within arm’s length of him. “But, since you don’t remember how to respond to politeness, I will say it plainly. Stop! Now!”

That got his attention. The other two women who came with her were now beside her. Susan wasn’t entirely sure what she was doing there or what they would do if he became violent,

but she was there for support. Nymraod was now partially surrounded by three women, servants of the Creator of the universe on a mission from Him and ready to defend His creation and His ways. Nymraod could not move.

After what seemed like forever to Nymraod, Ian, José and Onayasim arrived. Ian asked, in a voice that was far too cheerful for the situation, “What’s the big excitement?” He knew that there was something new to explore, but none of the three men knew how ugly it had gotten.

As they got closer, they saw Nymraod’s situation. They could only stop and look at what he had done; all the vines and branches, all the roots and leaves scattered everywhere.

Onayasim spoke, “You wanted to explore. Creator put that desire in you. But, He also put the knowledge of *how* to do it in you as well. You will come down here and stand.” He pointed to a place some ten yards from the edge of the cliff. The three women surrounded him as he walked, staying just out of arm’s reach from him. They let him out of their circle as he reached his destination.

While Onayasim was lifting his hands and face to the sky, seeking Ymanyale’s advice, Ian waved his arm, motioning for whoever was nearby to come help clear the waste and replant whatever they could. When Onayasim had finished asking for guidance, the Dove started singing, not at all like doves do on Earth, but a silky, golden song. The mentors all recognized the voice and understood His message. The others, all except Nymraod and Mirilaen, knew the voice, but could only catch bits of the meaning.

Onayasim looked at the others, his face asking the question, “Do you want me to translate for everyone?” The others nodded their consent. So, he began, “We may explore this area, but, as always, we must be sure to be in sight of the Tree of Plenty. The Dove has also allowed me to tell you all about this place, as soon as we have uncovered it and have gone as far as we can go into it.”

José stepped up and offered, “May I lead the trimming of the vines and such so we can properly search this new adventure?”

The other mentors, knowing that he had a lot of experience in such things, agreed that he should lead them in that project. It didn’t take him long to get everyone organized and working effectively so that, within an hour, all the plants were successfully trimmed or moved so they could see what was making their voices sound so odd.

What they saw made them all stop and stare. They hadn’t been able to see exactly what they were uncovering until now. It was a cave, or a tunnel. Nymraod had been standing, more or less, where he had been told to stand the entire time. He had not been silent, however, complaining and asking bizarre questions. Now, he demanded to be able to go with the rest of them when they explored this new place. “Hey, I found it and started all the cleaning and stuff” he whined.

“You will go when you are told to go” Onayasim told him firmly, his nose exactly one inch from Nymraod’s. He got quiet and stayed that way while some of the mentors decided how to proceed. After a while, it was decided that it would be better to have Nymraod with them so they could keep an eye on him than to try to confine him somewhere. They knew that they could ask for Cherowb to watch him, but this was still supposed to be the place where those rescued from that Dark Valley learned to live as they should.

“We will stop every few steps to be sure that we can still see the tree of Plenty,” Onayasim announced. “Please, do not get ahead of me.” He waved his arm for them to follow him. As they started, the Dove flew in ahead of them. They couldn’t see where He had perched, but they could still hear Him cooing occasionally and were reassured that He was still there.

As they entered this hole in the planet, they noticed two huge, clear crystals, about four feet tall at the entryway. The pathway through it was wide and seemed to be purposely smooth, as if it was paved, perhaps. The walls and ceiling were white, with occasional splashes of colorful designs, although it didn't look as if it had been painted; it was the color of the rocks. Everyone was enthralled by the unpretentious beauty of the place.

Susan's head snapped up just a bit and a grin crept onto her face. "Onayasim" she called "Weren't you going to tell us about this place once we got it cleared away?"

"Yes, I was," he said, glad to be able to tell the story. "When the Valley of the Dark Eyes was still a place to play, and this garden was still the place for the caretakers, this was the way they got from the Garden to the Valley each day that they worked. It was too far to walk the length of the valley and it wouldn't have been good to use a vehicle all the time, so Creator put this passageway here for them so that, after a long day's work, they didn't have far to go to get home."

"What are those big crystals for" José wanted to know.

"Light".

"Light? How do they make light?"

"They don't".

José made a friendly "Don't mess with me" face and Onayasim laughed.

"Sorry, my friend" Onayasim said when he had settled down. "The valley and the garden line up directly east and west. When the sun comes up, it shines directly in the entryway to the Garden. When it sets, it lights the entryway to the Valley. Those crystals amplify and scatter the sunshine so that it lights up the whole inside of this passageway."

"That should look awesome" José said.

"We won't be able to see it now," Onayasim said with a bit of a frown. "It's too late in the day. And besides, for us to see the crystals work in the evening, the other side would have to be cleared away. That would mean that those from that Dark Valley would know about this passageway and would be able to escape".

It seems that those in the Valley of the Dark Eyes could have wandered away at any time through this passageway. The only physical thing in their way was a tangled web of vines and branches. Of course, Creator had made sure that the thought never came to their minds and that the Cherowb always kept them from finding the other end of the tunnel.

Just as Onayasim finished his explanation, Yaleah and Susan squealed together in delight, "Oh look! It's beautiful!" It was a beautiful round pool with a curving, geometric fountain at one side with three spouts out of which clear, sparkling water still flowed. It was hard to distinguish all its features in the semi-light that was there. As they all went to see, they also noticed that the room they were in was had a high, vaulted ceiling. This was clearly no natural cave or spring, but something carefully designed and fashioned by Creator for those special people who had worked here.

Onayasim took a few glances out the entrance to this passageway to make sure they were still in sight of the special tree. They were all still where they should be. Nymraod was sure to jeer at him, "Can't even make one little decision by yourself. Always have to be checking with someone. What a sissy!" Onayasim just ignored him.

