

## The Last Planet on the List

“So what are you going to do when you get back to Earth?” asked Riley, while she finished up a report on the geology of Marzipan-b, the planet whose orbit they had left just the day before.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Bickel. He was the ship’s engineer, and was on the other workstation on the small deck, checking the ship’s operational systems. “I’ll probably sign up for another mission. There’s always another one going somewhere.”

“Like where? It wouldn’t be another study like this one, would it?”

“Oh, no. Probably a mission to Enceladus or another one of those potatoes orbiting Saturn. Those are the real hot items now.”

“Don’t you get tired of it?” Riley asked.

“Not really. I don’t really have anything else to do. You get used to it.” Bickel punched a few buttons on his console. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m trying to figure that out myself. I’ve spent my whole career in astrobiology. This was going to be my big moment - the chance to find a planet with life on it.” She shook her head. “Who would have thought that of 87 Earth-like planets, none, not one, would have life on it. No intelligent life. No life at all. All were just the right temperature, all had water, all were out of the path of large asteroids.”

”But won’t they send out other ships to look for life?”

”Oh, I’m sure they will at some point. But not right away.” She sighed. “No, this was supposed to be the big mission. Four years to investigate Earth-like planets with the mildest temperatures and most stable orbits, and therefore the best

candidates for having an atmosphere and climate that could support life. It took a lot of planning - a lot of funding - and a lot of arm-twisting and favor-trading to make this happen. When we get back and tell them that we found nothing, absolutely nothing....They're not going to be too eager to arrange for another mission like this anytime soon."

"But didn't some of those have the right climate and everything? I thought some of them looked all right."

"Oh, yes, some of them looked great," Riley said with a gleam in her eyes. "Quite a few, in fact. Water, mild climate. Beta-Schiller-d had beaches so pristine and warm that I could almost see the beach chairs and cocktails." She shook her head. "Who would've thought that of all those planets, not one micro-organism, not even a cell. Not even so much as a polypeptide."

"Well, don't give up," Bickel said. "There's still one more, right?"

"Yes, that's true." Riley got a wistful look in her eyes. "Voltimar-g. The 88th and last planet on our list."

They heard the sound of the electronic door sliding upwards and in walked Captain Kern. He had the usual disgusted look on his face, a look that had become ever more intense with every planet they had visited.

"So Riley, when are we going to get to this last planet?" he asked. "It is the last planet on our list, correct?"

"Yes, sir, that's correct," she said. "Voltimar-g."

"And when are we going to get there?"

"At the current speed, in approximately..." She pressed a few buttons on her console. "In approximately eight days we should get there."

Kern shut his eyes, and hung his head for a few moments. "Jesus," he whispered. "All right, eight days. And then we're done with this worthless mission." He turned and went back

through the same door, which slid up for him as he approached it.

For the next eight days Riley and Bickel did not see much of Captain Kern. When the mission had begun almost four years earlier, Kern had been on the deck almost constantly, directing the ship's travel, giving orders to the automatic pilot. He had looked excited to be exploring new worlds and being the captain of mankind's first foray into investigating Earth-like planets up close.

But as one planet after another turned out to be nothing but barren rock, Kern had become more and more discouraged, and quiet. He was on the deck less and less, preferring to stay in his cabin.

"What do you think the Captain does in his cabin all this time?" Riley asked Bickel one day. "You've been on other missions with him. Do you know?"

"I think he watches old movies," Bickel said.

On the day they were to go into orbit around Voltimar-g, Riley was excited. She had, for the time-being, dropped her moroseness and regained the fervent glow that had accompanied her at the beginning of the trip.

"I don't know why I'm excited, Bickel," she said. "But I have a feeling about this one. As a scientist I'm not supposed to let my feelings determine my course of action. I'm supposed to make conclusions based on scientific fact. Yet I can't help it - it feels like Christmas morning. Does it feel like that to you?"

"No," Bickel said. Then, after a moment, "But I think I know what you mean. Maybe this will be the one we've been looking."

Riley smiled. "You know what they say: '88th time's a charm!'"

Riley and Bickel made their preparations for approaching the planet and going into orbit. It was an elaborate checklist of items. Before they had left for this mission, they had undergone intense training on how to approach a planet that may contain intelligent life. This training had been administered by none other than NASA's Administrator herself.

"The most important thing to remember," Administrator Dawkins had said to the three of them during training, "is that it is their planet we are visiting, and we must respect that it is their planet. Even though you will have traveled a long, long way and endured many, many hardships, you cannot presume that they will welcome you with open arms. It is the epitome of arrogance to assume that they will welcome you at all."

She went on:

"When you approach a new planet, one of the planets on your list, there will be a three-stage approach. You will not just land your ship and start looking around. If the planet holds intelligent life," the Commissioner said, "it is important that our actions not be viewed as hostile. We must show them, first and foremost, that we respect their world and culture, and mean no harm, and only wish to conduct some scientific investigation with their permission and in accordance with their rules and requirements and wishes. If they wish us to leave, then we must leave."

The procedure involved sending out signals from space a variety of Earth language and in binary code, saying that the Earthlings came in peace. Then, the ship had to wait three days for a response, continuing to send out the message. For three whole Earth days (measured in an atomic clock aboard the ship), the crew could do nothing except send out this message and listen for a response.

