

Third Place: Fiction

Student Choice Award

"The Great Traveler"

By Travis Mersing

Saera awoke to a soft and cool morning breeze. It drifted in through small cracks between the wooden slats of her home bringing the smell of morning seaweed with it. The smell alone was not enough to carry her from her warm bed, but the soft morning sun glittering on the waves outside her window was.

She rose with a yawn as her sleep tightened muscles relaxed. Her body carried her through breakfast and making her bed while her mind wandered elsewhere. To the mountains of Sande Fel, the plains of Tauro, and the deep oceans of Plagueo. They came as distant memories or future visions or maybe just vivid dreams.

Either way, she could no longer keep them straight as she added the two-thousand-seven-hundred and third mark to her door. She could no longer remember starting to add the marks, but still every morning before she headed outside, she added one more. This morning was no different, and as she swung the marks out and away, the village of Hoarth greeted her like an old friend.

It was a small fishing village set between two mountains on the watery moon of Greeth. The sun rose over the water each morning and disappeared behind the mountains each night. However, this morning the sun was being cut by a thin black line that was growing larger with each passing moment.

Saera had seen such a sight many times, but never in Hoarth. She began to wonder who the space cruiser would bring: journalists, Cassel agents, or just lost travelers. Either way, they would find their way to her eventually, but first they would encounter the people of Hoarth.

They were private people who normally did not take to strangers. It had taken Saera many revolutions to gain their trust and many more to gain a place among them. It was not their nature to be this way, but having been plundered and abandoned by Greeth many eons ago had made them distrusting of outsiders.

Among themselves, the people of Hoarth were friendly, holding community dinners, water games, and worship. They each lived alone in a small circular hut raised above the water on stilts, but it was in the water they came together as one. Their scaly green skin and flat appendages allowed them to glide through the water like a knife. And their bright green eyes made even the murkiest waters clear as glass.

They used these gifts to collect luminescent musk whose meat fed the village and whose glowing shells provided trade value when needed. Comparatively, Saera found this way of life difficult at first. Her long, thin arms and legs flailed in the strong ocean currents. And her dark skin and wiry hair quickly became plump with water making her heavy and slow in the water.

She struggled on this way for several revolutions before the people of Hoarth gave up on her swimming abilities. Instead, they taught her to shuck the musk they had collected with a long thin knife. The people of Hoarth had four webbed fingers that made such a task slow and painful, many of them even preferred to rip the musk open with their razor-sharp teeth. But Saera did not have such difficulties, her six long, thin fingers moved her blade with expert precision. She could open five times as many musk as a group of villagers could in the same amount of time.

It was this skill and her respect for their ways that Saera believed finally convinced the people of Hoarth to let her live among them. But it was also this fundamental difference in their species that would lead the space people right to her.

Most of the villagers would give vague responses to the space people or downright ignore them, but they would not protect her. She was not one of them, so if offered trade or threatened, they would point the space people to her. So she watched as the space cruiser came to rest just outside the village gates, and her wait began.

Despite the new visitors, the people of Hoarth brought Saera musk to shuck as they did every day. But unlike every other day, they were quiet and their eyes evasive. They did not understand why the space people had come, but they assumed it was because of Saera.

Saera had assumed they had come because of her, but as the day passed, she began to wonder if it was because of her. If Cassel agents or journalists had come for her, they would have already reached her. If it were only lost travelers, they would have found their needs and been gone. So Saera began to question why the space people were still there, and what they wanted. The minutes seemed to drag by; she shucked musk shell after musk shell until the people of Hoarth had retired for the night. As the sun began to sink beneath the mountains, she caught her first glimpse of the space people.

They were a single person struggling through the currents. His hair was dark and spiky, and his face pale as an albino musk. His arms and legs flailed about miserably, and his mouth appeared to cough up a continuous stream of ocean water.

Saera wavered a moment, wondering if she should just let him drown, before something deep inside tugged her to action. She strolled into her hut, searched for a moment, then emerged carrying a rope made of seaweed.

She tossed the rope down to the stranger hoping he would be wise enough to grab ahold, he was. She pulled him to the ladder that led up to her hut with a heavy tug, tied off the rope, and took a seat.

It was several minutes before the stranger recovered and made his way to the top of the ladder. The sun had set, but in the dusky light created by the ocean musk below, Saera could make out the boy's youth. He was no stranger to the galaxy, but there were many things he had yet to see and many things the galaxy had yet to introduce him to as well.

He was of the same species as she was, and presumably from the same place, Cassel. He bore the marks of the middle: distant tired eyes, worn hands, a baby blue jacket, and the symbol of press tattooed on his neck. He was a worker, the driving force of Cassel, and he had no right to be the sodden, retching ball laying in front of Saera.

In fact, he had no right to be flying a space cruiser or traveling to outer systems such as Greeth. So what was he doing lying in front of Saera? How had he, of the middle, come to Greeth? And more importantly, what did he want or know of Saera?