They spent a little more time trying to explore what they could in that area, but the light was getting even dimmer, so they decided to try again in the morning when they were sure that the sun would illuminate the crystals and, in turn, light up the tunnel, at least as far as they needed to see.

Onayasim called for everyone to follow him out, making sure that Nymraod was in front of him. The only one who didn't leave that night was the Dove.

Chapter 30

Discovery in the Valley of the Dark Eyes

Duke and some of his followers were running and chasing, but they weren't playing. Two men had done something to make Duke angry and he was going to try to hurt them as much as he could. They were in a part of that Dark Valley that no one had been in for thousands of years. It had a steep wall on one side and as they passed it, they noticed that their voices sounded different as they shouted at each other.

Duke hollered at his so-called friends to stop. The two they were chasing made their getaway. "Listen. You hear that?"

His friends nodded "Yes".

"Let's check it out," Duke demanded. So they started tearing at the pale, nearly lifeless vines that covered the cliff. Underneath, they found the western entrance to the same tunnel that those in the Garden had found. They started in, but found that, just a few feet in, it was too dark for them to see. The sun had just cast its last, long shadows for the evening.

"Let's just find somewhere close to sleep and try it again in the morning," Duke said in the same demanding way he always seemed to use. The others mumbled their reluctant consent.

Just after the sun had come up the next morning, they started their exploration again. Only this time, there was some sort of light coming from inside the cave. Though it took a couple of hours for the sun to shine into that Dark Valley, it was already shining on the giant crystals at the tunnel's other entrance in the Garden.

Light tended to frighten anyone from the Valley of the Dark Eyes, and this light almost made them abandon their exploration. But, Duke had lost all reserve. "Let's go. It's just a little light." He waved an order to follow him. They didn't have to go far before they heard voices. The group from the Garden had entered the other end of the passage and was as far in on their side as Duke and his bunch were on theirs. The pool was in the center of the tunnel and that's where both groups first saw each other.

The Dove was perched on a stone bench at the side of the pool. He had been singing softly, like a beacon. But now, His song was powerful and commanding. As soon as He had finished the last note, a dozen brilliant shafts of light shot down from the ceiling and landed as a wall between the groups. Their light made the sunshine pale as a candle beside a campfire. And as they landed, the little bit of dust in the room was stirred as if large, heavy posts had been dropped on their ends.

The Dove sang again and the light subsided so that everyone could see that the beams of light were really Cherowb, bigger and stronger than usual. All but one in the middle faced Duke and his friends. The one in the middle was Miyka'el. "We are here to keep those who belong in the Valley of the Dark Eyes from escaping. We can allow any who wishes to pass into the Dark Valley to go there, but none may leave it."

"Who are you, telling me what to do?" Duke bellowed as he ran headlong toward what he thought was a gap in between the Cherowb. Just as he got to the line of guardians, they spread their wings and formed a wall. Duke painfully bounced off of it and flew backward about ten feet.

"We are Cherowb, sent by Creator", Miyka'el answered plainly.

Duke got up and rubbed his bruises. He had even got a few scrapes, but no one seemed to notice; they were all standing, transfixed at the sight and power of the Cherowb.

Soon, a dark, nearly invisible wisp of vapor circled Nymraod's head once and disappeared below the floor. He yelled at the other group, "Hey, you guys! Yeah, you that can't go anywhere, how's it feel to be cooped up like that?"

"We may not be able to *go* anywhere we want, but we can sure *do* anything we want!" Duke shot back. "You've got all those people pretending to be your friends, telling you what to do, what to eat, what to say, where to go. We do *what* we want, *whenever* we want with *nobody* bossing us around!"

"They don't tell us what to do. If I do something, it's 'cause I want to, not 'cause I have to." Nymraod roared right back.

"Yeah. No one tells us what to do" Mirilaen chimed in, not quite as loud or angrily as her companion. She wanted to rebel, but something about the way things were playing out, and the song the Dove had sung, made her unsure.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Ian said, as calmly and with as much authority as he could, facing Nymraod squarely in the face. "What are you doing?" He knew what Duke was doing; he still belonged to the Dark One, but Nymraod was supposed to be free from him.

"Out of my face!" Nymraod yelled at him, while ignoring Ian's presence and looking straight at Duke. Then he gave Ian a shove and started toward the line of Cherowb.

Mirilaen was now finding a place among the other women, holding on tightly to Yaleah and Ruwauth's arms, with Susan in front of her. She had finally realized what she was playing at and figured that it shouldn't be a game.

Meanwhile, Nymraod was playing his own game, putting his arm as close to the Cherowb as possible, then putting his arm or leg between them, all the while taunting whoever would listen with "See, I'm going wherever I want and doing whatever I want. I could even go over there and come back and no one would be dumb enough to stop me."

"Stop!" Ian implored. Others joined him in trying to get Nymraod to abandon his dangerous pursuit.

"Would you all just shut up?! I know what I'm doing", he hollered, his face now in a grimace as if he was forcing himself, or was being forced, to continue.

The Dove was singing as sweetly as He could, flying to a spot nearer to Nymraod, even trying to perch on his shoulder, but Nymraod brushed Him away.

Then, Nymraod cocked his head like he was listening to someone, and a malicious grin crept across his face again. Doing an annoying little dance, he slipped between the Cherowb, his left arm going in first, and tried to slip around one of them with his back to it. Then, his whole body moved to the other side of the Cherowb. He had intended to circle one of the Cherowb, but when his left arm reached the place where he might have come back through, it met a wall of muscular wings. He looked startled; then he started trying to punch his way through.

"No! No!" he screamed. "I'm going to go back through. Out of my way or I'll...I'll"

The Cherowb closest to him looked at him as if to say, "You'll do what, you sad little man?"

