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.”

“Understood,” Jen said as she attached the soil analyzer to the end of her cane. At least, that was what she called it. Her parents had taught her to revere the blind guides, those who had shepherded humanity through the Salamagu plague. They had called these sticks canes; so, that was what she called them, at least in her thoughts. If the other crew members called these sticks probes, well, she could use that nomenclature, but to her, these sticks were canes.

Jen tapped along letting her haptic system build a map of her surroundings. The main projection read as vibrations of varying force on her stomach, a gut map. She used her left, non-cane, hand to read a more detailed map of her immediate surroundings. If there were rough patches, she really wanted to know about them. Eventually, she would put her cane in its scabbard allowing her to have a free hand. But for now, whe wanted that extra level of verification that only a cane could provide. Besides, the fact that her cane sweeps were picked up by her hand map assured her that the system was working properly.

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 to drink so that they could replenish their water supply, but you never knew what it might contain. She remembered the unpleasant surprise they’d all 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 air analyzer’s audio summary. 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 and sent the report to ship’s commons where it could be read by any member of the crew.. “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.

“Not bad,” Jen said, “It even smells halfway decent.”

“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.

With excitement, and some fear, Kenny listened with greater attention 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 water.”

“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 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.

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

“Good point,” the captain said. “We don’t want to break down out there.” The captain appreciated Kathy’s innate mistrust of mechines; her skepticism about automation had saved their hides several times.

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.”

Once the mapping software completed its work, 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.” If Kathy had her choice, the ship would have carried animals to do the mapping work, birds to cary the sensors, and service animals to guide them along their way. She realized, however, that this would not be practical for several reasons. She did feel though that part of the reason that animals weren’t used went back to how most people now lived in space habitats Habitat people lacked the farmer’s appreciation of beasts as well as the farmer’s tolerance of dirt. Habitat folk were, by in large, too much into playing with buttons and to little into working with the stuff of life. Kathy felt that habitat folk were too prissy for planetary exploration; thus, Jen’s dramatic reaction to getting mud on her gloves. But then, no one asked Kathy about staffing spaceships.

“Aye aye captain,” Prem said bringing Kathy back to the business as hand.

“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 a complete bioanalysis of the water yet?”

“Just finished,” Jen said. “It aught to be safe. Nothing in there 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. It, a flooding of his radio system with intense noise followed by profound weariness, had hit when the rover came over the hill. Kenny’s guess was that whatever it was had knocked out everyone in the crew, but now that he was coming back to himself, he needed to do some investiagation.

Feeling around for his probe, 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 whatever 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 replied 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. Hence, hangovers were not a common source of conversation on the ship. Kathy wondered where Prem would have gotten experience with hangovers; she hoped that such experiences were not recent.

“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, one of which rumbled with a deep base, another was more of a tenner. The third was higher, an alto.

Prem grabbed his probe and started moving about the nearby space to give his personal echolocator 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 his best way of getting around since he’d lost his connection to the drone swarm.

Besides the crew, there were three other shapes moving around the room, if that was the right word for this place. They seemed humanoid, larger than the typical human although not vastly so. Their outlines read as fuzzy the way plush toys from Prem’s childhood had been. Maybe, they were covered in fur. Prem would have like to touch one of the creatures, especially the alto, female sounding one, to see if this was so; but he dismissed this desire as being a wish better not granted.

“There are three aliens,” Prem said to his crew in case they hadn’t built their own map, “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. Kathy, do you have a read on the air?”

“It’s not the planet’s air,” Kathy said, “a bit less oxygen and more of some extraneous gasses. 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,” Jen said, “I never farmed.”

Kathy was about to tell Jen 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 alien with the base voice rumbled.

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 of view. The intervening silence prompted the aliens to try 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. Most planets explored by man were never revisited, though some became destinations for wealthy ecotourists, and a few even had ports visited by space going cruise ships.

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 desired to experience contact with intelligent alien life if such was to be found. Prem felt joy in the current situation, even though the experience had its scary, and painful aspects.

“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 the universe.”

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.

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 that these creatures were fanatics. Human fanatics had a long history of dealing with blasphemers, and it was all bad. Prem had no reason to feel that alien fanatics would treat blasphemers any better than did human fanatics.

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 legendary days of sight, before the salamagu plague had blinded humanity.

Like most people, Prem didn’t spend much time thinking about these ancient times. Indeed, Prem had always suspected that these days were more mythic than real. He’d heard tales of people who could see, but he’d always lumped such yarns in with romantic fantasies about people who could fly, read minds, or do other sorts of magic. Prem realized that he’d heard the archaic words for sight; he had not recognized them in this situation because he’d not thought to link these fantastic stories with the very real situation he’d found himself in.

Now though, Prem had no doubt about the existence of these times. After all, brainboxes issued to spacers did not waste precious storage on fantastic literature. As his brainbox downloaded into his memory, the knowledge Prem received gave him 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 alien with the tenner voice 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, the elect, to look upon God’s visage, 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 before the plague taught the newly blind to survive without sight. So, be assured that we gaze upon the stars no longer.”

Jen then started in telling the stories of the blind guides; those who did not have sight before the plague. Prem let this continued for a while, hoping to convince their captors that he was telling the truth about humanities blindness. Finally, the tenner alien spoke.

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

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I’m sure glad the aliens finally let us go, “Kenny said. “They sure devoted some effort to assuring themselves that we were blind.”

“I guess they’re into trust but verify,” Kathy replied. “They sure didn’t buy all those blind guide stories.”