But instead of asking any of these questions, she asked, "What is your name?"

"Desro," said the boy, pulling himself to his feet. He was still dripping wet and beginning to shiver. Despite feeling threatened and repulsed by Desro, Saera gestured for him to enter her hut where she offered him a silky grey towel, one of a few possessions from her past.

"So what brings you here?" asked Saera, disinterested in any small talk. Desro sat silent and still on her floor draped in her towel. She could not tell by his expression whether he was in shock or sizing her up. So she added, "And seeing as you are of the middle?"

"I needed to find you," answered Desro, coughing up water still left in his lungs.
"And who exactly am I?"

“You are Saera. The great traveler of Cassel. You have seen the mountains of Sande Fel, the plains of Tauro, and the deep oceans of Plagueo. You have eaten with the people of Gore. You have brought the end to the Dimetien plague. And most importantly, you are Cassel’s greatest hero.”

It took Saera a moment to believe the sincerity in Desro’s voice. He had meant every word he had said, and he had spoken with a reverence that Saera had not heard in a long time. It was flattering, yet it was more confusing and concerning than anything.

“And say that I am? I still do not see what brings you here or how you would know such things.”

“I come only to speak with you, to hear your stories, and to know why you disappeared.”

“I still do not see why,” said Saera, shaking her head. “What have you been told of me? And how have you come by a space cruise?”

“I have only been told the greatest of great stories. How for years you lived for Cassel, traveling the galaxy to bring their ways and their technology to less fortunate civilizations. How you were the first of the middle to travel unaccompanied from one end of the galaxy to the other. But how ultimately, you realized Cassel was not benevolently spreading their ways, but stealing other cultures’ greatest features then letting them fade away. Eventually, you turned on them, releasing the Copus Harde to the masses before disappearing completely. Most assumed you dead, but the middle rallied at the information contained in the Copus Harde. The disparity of wealth on Cassel, and the cultural loss across the galaxy, all so Cassel’s high could be the only ones to experience the wealth of the galaxy. We rallied the lows and any highs sympathetic to our cause and overthrew the Cassel elite. We have since been determined to explore the galaxy, not to spread our ways, but learn the ways of others and restore their ways to them.”

Saera, who had been standing over Desro, was forced to take a seat. It was all she had hoped for when she had released the Copus Harde, but it was all so much more. She never expected Cassel to be overthrown, but what had she expected? The middle to be upset by the information. For resentment to build and grow like a virus. No! She had expected a few to read it, but for Cassel to quickly seal the breach. But they hadn't, the information had spread and Cassel had been overthrown.

It was all too much. Too much to believe, too much to process, too much. The lights began to swirl and fade around Saera as her brain fought to understand and process Desro's information. The last thing she saw before the lights completely faded was Desro rising to catch her.

When she awoke, she was no longer in Hoarth, but overlooking Cassel. Its grey stone buildings carved in perfect cylinders rising from the rocky terrain below setting a new terrain above. Morning commutes had resulted in space cruisers being gridlocked between the buildings. The air smelt of pressed Gool, the driving force of Cassel, and a soft breeze played among Saera's silky sheets.

She rose from the bed feeling more limber than she had in ages. Her seaweed rags, common in Hoarth, had been replaced by a silky, baby blue nightgown. As she stretched towards the open balcony in front of her, an IV tugged at her arm. She quickly removed it with a slight wince before whispering, "What is happening?"

Her answer came immediately as the door to her room opened with a mechanical whoosh. Desro entered, flanked by three or four nervous looking adolescents. He looked much better than their first meeting. His hair had been slicked down, his face was a light pink, and his formal middle robe was freshly pressed.

“I am sorry for taking you against your will, but it was necessary,” said Desro, sounding much older than he had during their first meeting. He no longer spoke with the choking of water or reverence, but as an equal.

“And why was it necessary?” asked Saera, her mind only beginning to understand the new life being set before her.

“As I mentioned, the new Cassel, run democratically by the people, wishes to repair the damage we have done to the galaxy. However, neither desired outcome has been without its struggles. We need someone like you who understands the plights of Cassel and the cultures of so many. So we must ask, despite already having sacrificed so much for us and the galaxy, that you sacrifice a little more. We ask that you share what you have learned? That you help us return the galaxy’s culture to them? And that you make Cassel a fair place for all?”

It took Saera a few minutes to digest the request. She had resigned herself to a simple life of consistency in Hoarth. It had been so long since she had explored and provided aid that she had begun to forget it was part of her life at all. Now, she was being offered the chance to do so again without the shadow of Cassel’s true intent following her every success.

How could she say no? She couldn’t, but she sat watching the worry spread across Desro’s companions faces. It was all she needed to solidify her choice. They were scared and needed her help, she could not refuse. It would be equal to refusing to help prevent Greeth from plundering Hoarth, home to a people she had come to love. So her answer was clear and definite, “Yes!”