"I'm supposed to be able to go back!" Then, looking straight up, he screamed, "How could you do this to me?" He backed up a few feet and ran, hurling himself at the Cherowb again and again. When he started, Ian and those with him were weeping, some saying things that they thought might have helped Nymraod, but they soon realized that his last decision was final. Soon they became silent.

After he had flung himself at the Cherowb a dozen times or more, he threw himself on the ground and started sobbing. Duke and those with him had taken great delight in seeing him being defeated, and when he had fallen down, Duke went over to him, gave a stiff kick in the side and said "Welcome home, tough guy." Then they retreated, snickering, to near their entrance to the passageway.

When Nymraod was finally, totally on the side of that Dark Valley, once again resigned to the rule of the Dark One, the Dove fell silent, flew toward the entrance to the garden and perched on one of the giant crystals there.

As Duke and his friends were leaving, Ymanyale walked in from the Garden side. Everyone rushed to meet Him and all started at the same time to tell Him what had happened.

All except Susan. "If you had been here, maybe Nymraod would still be here, too." Her statement was said more like a question. And when she said it, everyone else got quiet to hear what Ymanyale would say.

Ymanyale looked sad, even angry. "He would not have listened to anyone, not even someone who had come back from the dead."

They all knew He was right, even Nymraod, who was still on the floor where he had flung himself. Now they were waiting, but for what they didn't know.

Finally, Ymanyale moved next to the Cherowb and spoke to those from the Garden. "We must all leave this place at once". He turned to face the Cherowb and spoke to them in their marvelous language. All the guardians except Miyka'el and one other started toward the entrance to the Valley of the Dark Eyes, rousing Nymraod as they went. They swept everyone that belonged in the Dark Valley out of the tunnel and chased them as far away as they could.

Ymanyale turned back to face His followers and, raising His arms as a shepherd would, ushered them all out of the passageway, with the Cherowb behind Him. When they got a dozen yards or so outside of the entrance, He turned to His right and said, "Follow me". Then, He led them quickly away from the cave and up a small hill, leaving the Cherowb at the entrance.

When they got to the top, they stopped. Everyone followed His gaze as He surveyed the large area in front of the entrance. They saw a handful of Mawlawk and Cherowb leading people and animals away from the tunnel entrance.

When Ymanyale saw that no one was near the passage, He looked up. A Mawlawk appeared beside Him and said, "They are away as well". Then Ymanyale raised His arms and bowed His head.

After what seemed like a very long time, He dropped his arms. A terrible rumble came from the hill where the tunnel was. Its peak collapsed, toppling trees and burying brush as it fell. Dust and gravel spewed from the cave like so much vomit.

No earthquake or volcano had ever been known on Awdnaw. Streams, rivers, lakes and seas were designed so that there was virtually no erosion. Any rearranging of the landscape, except what had happened in that Dark Valley, was by design, with full consultation with and approval of Creator. Trees were never toppled; bushes were never buried; dust was hardly known, let alone spewed into the air.

But there it was, an earthquake that killed trees, moved parts of the planet and polluted the air, an abomination to everyone on Awdnaw. This controlled chaos was Creator's response to the evil He found. Later, people would wonder why He had waited all this time to close the passageway and why He chose to do it this way. In the end, they all agreed that Creator has His times and ways and responses. And, because they trusted Him, they left it at that.

It had taken thousands of years for it to happen, and it was all over in a matter of minutes, but no one would ever travel under that hill again.

Chapter 31

Last Time in the Valley of the Dark Eyes

Ian, Yaleah and the other missionaries had returned to Nadtsarett to take time to rest from their last assignment in the Valley of the Dark Eyes. Over the next few years, they made a number of other visits to share the good news about how to return to Creator. There were more than seventy others who decided to follow Creator and His ways. They, too, had to prove themselves in the Garden of New Beginning. But, there were none who turned back to the Valley of the Dark Eyes.

It was a joy for Yaleah and her fellow messengers to find places for those who came out of that Dark Valley. Some of those who came out of that Dark Valley had been married, and their spouses decided to stay unmarried. Those reunions were an incredible thing to see. The ones who remained unmarried weren't waiting for their other half to return; no one knew that anyone could have returned from that Valley. They just felt that no one else would do. It was such a source of happiness that some of them cried happy tears so hard that it almost frightened them.

Sadly, some of the spouses had remarried. The concept of divorce was abhorrent to the whole planet. Creator's plan was for forever. The only way to dissolve a marriage was if one of the spouses had been taken to the Valley of the Dark Eyes. That person, in essence, would have died to the remaining spouse. And, some of the spouses had been without a mate for more than a thousand years. The ones who came out of the Dark Valley, whose mates had remarried, were relocated to a place far away. Even though that person was forgiven and restored, there were still consequences for their rebellion. But, Creator is gracious, and would not add to their pain and sadness.

Those who had not yet married were returned to their families. Many of those people had younger siblings hundreds of years old that they had never met. Most of them had to have a place found for them. Since everything moved at such an easy pace, quick changes were a little tricky to achieve. But, everyone was more than gracious in welcoming these prodigals home. When those who had offended anyone found out where the ones they had offended were, they were quick to ask forgiveness, and the offended ones were even swifter in giving it. There were no questions, because if there are questions, there is no forgiveness and if there is forgiveness, there are no questions.

Susan and Onayasim had finished their new work on how the bodies of the Awdnites, including the animals, stayed perfect, as long as they obeyed Creator. They had also discovered the secret to the way the Earthling bodies had recovered from their corruption on Earth. They knew the general reason, but the work on the cellular and atomic levels was fascinating. Even the precisely aligned magnetic field on Awdnaw had affected the electron orbit in their atoms so that they could regenerate the way they were designed to do.

