The odyssey of Homer One
by Shawn Jacobson

Jen touched the new world.

“Yuk!” she exclaimed as she wiped the mud from her gloves.

“Braille is good,” said Kenny, her partner on the first walk by humans on this world, “But your scoop analyzer is better for feeling out unexplored planets.” Kenney hoped that this was merely the sort of mistake someone new to planetary investigators made, not an indication of general sloppiness.

“Understood,” Jen said as she attached the soil analyzer to the end of her cane.

Jen tapped along as she let her mapping software build a tactile model of the surrounding ground. Over the hill in front of her was the channel that separated the island on which they’d landed from the mainland. Jen hoped that the water was safe, but you never knew what it might contain. She remembered the unpleasant surprise they’d received from the microbes on the last rock they’d visited. She wouldn’t feel confident in its safety until they could do an in-depth analysis.

“Is the air safe!” Kenny asked. “I’m tired of being in this contraption. Then, after some hesitation, “but don’t test this by opening your helmet.”

“Someone needs to taste this stuff eventually,” Jen said, “but you’re right. I’ll use the analyzer.”

Jen listened to the audio summary of what the air analyzer reported. Oxygen was within reason; nitrogen was the main gas. She also noted the lack of anything obviously deadly.

“I’m opening up,” Jen said as she unclipped her helmet. “Be ready to bring me in if this stuff has nasties the analyzer couldn’t pick up.”

“Got it,” Kenny said as he read the report sent by Jen’s suit; he passed it on to the captain and the biology team.

“Not bad,” Jen said, “It even smells halfway decent. Not like that hog lot we dealt with three planets ago.”

“OK,” Kenny said, “I’ll bite.” He pulled off his helmet and gave the new atmosphere a chance to do its worst.

“We’re picking up radio signals,” the captain said, “and this doesn’t compute as random. The signal is intermittent. That’s probably why we didn’t notice it before now.”

“Someone else is out here?” Kenny asked. “I thought we were the only ship in this sector, that this was unexplored territory.”

“Unexplored by us,” the captain said.

“You think?” asked Jen. It was the one question that everyone had. They hadn’t found intelligent life out in the great beyond, but the possibility lived in the backs of their minds. Any new world could bring the wonders, and terrors, of first contact. This was, after all unexplored territory, unexplored by humans anyway.

Kenny listened to what the planet had to tell him. He heard some peeping cries, or at least that was what they sounded like. None of this sounded dangerous and none of this sounded close. He sure didn’t hear anyone offering to take them to their leaders.

“Any idea where the source is,” Kenny asked.

“Checking,” the communications officer said as he pinged the satellites they’d dropped off for triangulation. “I’d say at two o’clock from where you’re facing; about five clicks away. I’d say it would be a good walk for someone in shape if it weren’t for the intervening channel.”

“Someone’s feeling energetic,” Kenny groused; he sure was not looking forward to that sort of walk on a new planet; especially since the gravity here was higher than he was used to. If the intervening water made them use the rover, then thank God for the water.

“I recommend the rover,” the captain said as Kenny breathed a sigh of relief. “We’re exploring a new world, not training for the Olympics. Let’s stay on mission.”

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Kathy got the rover prepared for the trip.

“You ready yet?” the captain asked with less patience than Kathy felt was appropriate given the situation.

“Just checking to make sure auto drive is working correctly.”

“Good point,” the captain said. “We don’t want to break down out there.”

After a few minutes filled with anticipation Kathy gave the thumbs up.

“It’s ready to go,” she said. “Give me the coordinates you want to arrive at, and I’ll see if the mapping software will give us a route.”

Kathy looked at the proposed route glad that the rover could operate as a ship. She understood the reasons, from the perspective of biological preservation, for landing on islands; still it complicated these missions. She liked her jaunts in the rover to be simple, straightforward, with as few moving parts as possible. The more you asked systems to do, the more trouble they caused.

Eventually, the rover with Kathy, Jen, Kenny and Prem set out looking for the radio source.

“Good news,” Jen said. “Initial indications are that the water is safe to drink if necessary; I’ll have a drone get a sample for a bio-assay to check for bugs.”

“Thanks,” Kathy said as they approached the shore. “Switching into amphibious mode. Make sure you have your life jackets to hand.”

“Eye eye captain,” Prem said.

“Sailing, sailing,”

“You can’t sing,” Kathy said critiquing Kenny’s attempt at music.

“Thanks for the five-star review” Kenny muttered. Then, “do we have an analysis of the water yet?”

“Just finished,” Jen said. “Looks safe. Nothing in there looks like it would find us tasty, or vise-versa.”