“Then,” Administrator Dawkins continued, “if no response is received after three days, you are to send down a messenger robot by parachute, into a remote area of the planet. Surely by this point you will have identified the remote area by using the Kerben-Slake model of population settlement. By doing so, you will minimize the fear that may result from a strange object falling from the sky, and the distance that the native population will have to travel to get to the robot will give the robot time to deploy and commence the greeting sequence and establish a direct line of communication between the native population and yourselves.”

“And how long do we have to wait for this robot to get a response?” Kern had asked with the faintest tone of impatience.

“Three days, Captain Kern,” Administrator Dawkins had said sharply. “You shall wait three Earth days for the robot to establish a line of communication.”

“And if that doesn’t work, then can we land on the planet? Or is there some other ritual we have to perform? Are we then going to sacrifice a chicken and interpret its entrails?”

The Administrator smiled. “Captain Kern, I am sorry if these procedures pose an inconvenience to your command. While I appreciate your eagerness to explore these planets, you clearly do not yet appreciate the fact that these planets are not your own, and that you will be a guest there, and a representative of your planet, your country, your people, and this agency, of which I am head and as such have a responsibility to ensure that our emissaries do not repeat the mistakes of this planet’s colonists from so long ago. Does that make sense to you, Captain Kern?”

”Yeah, I guess so,” Kern grumbled, looking at the floor. He didn’t speak for the rest of the training.

”And so, as I was saying,” Administrator Dawkins continued, “if after three days the robot fails to attract attention from the native population and establish a line of communication - and of course this entire time you are still to continue sending out the signal from stage 1, and listening for a response - then you and Riley here may take the dinghy to the planet’s surface to explore.” She paused. “But there is still another precaution to have to take. You have to send them a hologram of yourselves in a display of peace.”

For 87 planets they had followed this procedure religiously. To the letter. In the beginning it had been easier. But as time went on, it became harder and harder.

“I don’t care. I’m tired.” He thought of all the work he would have to do. “Think of all the paperwork. I’m not doing all that paperwork. It’s going to be another rock. They’ve got us exploring all these ‘Earth-like’ planets and for what? It’s going to be another barren rock without an atmosphere. I’m so sick of this. Everyone thinks that we’re going to just find a planet that is just like Earth. And it never happens!”

“But this one...the readings show that there is oxygen,” Riley said.

“And it is on the star map. They are going to expect a report. I need something to put in the blank space.”

“Fine, if those apparatchiks at NASA need something for their precious forms, then let’s give them something. We’ll do a quick jump down, a quick landing. Look around, take a few pictures, and tell them the place was inhospitable, just like the others.”

“But sir - “

“I’m not doing a full scale investigation. Those take forever. Provisioning the dinghy, packing the suits, organizing the jars,

preparing the devices, and the robots, checking everything eight million times. I'm sick of checking things! Now that's my decision, and that's final. We do a fly by, snap some photos, and then we're out of here, straight back to Earth! Okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm not doing that whole rigamarole with the greeting, the fancy greetings in case there is intelligent life. That stupid Administrator Dawkins. What does she know about what it is like to be out here? She's spent her whole life in a classroom. All of sudden she gets this great idea that oh wouldn't it be nice if we had some kind of ceremony to show any beings that we are friendly, that we don't wish to harm them. So we go through this whole ceremony, every time, 47 times to be exact, and what happens? 47 out of 47 times the planet that was supposed to hold this vast hierarchy of intelligent that is going to be offended if we don't genuflect as we step off the ship are nothing but barren pieces of rock floating in space."

"But, sir, what if this is the one time there is intelligent life?"

"It isn't! Face it, Earth is it. Earth is the only place for life. I hate to say it, but the priests were right. Life was created on Earth, and Earth alone!"

The three crew members - Captain Kern, Riley, and Bickel, landed on the planet without going through the Commissioner's ceremony. Riley had advised against it, but Kern was impatient. Bickel just shrugged his shoulders.

What happens when they land on the planet, on Voltimar-g. They do not go through the ceremony.

The aliens capture them and put them in a prison. The crew have no idea what is going to happen to them, but they suspect that it is not something good. They wonder whether this would have happened if they had gone through the diplomatic ceremony.

The creatures on Voltimar-g are wide crab-like creatures, wide and squat against the ground, but with six legs and pincers, and four eyes. They communicate telepathically, and because the telepathy is communicated as a thought or picture, rather than as words, the crew can understand what is meant.

What should we do with them?

We're supposed to bring them to headquarters so they can be studied and investigated.

Another one of those studies? I'm sick of those. It's a ton of paperwork and they end up destroying the creatures anyway because the creatures never turn out to be intelligent. They just stand there and look at us with dumb faces, like these three.

Yeah, I have to get back anyway.

But shouldn't we...

Forget it. Just de-animate the creatures and let's get going. My legs hurt.

The first creature aimed an object that looked like a glass telescope at Captain Kern. The crew members heard a whistling sound, and then Kern collapsed and did not move. Riley and Bickel were shocked and Riley was about to check the captain's pulse, but then the creature aimed the glass thing at Riley, and the whistling sound was heard again, and she collapsed, and then aimed the glass thing at Bickel, the whistling sound again, and then Bickel collapsed. The second creature held up an object in its right pincer that looked like a red gem. A red cloud



emitted from the gem-like object, and enveloped the three lifeless crew members, and lifted them up. The three creatures started walking towards the mountains, and as they did, the red cloud holding the three dead crew members floated behind them, following.

“All right, let’s go,” said the leader.

“Whatever you say, sir,” said the second in command.

“Whatever you say.”

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