So, when the Earthlings were subjected to the perfectly balanced forces on Awdnaw, their bodies began to fall back into the patterns that Creator had designed for them. It wasn't a healing process, as people usually define healing; rather, it was a restoration to the original pattern and condition.

José and Ruwauth had returned to Nadtsarett, at Ymanyale's request. They had been studying the stars at a place Ymanyale had prepared for them where they had an excellent view of the nocturnal sky. Many times, they would be up all night, pointing and reading and writing and asking each other the most outlandish questions. They would spend days conferring with others who had studied the star patterns, learning all they could about the meaning of each constellation. The patterns were totally different from those on Earth, but they told the story Creator wanted to share with them. When they had talked to Ymanyale about what they saw, He simply encouraged them to keep looking, telling them that they were definitely on target. For months, they were almost stressed over the things they saw. Finally, one day, they asked Ymanyale to tell them what they were seeing. Instead, He arranged a meeting of all of Nadtsarett for three days from then.

On the appointed day, everyone in the village was assembled. Onayasim set up the same broadcast device they had used to see the historical view of Earth, except now the broadcast device was on this end and everyone else on the planet would be watching what was going on in Nadtsarett.

Once Onayasim pointed it at Ymanyale, He began, "I have told you that things will cease to be as they are. What José and Ruwauth have seen in the stars is the story of that transformation." Turning to the star-gazing couple, He said, "Please tell us what you have seen".

They moved timidly forward, stood a minute, took a deep breath and looked at each other. After a few seconds, José started, "It's hard to know where to start". Then he paused again.

"We have been working hard on this search," Ruwauth continued for him. "We've been up all night sometimes and then asking everyone we knew, including Ymanyale, what it all means."

"He was helpful in the process, but He wanted us to make most of the discovery ourselves, and we understood that", José interjected so people would know that they weren't trying to do it solely with their own strength or wisdom; that would be silly.

"Yes, of course" Ruwauth added. After another deep breath, she continued, "We have never had more than one sign in the stars at a time on Awdnaw. Ymanyale has guided us, to one degree or another, when each one appeared, or would be appearing soon. This time, there were seven signs, all set to appear at the same time. The thing that was the most challenging to us was the fact that there didn't seem to be one that was more important or needed to be explained first. They will all be important when they appear." Then she paused, turned to José and shrugged her shoulders a bit, as if to say, "Which one do we describe first?"

José read her meaning. "The constellation Barawb, the one that refers to Ymanyale, will soon lose its reference to a physical body and will be purely spiritual. The two stars that indicate His physical presence with us will be hidden by two stars that mean He is spirit."

Ruwauth was now getting comfortable with sharing these great mysteries. "And the stars that represent the people on Awdnaw that follow Creator, Baen'baraw, will rise far above the constellation Awdnaw'Shaulaem, which is Awdnaw itself. We will all leave Awdnaw, but not in the bodies we now possess. We will be transported beyond the edge of the universe." She looked entirely pleased and excited, but shrugged one shoulder a bit as she grinned at the possibility.

José knew it was his turn to share, but when he stepped forward to speak, he didn't look very happy as he began. "Baen'Sautawn, that is the stars representing children of the Dark One, will soon be separated from the constellation Ael'aloihaem, the formal name for Creator and

appear *under* Awdnaw'Shaulaem. They, too will be in other bodies, and will never have another opportunity to return to Creator."

They continued for another half an hour describing all of the things they had discovered, while, every so often, peeking at Ymanyale to see if they had interpreted everything correctly. Whenever they peeked, Ymanyale would wink and grin, as if to say, "You're doing just fine. Keep up the good work."

When they had finished, they looked exhausted. "You have done well, quite well" Ymanyale commended them.

Then, His face turned very serious, and He addressed the whole crowd. "It has been one thousand years since the Dark One was imprisoned. He will be allowed to wander freely now for a little longer. There are some who have been warned, but will still follow that fiend to eternal darkness. Do your best to keep resisting him, for yourselves and others. When the time comes, there will be no warning. You know my words and my ways. You know how to speak to the Dark One and his servants. Use these as weapons to fight them with all of your might."

The following evening normally would be the feast at Last Day, but Ymanyale announced, "This week, you will celebrate Last Day by waiting. No one will eat anything from the time the sun sets until it sets again. Remember and contemplate all my words, whether you have heard them yourself or read them in the books. They will be your food and drink. Remember my love."

With those words, He turned and walked out of their sight. Everyone went quietly to their homes, talking as they went. No one seemed disturbed or troubled. In fact, most of them seemed quite excited about the prospect. Even though none of them knew exactly when the end of things as they knew it would be, they were content in knowing that He would take them from where they were to where they were going, without fear or frustration or pain.

At the Last Day meeting, Ymanyale spoke quietly with Ian and Yaleah. "Your work in the Valley of the Dark Eyes is nearly finished." They looked at each other in surprise. It hadn't seemed that long, and the visits had become part of the rhythm of their lives, even though the rhythm was somewhat syncopated. Ymanyale continued, "You will make one more journey to the Dark Valley. There are a few more who will come out. They will have enough time to prove their hearts before the time. Three days from now you will go, and spend five days there. José, Ruwauth, Susan and Onayasim will go along for support, but they will not be going in".

"When those who decide to follow me are out, you will need to spend only one month in the Garden of New Beginning. I know that those whom you will have there have started proving themselves already. When you leave the Garden for the last time, cut tree branches and drag them into the entrance. It will have served its purpose well and will be left to rest until it is regenerated." Then, He hugged them both and sent them on their way.

Ian and Yaleah waited for the three days. This time, their departure was more somber than usual. Whoever didn't come back with them this time would be condemned to belong to the Dark One forever. The fault would not be Ian's or Yaleah's, but it would be a heavy knowledge for them to bear.