“Then living off the land isn’t an option,” Prem said, “or the sea.”

“Not much to live off anyway, Jen said. “Initial findings from the drone squad indicate that there are some eight-legged things about the size of squirrels; they seem to be the top of the local food chain. That’s also true of the mainland as far as we know. Whatever is sending out the radio signal is probably as strange to this world as we are.”

“Speaking of which,” the captain broke in,” you are about a click from the radio source. It should be at the top of the hill you will find once you reach shore.”

“Roger that,” Kathy said as the rover came to ground. “Changing back to land mode.”

The rover made appropriate mechanical noises as the wheels came out; the machine took its crew out of the water and rolled over the rocky shoreline.

“Let’s go visit the neighbors,” Kathy said as she read the tactile map provided by the rover. She knew too much about machines to trust them without verification. Besides, she wanted to know what she’d be walking over should walking become necessary. Then a few minutes later, “I think we’re almost….”

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Kenny awoke from the sudden sleep that had hit him. He guessed it, a flooding of his radio system with intense noise followed by profound weariness, had hit everyone as the rover had crested the hill. Feeling around for his cane, he found himself on what appeared to be a floor. The surface was soft, but it didn’t feel like a carpet more like a meadow after a soft dew. Liquid musical tones in some sort of language, reached his ears. He guessed that whoever was responsible for the signals had taken them to its leader, or at least to the radio source.

“Anyone awake,” Kenny asked.

“Not so loud,” Jen said as her voice assailed his ears.

“Not so loud yourself,” Kenny said pitching his voice to a softer tone.

“Man, what a headache,” Prem said. “This feels like the worst hangover I’ve ever had.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Kathy said, “I don’t drink.” Most members of the exploration core didn’t drink; alcohol slowed the performance of your brainbox among other things. You didn’t want to be impaired when the unknown reached out to grab you. Hangovers were not a common source of conversation on the ship.

“At least we’re all alive,” Prem said, “though this headache might make you wish you were dead.”

Prem tried to work through his headache and listen to his surroundings. The voices, or what he presumed to be voices, seemed to be switching languages, as if seeking one the crew would understand. Prem also noted that there seemed to be three voices, two of which were relatively deep, the other higher in pitch.

Prem grabbed his cane and started moving about the nearby space to give his personal sonar enough parallax to build a map of the surroundings. He tapped before him to make sure he wasn’t going to run into anything. The last thing he wanted to do was to spoil first contact with a star-faring species by bumbling into an alien. Besides, the cane was the best back-up in case his on-board technology failed. Shortly, he had a map of his surroundings.

Besides the crew, there were three other shapes moving around the room, if that was the right word for it. They seemed humanoid, larger than the typical human although not vastly so. Their outlines appeared fuzzy the way plush toys from Prem’s childhood had been. Maybe, they were covered in fur.

“There are three aliens,” Prem said to his crew in case they hadn’t built their own map of the place, “two larger and one smaller. The smaller one seems associated with the higher-pitched voice. Maybe it’s female.”

“Why does that matter,” Kathy asked though she suspected she knew the reason that Prem would care. “Are you feeling amorous?”

“Not really,” Prem said, “I have a headache, remember. I’m just noting what I’m getting from the mapping software.”

“Does it tell you about the room?” Kathy asked getting back to business.

“Round,” Prem said, “about thirty meters in circumference and about four tall. I’m picking up non-moving shapes around the walls, I’d guess equipment of some sort. Jen, do you have a read on the air?”

“It’s not the planet’s air,” Jen said, “a bit less oxygen and more of some extraneous elements. Other than it smells like a barnyard, the air seems acceptable. This stuff shouldn’t kill us.”

“I wouldn’t know what a barnyard would smell like,” Kathy said, “I never farmed.”

Jen was about to tell Kathy what other things smelled like a barnyard, but that thought was forgotten when one of the aliens started saying things she could understand.

“Why do you come to gaze at the stars?” the aliens with the deepest voice asked.

Prem did not know what the word Gaze meant and thus had to query his brainbox for a definition. After several seconds of silence, the highest-pitched alien spoke.

“We apologize for our use of archaic words. we wanted to know why you traveled to this place to view the stars?”

Prem queried his brainbox for a definition view. This prompted the aliens to test out other archaic words such as see, look upon, and stare at. By the time they got to gawk at, Prem decided to take control of the conversation.

“Are you asking why we want to explore other worlds?”

For Prem, the answer was not simple; to be honest, he’d never asked himself the question explicitly. It was not to find new homes for man; living worlds had life incompatible with humans, and to kill this life was something that man no longer desired to do. It was not to find natural resources; such things were more easily exploited when found on rocks with light gravity. Prem decided that his reason for exploring space was to satisfy his curiosity, to learn about the great out there and to experience its wonders. And yes, he wanted to see intelligent alien life if such was to be found; Prem decided that his wish has been granted.