“Maybe they think that all us unelect types are pathological liars,” Kenny said. “Though I’ve seen enough folk who think they’re the elect of God but go about lying like fiends to think that the aliens might have their own issues with veracity.

“What I can’t understand,” Prem said in an attempt to get the conversation back onto the firm ground of secularism, “is why the sighted folk of old never made it to the stars.”

“Who knows with the sightlings,” Jen said. “Maybe they had it too easy with all of their gifts to need the required creativity. History teaches that a lot of space drive technology came about in the burst of discovery right after the blind guides saved humanity.”

“Or maybe,” Kenny replied, “they just didn’t pay attention to the universe around them as much as they should have.”

“What do you mean?” Kathy asked.

“Well,” Kenny replied, “you remember the hull breach a few worlds ago?”

“Yes,” Kathy said, “but what does that have to do with it?”

“Well,” Kenny continued, “someone sight dependent might have mistaken the stench alarm for a backed-up toilot. You might have a bunch of sighted folk griping about the plumbing while the air escaped the ship.”

“That’s a pleasant though,” Prem said. “Speaking of paying attention, has anyone else noticed trouble communicating with the drones?”

There was a moment of increasingly uncomfoertable silence as the rest of the crew checked their links.

“I can’t read mine at all,” Jen exclaimed.

“I’m getting something,” Kenny replied, “but its real shakey, very intermittent.”

“Good enough to trust,” Prem asked.

“I wouldn’t,” Kathy said. “I’m switching over to echolocator mode. Unfortunately, I can’t get information from outside the rover because it blocks sound. I know we’re on the water, but I’ll be confounded if I can pinpoint our location.”

“Tell you what,” Jen said, “I’ll get on top of the Rover and see if my echolocator will tell us where land is.”

“Thanks for volunteering,” Prem said, “I’ve got the hatch open for you.”

Jen pulled herself out of the hatch and crawled about the top of the rover for parallax. In a minute, she popped her head back into the cabin.

“There’s a smooth piece of shoreline between two big rocks in a couple of hundred meters,” Jen said. “Turn the rover to eleven o’clock and you’ll have a straight shot.”

Kathy turned the rover and aimed for the shoreline as Jen pulled herself back up through the hatch. Eventually, the rover reached the shore.

“Switching back to land mode,” Kathy said.

“Have any idea where we are?” Prem asked.

“According to the maps I saved,” Kathy said, “we’re just a bit off course. I’ll have to turn significantly right to avoid some rough country, but once we’re through that, it should be straight over the hill.”

“Excellent,” Prem said. “Jen, you stay on top of the rover to guide us in. If you find we’re headed for trouble, come back down enough to give us warning.”

At this, a voice came over the radio.

“Do you need help?” the voice asked.

“Is that the ship,” Jen asked.

“No,” Prem said, “it’s the aliens. I still can’t reach the ship. Those folk have some tech we don’t have yet.” The, after a minute, Prem answered the question from the radio.

“Thank you for your offer, but we’re fine now. I think we can make it.”

Prem was glad he didn’t need help from outside, but asking for help was never off the table. Every member of the space force had to go through the test, where they were cut off from electronics. He’d never heard of a cadet who’d not had to ask for help during the test. The psychologists said that the experience asking for help made crew members more cooperative, less likely to engage in petty quarrels. Prem wasn’t sure this was the case, yet he didn’t doubt that it helped keep teams running smoothly.

With Jen as a guide atop the rover, and without help from the folk who’d kept them prisoner, the away team reached their ship with no further trouble.

Jose met them at the ship’s entrance ladder.

“Why didn’t you communicate with us?” Jose asked. “The captain is frantic, some crew members wanted to give you up as dead, or missing, but the captain wouldn’t let them.”

“Not dead,” Prem said, “though my head makes me feel like death might have its merits. We just had technical issues, lost contact with the swarm of drones. We didn’t communicate because we couldn’t.”

“Understood,” Jose said. “We’ll get you to sick bay to run some diagnostics.”

“Thanks,” Prem said with a groan. “The last thing he wanted was to have someone else messing around in his head.

Yet, painful or not, Prem wanted to be set aright, to be hooked back into the various communications systems that would fully reunite him with the rest of his ship.

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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’re faith teaches 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 are 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.” And that was the problem with religion; it didn’t make sense outside of itself nor did it feel the need to do so.

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

“I’m guessing from what the high-pitched alien said that their crew didn’t think the plague worked,” Prem replied. “That was why we were taken prisoner. I don’t think we were convincing in our blindness until their doctor subjected us to 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 one I take it,” the captain said.

The captain did not like Prem’s gender assumptions about the aliens. One reason that trans people tended to stay on their own ships was to avoid the gender assumption, and gender games, of binaries such as Prem. The captain had only taken this post commanding a predominantly binary crew because the ship was Homor One, the elite ship of the exploration corps and the captainship of this vessel conferred prestige on its commander.

Mostly though, the captain hated unwarranted assumptions of any kind. What you knew that wasn’t so could kill you sure. It was best to acknowledge the unknow as the unknown and move foreward accordingly. The captain appreciated Prem’s skill at getting the crew home, mostly, unscathed, yet he would need to be reminded of 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 their 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, the captain prepared to write their own report. They weren’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 the captain’s sphere of expertise. They decided to follow the rules that they’d set for Prem, to stay away from unwarranted assumptions; it was best to stick to the facts.

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