When the shuttle craft they took touched down, they found their usual place to stay. Over the years, they had outfitted it with all of the comforts of home. Since it was still an hour or so until lunchtime, Ian and Yaleah had time to share the good news a while. They even knew, by name, the Cherowb that were stationed near their temporary home. They nodded and waved as they went between them into that Dark Valley.

When they arrived, the atmosphere was even eerier than normal. It looked as if large, insane animals had gone on a rampage. In reality, the people there had been tormented even more by the Rawh since the Dark One had returned to lead them again. He knew that his time was short so now he was causing as much chaos as he could.

He and his minions had persuaded people to pull down trees, tear away the plants and dirt to expose the rocks underneath, plant pointed sticks in random places in the ground, dig trenches to hide in and pile rocks and refuse all over the place for no good reason. Some of those that followed Nymraod had started to dig a tunnel to escape. So had those who followed Duke. But, instead of working together so that they all could escape, they had been destroying each others' work, which added to the debris.

The Valley of the Dark Eyes had always had a bothersome odor due to the uncleanness of the place, but now the stench was nauseating. Blood, vomit and feces were rotting everywhere. Even the insects, which were normally under control, were swarming everywhere, maddening, but not biting.

When Ian and Yaleah had had a chance to see and smell it for just a few minutes, they had to retreat to the outside again. Holding their noses, they walked, then ran through the Cherowb. When they came out, gasping for air, the others gathered around, wanting to know what had happened.

"What was that smell?!" Yaleah asked, not having ever sensed anything so intense before.

"Rotting" Ian gasped. "Stuff in there is rotting" he blurted, pointing in the direction of the Dark Valley. "It smells to me like death!"

Yaleah looked a little confused. José spoke up so Ian could catch his breath. "When we put the parts of plants that we cut off in a pile, or when we cover our own waste and the tiny, unseen creatures eat it, that's a form of rotting. When it's done like Creator intended, it doesn't stink very much, if at all. But, out of control like it must be in there, then it reeks like...well, you know."

By the time José had finished his explanation, the other two had caught their breath.

"Now what?" Susan asked. She was voicing what everyone was thinking.

"Well, it looks like the Dark One wants to keep you out" Onayasim stated. Everyone nodded in agreement.

Ian, reluctantly, explained, "I think Yaleah's stomach might not be able to handle the stench." Her look at Ian said, "Hey, I'm tougher than that" so he added "My stomach probably isn't up to it either." She smiled at his admission.

When Yaleah smiled, Ian's mind took an odd little trip. He remembered the way she smiled when he had given her the engagement ring. Then, he recalled the excitement in the diving trumpet. Finally, his face brightened when he remembered how they had prayed when they were there.

He snapped his fingers and exclaimed, "I know!"

The others were startled by his sudden outburst and looked at him, waiting for him to tell them what he knew.

"When we were diving for the Owrah for the rings, the Rawh tried to get the best of us. So we prayed, 'Creator, we are here, and the Rawh are very close.' Even though it was difficult, we were protected. But, I'm not sure how Creator could protect us from such a smell."

"Let's ask Him and see what He does" Yaleah exclaimed, excited about seeing Creator do something she had never experienced before. She faced Ian and took his hands. The others

joined hands around them. Yaleah and Ian looked at each other, mouthed the word ‘smell’ at each other and smiled. Then, they lifted their faces toward the sky and spoke together, “Creator, we are here, and the smell is very near”. Then they all quietly uttered the Awdnese word for ‘Amen’.

Ian let go of Yaleah’s right hand and clung to her left; the others backed away. Not sure of what to expect, but certain that Creator would provide some sort of relief or protection, they headed back to that Dark Valley.

As they approached the place where they usually entered, they saw two sets of bright vapors come down from the sky. The first group landed just inside the ring of Cherowb so that when they walked between the two most familiar guards, they were inside a ring of smaller servants of Creator.

There were five of them and they were about four feet tall and looked strong, but not fierce like Cherowb; capable, but not intense like Mawlawk. Yaleah reminded Ian that these were Mawleybid, the ones that helped clear the brush and trees from the mouth of the Garden of new Beginning. These particular Mawleybid had arms and legs that could change into wings or fins or whatever shape was needed.

Three of them made up the second group, but they were hovering about ten feet above Ian and Yaleah’s heads. Their appendages were more like fins and they were spinning slowly, like a ceiling fan. But, the air was blowing gently downward on them, and it was, cool, sweet, fresh air, not the dank, pungent fumes in that Dark Valley.

Ian looked at Yaleah and exclaimed “Cool!” meaning that he greatly approved of the arrangement.

“Yes, and fresh smelling, too” Yaleah responded. Ian just smiled at her, not sure if she was being silly with his word or if she didn’t catch the meaning of his slang. Either way, it didn’t matter about the words; Creator’s servants were there for them.

“How do we move? Or are we to speak from here this time?” Ian asked. He wasn’t really asking Yaleah, just voicing his question.

Then they heard voices, a chorus of voices. “We move when you move, but you must move together and deliberately.” It was the whole group of Mawleybid in unison, yet each one’s voice was distinct.

Yaleah and Ian squeezed each other’s hands. The Dove flew in past them and settled on a dead branch of a tree near a large group of people. Taking His cue, the missionaries started moving toward them. It was hard to tell men from women. They were filthy from head to toe; their half-healed wounds were oozing; broken bones had set crooked, and, in most of them, the darkness in their eyes made them seem even more vacant. They were bickering about who was in charge in their Valley. It had degenerated to bouts of throwing mud and sticks and shouting, “Duke!” or “Nymraod!”

Ian started speaking in an unusual way, especially for him. “Hey! Yeah, you, all of you! Shut up for a minute!”

Yaleah looked a little surprised, but the others stopped talking immediately and looked at him, dumbfounded.