“If you come to look upon the stars,” the alien who’d not spoken yet said, “than you seek a holy purpose, one only meant for the elect of the universe. It is blasphemy for those who are not of the elect to gaze upon God’s visage. We wish to know if you blaspheme against the God of all.”

Prem really didn’t like that the aliens held deep religious beliefs. It wasn’t that he was an aggressive atheist; to him the question of a higher power was open. Also, he did not believe that people of faith were irrational; his experience was that religious folk were perfectly rational given their assumptions about the universe.

The problem was that Prem found a lot of religious assumptions to be strange. He didn’t know how to reason based of the assumptions of many human faiths; he expected alien faiths to be even more difficult to reason through. The biggest problem though was these aliens seemed to be the type of fanatics who through around words like blasphemy. Humans who did this had a history of doing terrible things to blasphemers; Prem expected alien fanatics to be no better.

Prem’s dark musings were interrupted by a message from his brainbox; a reference had been found to the word gaze. It had been a word used by humans back in the days of sight, before the salamagu plague had blinded humanity. This knowledge gave prem an idea, a question to ask.

“Is it blasphemous for us to understand the stars, to know about them and the planets that orbit these suns, or is it only blasphemous to see them?”

The aliens consulted among themselves in what Prem assumed was their own language as Prem, and the members of his team, waited.

Finally, the middle alien replied, “it is good for all knowing creatures of the universe to know of God and of the ways of God. Yet it is reserved to us, the elect, to see the stars, the image of God. It is only for us, the elect, to look upon God and to see God face to face.

“At one time,” Prem said, “we saw as you did. Then there was a plague and it blinded us. We only survived because the plague acted slowly, over years, and because those of us who were blind for other reasons taught the newly blind to survive without sight. So, be assured that we gaze upon the stars no longer.”

“IF you no longer see the stars as we do,” the middle alien said, “than that is acceptable.”

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“So, our neighbors created the Salamagu plague because sight violated their religion?” the captain asked.

“That’s what the highest-pitched alien told me,” Prem said. “They believe that God is the light and that the electrical-magnetic spectrum is his home. They believe that the wavelengths that correspond to what used to be called visual light are especially holy, that only those having God’s special favor were allowed to use these wavelengths. They don’t acknowledge any species other than their own as being among the elect. Thus, we had to be made to not see the stars.”

 “I know it sounds strange,” Prem continued, “but my experience tells me that religions always seem weird from the outside. I find many things about human religions bizarre; for non-human religions to be even more bizarre just makes sense to me.”

“I wonder if they were surprised to see us out among the stars,” the captain said as she sipped her tea.

“I’m guessing from what the high-pitched alien said that they didn’t think the plague worked,” Prem replied. “That was why they took us prisoner. I don’t think they were convinced that we were blind until we explained what our canes were for and told them how we accomplished our explorations without sight. Even then, they demanded the right to verify our statements with some rather painful procedures,” Prem continued feeling the scars on his forehead. “Given that, I was surprised to find that the one alien was not surprised that we made it into space in our blinded condition.”

“Oh?” the captain asked.

“Most of their people figured that, without sight, we would not keep our society going; but, some expected, that we would pull together when it was necessary for survival. This small group of their people believed that when we realized that we couldn’t go back then we would have to go forward. The high-pitch alien was one of these people. She was not surprised that we made it.”

“You got on well with the highest-pitched I take it,” the captain said. She didn’t like Prem’s assumption of genders for the aliens, she didn’t like unwarranted assumption of any kind. The captain appreciated Prem’s efforts to get his team back to the ship mostly unscathed, yet Prem would need to be reminded of proper procedures.

“Remember,” Prem said, “that I had a devil of a headache through most of this. She told me much about her people, but that was it.”

“Understood,” the captain said turning to his log. “Your next mission is to write a report about what you learned. In the report, please stay away from unwarranted assumptions, such as gender, please stick to the facts.”

Later, captain prepared to write her own report. She wasn’t sure if the Salamagu plague was a blessing or a curse. Sighted man had squandered his gifts, and had almost squandered his planet, before the plague, before man re-learned the serious business of survival. Yet, had blindness been necessary for this awakening? The captain didn’t know. Such questions were for historians, sociologists and philosophers to wrangle over; they were outside of her sphere of expertise. She decided to follow the rules that she had set for Prem, to stay away from unwarranted assumptions; it was best to stick to the facts.

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