“It doesn’t matter who is in charge here, because in a little while, this won’t be here.” Ian was not using his normal wooing voice. He had a righteous anger now; he was tired of the Dark One keeping these people in such chaos. “Creator has been calling out to you for eons, now, and all you can do is look at your tiny little world here. Stop! And look at what you’re doing.”

Yaleah continued speaking for him, almost as angrily as Ian had been. “Does it look like you’re accomplishing anything doing this?” She waved her arm to indicate the mess they had been making. “Come back to where Creator has designed for you to live, the way He’s designed for you to live it!”

Just then, Duke came limping over a rise, waving his arms as if to frighten them away. Ian and Yaleah had been moving slowly, here and there, as they spoke, trying to hold the attention of whoever would listen. But, Ian couldn’t constrain himself. He broke through the barrier of Mawleybid and ran up the small hill toward Duke.

“Duke! Duke! Do you recognize me? Do you remember me?” he was now not more than an arm’s length from his old friend.

“Go away, you” Duke roared. Then he froze, for just a second, and his face registered that he knew Ian. Somehow. But, evidently it didn’t matter because he reached down to pick up whatever he could find to throw at Ian. A handful of mud just missed Ian’s head. Then, he looked at Duke’s right leg. It had been broken some time ago, but had healed very poorly; the toes on his foot pointed at the insole of his left foot even though his knee was still in the right place. Duke started to reach for a stick. Ian tried to reach his friend’s mind again, but the Rawh were swarming all around him now, and they were all that he could hear; they were all that he wanted to hear. When Duke tried to hit Ian, Ian ran down the hill, but off to the left some.

There, he found a pair of people who seemed, desperately, to want to hear what he had to say. He couldn’t tell if they were men or women. The Dove perched on what remained of a bush, singing enticingly. After only a few minutes of speaking with these people, they said that they wanted another chance to live for Creator, to live in His presence. The missionaries usually waited until everyone who wanted out was assembled to take them out. But, things were so bad in that Dark Valley that Ian immediately ushered these two out.

The other four could see what was happening and had asked Ymanyale to come. So, the five of them were waiting just outside the ring of Cherowb. When Ian brought his two converts out, Ymanyale welcomed them and put Susan and Onayasim in charge of them, to help them clean up a bit and get some good food. After a short while, it became evident that it was a man and a woman.

While Ian had been busy with Duke and the others, Yaleah had kept talking to the first group. She saw the Dove land just in front of them and coo softly. Three of what she believed to be women were, alternately, laughing and crying. When she spoke about the futility of their actions, they would laugh. When she told them how much Creator loved them, they would cry. She knew that she had to get in touch with them, so she broke out of the sweet air into the rank. But, she never noticed. She ran up to the women, wrapped her arms around them and told them one more time how much Creator loved them. “Would you like another chance to live the way He designed you to live? Will you follow him instead of listening to the Dark One and his shadowy servants?” They all nodded.

Yaleah led them out quickly as well. As she was ushering them out, the Rawh were swarming around. Ian had re-entered the Valley and was ordering them away. Cherowb were also fighting them, but this battle was more intense than any before it. Teeth and claws and swords and shields were all clashing and clamoring together. Ian ran to the other side of Yaleah’s group and helped escort them to the outside.

Yaleah and Ian stopped to catch their breath once they were in the fresh air again. They sat together on a nearby log, intending to rest just a minute. Ymanyale was talking to those former residents of the Dark Valley who had come out already.

Onayasim and Susan walked to where Ian and Yaleah were sitting. “So, you got used to the smell. I guess?” Onayasim asked.

“What do you mean?” Yaleah asked. Ian nodded, agreeing with her question.

“We’ve been watching you run around helping people, not worried a bit about the bad air,” Susan added.

Yaleah and Ian looked at each other, startled at their own actions. Just then, Ymanyale walked up. They looked at Him and started, at once but not in unison, to explain what they had done.

Ymanyale held His hand up to stop them from talking. “What you did was show me that you were thinking of others before yourselves.”

“We didn’t want you to think that we were ...just...” Ian started.

“Wasting?” Yaleah added, helping Ian the word.

“Wasting the Mawleybid.”

“No” Ymanyale said, comfortingly “you have done nothing wrong”.

They looked relieved and breathed a deep sigh together. “But, what happened to the Mawleybid?” Ian asked.

“Well, the poor things tried to stay close to whoever was nearest,” Onayasim explained, “but after a while they just made their way back to the line of Cherowb, apparently waiting to see what they needed to do next.”

“Are there any more who want to hear?” Yaleah asked.

“You will find out” Ymanyale said.

So, taking each other’s hand, they ran back toward that Dark Valley. Ian was so proud that his wife with such a sweet face and quiet way was also as strong and courageous as anyone he knew.

“Do you think they’ll use the Mawleybid this time?” Susan wanted to know.

“Just look” Onayasim told her.

They watched as Yaleah and Ian ran straight into the Valley, waving at the Cherowb and Mawleybid as they ran past them all and went in.

Chapter 32

New Everything

Only thirteen more people came out of the Valley of the Dark Eyes. They were taken to the Garden of New Beginning and re-introduced to Creator and His ways for the month that Ymanyale had prescribed. When the whole group left the Garden for the last time, they pulled the branches across the entrance just as they were told. They also hauled away anything they had brought to their temporary campsite. As they packed up, they laughed at their use of the word ‘temporary’; it had been temporary for almost a thousand years. Those who had been rescued this time were given places to live near Nadtsarett. None of them were from there. And none of them was married, except the man and woman that Ian had talked to, and they were husband and wife.

The six missionaries eased their way back into the routine of life, but it was distracting, to say the least. They knew that things wouldn’t be the same in a while. No one on Awdnaw was frightened of the things to come, the way many people on Earth are afraid of things they don’t understand. But, they had a keen sense of anticipation, as if they were riding to the top of a roller coaster, just waiting for that first plunge.

Several months had passed. During one Last Day meal, there was a lot of quiet talk about the way the stars had been looking. They were all aligned the way Ruwauth and José had said. Was it nearly time for everything to be changed, to be new?

Ymanyale was there, talking to clusters of people, reminding them that the stars are only part of the story. When everyone had finished eating, He went and stood near the doorway where only He comes in. He raised His arms to the sky. And He began to glow, waves of soft light, tinted with ethereal colors. It only took seconds for everyone to be silent and give Him their full attention. He declared, clearly and emphatically, “I am...the Bright...and Morning Star.” He waited a moment. He continued, “The stars have revealed *what* will happen, but they have not told you *when*, have they?” No one answered. He lowered His arms.

“Your hearts and minds should be as focused on Creator and His ways as always. Enjoy the stars; enjoy each other; enjoy all that Creator gives you. Warn others about the Dark One and his Rawh. Let the love of Creator show through you now more than ever. As you are diligent, living as you should, then, when you least expect it, everything will be new and you will be in Creator’s presence.”

Silence filled the room as everyone digested what He had said. Then, gradually, He glowed even brighter. Finally, it looked as if He erupted as a small cloud of stars.

Everyone was in awe and wonder at the display. It was rare for Ymanyale to do something like that. José observed, “Sine we were all talking about the stars, and since He is the Morning star, it probably was just an object kind of lesson for us”. His observation was correct.

Reports came from all over Awdnaw that Ymanyale had spoken to them the exact same words, in the exact same way as He had in Nadtsarett. But, people weren’t surprised by such a simultaneous appearance. He had done it before, but only when He had something very important to say to everyone. That meant that things were going to change soon, even if ‘soon’ on Awdnaw could take years.

Maugrab and Austare, Ian and Yaleah, Onayasim and Susan, José and Ruwauth and everyone else on Awdnaw, outside the Dark Valley, obeyed Ymanyale's instructions and strove even more to allow Creator to enable them to be what He wanted them to be. Weeks turned into months, which turned into just a few years. At times, everyone was so busy searching and exploring that they forgot that things would soon be totally different.

The Dark One and his Rawh were busier than ever; they knew their time was very short. Every sort of deception was tried, all to no avail.

There was the battle for the young people, when the Rawh made a desperate attempt to deceive them in some sloppy wholesale way. The silly fools had tried it before, but the people on Awdnaw knew better than to follow a leader just because that person said that what they were doing was somehow right or better. The people, even the young, had learned to subject all activities and thoughts, even fashions and fads, to the will and rule of Creator. The ridiculous things the Rawh tried to get the young people to do were so outside Creator's nature that it failed miserably. Even the few weaker ones were easily kept from such ludicrous ideas.

During another time, the Rawh tried a lie that had worked well in a few other places outside of Nadtsarett. They would whisper to those they thought most likely to believe, "Just because it's all going to be new, will it really be better? He won't tell you that it might be worse. He won't tell you anything because He doesn't trust you." Those same people were the ones most likely to tell someone else what they heard. So, they told Ian and Onayasim and the others. It took just enough time for Ian to draw a deep breath before he and his friends dispatched the Rawh far away. At least for the time being.

One day, it seemed as if time was somehow beginning to slow down, or speed up, or simply disappear altogether. The process took a few days, culminating on a Last Day. In every town, everyone, including those that sometimes couldn't come and some who lived on the far outskirts, had come to a Last Day celebration. After the final Last Day meal, everyone on Awdnaw, outside that Dark Valley, went to sleep with deep anticipation in their hearts.

The next day, all over the planet, at the same time, regardless of where a person was, a sound was heard. The blast of a trumpet. Not deafening or piercing, but definitely loud enough to get a person's attention.

However, it didn't attract the attention of the people in the Valley of the Dark Eyes. They heard it, but they were all so engrossed in the way they were ignoring Creator, that it was just an interruption of their activities.

Every head outside that Dark Valley was turned skyward. Many had been awakened or called from other places, but after a few seconds, everyone saw Him. Ymanyale was in the sky, surrounded by so many people it was virtually impossible to count them all. He had brought some from Creator's city and some from other worlds.

Without warning, everyone started rising up to join the cloud of people in the sky. It may have taken minutes, or seconds to travel the distance. Past the trees, above the hills, through the upper water they went, without fear, without looking back. They joined the innumerable flock as they crowded around Ymanyale, miles above the planet. The Dove was also with them. He wouldn't be needed any more down there. And Gehbriy'ale, the lead Mawlawk, was there with the most beautiful trumpet, calling all who loved the Father to be made new.

When the people left, there was no more need for the Cherowb to guard the Valley of the Dark Eyes, so they joined the throng. And the Mawlawk that were there had no one else to share

information with, so they came, too. The only ones left were those in that Dark Valley. And the Rawh.

When everyone had been gathered, the whole group moved away. They would be with Ymanyale as He gathered more from other planets. No one knew how they were moving. Their desire was to be with Ymanyale and, evidently, that was all it took to move with Him. They traveled amazingly fast, but were still able to enjoy the splendor of the stars and planets and other celestial wonders.

The next planet was one on which the Dark One had beguiled many into following him, including their first parents. The rejoicing that had been rampant through Ymanyale's cloud had subsided onto silence. The planet had been ravaged by hate and greed and crime and last of all, war. There was no upper water. There was little water of any value left at all. Great waves of blood pounded against scorched, lifeless shores.

Gehbriy'ale drew a deep breath and blew his trumpet. Few people came from below, but when they did, the rejoicing erupted again. There was always rejoicing for anyone who escaped the Dark One.

This continued for the last few planets where Creator had placed life. When all the people had been gathered, the mass of them was immeasurable! Gehbriy'ale blew his horn one more time, and they all followed Ymanyale to His city.

When they arrived, there was talk of a huge feast to celebrate the eternal union between Ymanyale and His people. And lots of excitement about the places where each of them would live. And the worship that there would be and the exploration and the reunions with those they hadn't seen for a long time and a myriad of other things that they would see and hear and do.

But, before any of that took place, there was one more thing they needed to see. Ymanyale called them to stand on the edge of the city and look out over the universe they had just left. From there, they saw a great wave of fire surge from under the city, spreading in all directions across all physical creation.

On Awdnaw, those in the Valley of the Dark Eyes didn't even know that they were no longer prisoners there. They were so engrossed in trying to prove who was the leader, who was the most powerful, who was the most ... anything. They barely noticed that everyone else had risen from the planet and that the Cherowb had gone as well.

High above them, they saw a bright light. Not a pinpoint or even a ball of light, but an all-consuming light. It was the wave of fire, white and red, charging toward them. Some were so out of their minds that they simply cursed it and went on with what they were doing. Others were alarmed, but were so used to things just going on as usual that they dismissed it. A few knew what it was and screamed in terror, provoking curses from those around them.

As it approached the planet, it ruptured the upper water, boiling it furiously, resulting in a rain of fire and scorching water. When the brunt of the fire was a few miles over their heads, it began scorching trees. Grass and brush burst into flame. The heat caused blisters and open sores on everyone. Their screams and curses filled the air.

Creator is merciful to the innocent. Before the wave of fire ever left the shores of Creator's city, all the animals on all the planets ceased their physical existence. The Dove had sung a final lullaby to them and they had laid down for a final nap, and their souls went wherever animal souls go.

When the fire reached that Dark Valley, the screaming stopped. The cursing stopped. Time stopped. Each person was engulfed in a silent, dark, scorching cell, falling down, or maybe up, and no one was able to control anything about their condition.

Duke was among them. He had had many chances when his friends Ian and Yaleah would come to speak to him. Ian, especially, would often seek him out to try to woo him back to Creator's Light. But, Duke had made his choice. He was now among those who were kneeling before Creator's throne. For now, the pain and silence had stopped.

"Michael Washington". Creator spoke his name with the deepest love and compassion. "Your time for deciding is now over. When time stopped, your heart was directed away from me. That is the way you chose; that is the way you will be. It was my great desire to see you living joyfully in my city, but you will never see it. Go, away, to where you will be."

At His word, Duke flew away, down somewhere dark, lonely, hot and painful. He could see and hear others coming and going, but after a short while, there was nothing but his own thoughts and screams and curses. There was a stench that never left his nostrils. And, to keep him from getting used to it, it would change every so often. First, it was the smell of burning flesh. Then, vomit, followed by extreme saltiness, like someone's tears. Then it reeked of sweat, like unwashed feet. There was the smell of mold, as if from things held onto too long; and putrefying blood, like the kind found in untreated wounds. Each smell brought memories of wrongs he had done and of good things he had left undone.

The Dark One and the Rawh had all been in the path of the wave of fire, and now found themselves in a huge cavern filled with fire and smoke and pain. Their punishment was similar, but employed things that made them think about their once glorious life in the presence of Creator.

As the fire had spread, those standing on the shores of Creator's city saw it engulf galaxies and nebulae, comets and asteroids, and planets of all sorts. It didn't destroy a thing. Instead, as it passed over them, it left them looking more real, so to speak, than before. It was as if someone had polished the stars and rehabilitated the planets. The rehabilitation was especially noticeable on those planets where the Dark One had had such power.

The fire kept unfolding. It was no longer a simple wave, but was flooding the whole universe in all directions. It continued until it reached the edge of everything and disappeared.

Every single created citizen of that city, human and spirit, stood in awe for a while. Then, like a wave as powerful as the fire, they all turned to face Creator and began to applaud and cheer and commend Him for the way He renewed everything. They spent twice the time looking at Him as they did watching the renewal process.

After the applause and ovation had subsided, Creator spoke to them from His throne. He looked like Ymanyale. And, He didn't need to shout. It seemed that each person was as close to Him as the next, even though there were countless millions of people there. "Welcome, my beloved. You have loved me and enjoyed my presence. You have fought hard for me and attended me. You have called me Father. Now, you will call me your Beloved. There is no one who can separate us now. Come, let us rejoice in this union."

As soon as He had spoken, they were all seated at a banquet table with the most delicious food all over it. As people ate and drank, they visited with relatives and friends. People from planets like Earth, where death had been introduced, were getting to meet ancestors and other significant people that had gone before them. All those people were mingling, and when someone wanted to see someone else, it only took a thought to find where that person was and to be transported there.

After what seemed like a long time, even though there wasn't any time, the banquet table faded away and everyone turned their attention to their Beloved again. He enjoyed just being

Eden on a Distant World

with them. And they relished the ability to be with the Father and Ymanyale and the Dove, taking pleasure in just being in His presence.

Then He announced, “I have created everything to be enjoyed. The universe is perfect and pristine; now, the only darkness is part of the ways of shadows on orbs. The kingdom of my city is unexplored by humans. Go, now, where you desire; see and experience all the gifts that I have prepared for you from the beginning of time. We are always together, bound by my love.”

T H E E N D

What if Adam and Eve hadn't eaten that forbidden fruit? What would planet Earth be like? What would daily life be like? How would we interact with the animals? Would there be a need for police, fire fighters, doctors, garbage collectors or farmers?



Eden on a Distant World follows four Earthlings to the planet Awdnaw where their Adam and Eve didn't eat the forbidden fruit. Life is spent discovering all that Creator has made. People ask permission of a horse before they ride and ducks arrange their own race across a lake of mercury. Houses have no roofs and the stars tell the future. And Creator comes to talk to people.

But, even in paradise, the Dark One is busy with his lies and deceptions. What happens when someone believes his lies? Is there no hope for anyone caught in his trap?



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