

Planet 237

Mission Commander Gwen Hargrave displayed a visual scan of the planet in the conference room. Officially the planet had a long alphanumeric designation that gave its galaxy, location within the galaxy, orbit, and date of discovery, but to the crew of Explorer 6 it was simply "Planet 237." The two hundred and thirty seventh planet they had investigated. Most had been desolate rocks that only warranted a quick sensor scan. This one looked more promising.

"We've all been through this drill before," Gwen said. "Is it safe to land an exploration team, and is there any reason to send a team? Life support?"

"Conditions are well above minimum," Kai Pham answered. "Twenty-three percent oxygen, moderate temperatures, no harmful gasses or radiation, gravity seven-eighths earth."

"Biology?"

"Triopical" Val Koval replied. "Lush vegetation, abundant water, mostly forested but with a few open areas large enough for a landing. Infrared indicates warm bodies moving under the tree canopy, probably smaller than human. No visual sightings."

"Anthropology?"

"Probably nothing," said Jean Corbin. "No electronic emissions, no sign of habitation, no sign of agriculture or terrain modifications. There could be pre-industrialization hunter gatherer groups living under the tree canopy, but most such societies live in the open areas where they'd be visible."

"Security?"

"I think we can get by with minimal security," Quita Duran answered. "Biology and Anthropology haven't forecast any large threats. I'd still recommend body armor and small arms to protect against animal attacks, insect venom, and unforeseen threats. And of course gloves and helmets until monitoring rules out harmful microbes or viruses."

"Absolutely," Val agreed.

"Logistics?"

Habib Taj hesitated before speaking. "There's certainly no reason why we can't send a landing party," he said. "We've got enough chemical fuel for one more landing. We might even be able to find something edible to supplement our space fare. Heaven knows the crew would appreciate a little change to the routine. I just want to warn you that we only have enough fuel for one more landing. The last two landing parties didn't find anything suitable to convert to biofuel, so unless we find something to distill on this landing we'll have to head back to Earth. The main engines can keep going for years, but unless we have chemical fuel for the landing craft it's pointless to visit other planets."

“I can’t guarantee we’ll find anything distillable on this planet,” Val said, “but I think it’s highly likely. The last two planets were semi-arid. Life’s tough there, and the plants had evolved to incorporate toxic chemicals into their foliage to prevent grazing. Unfortunately, those chemicals killed the bacteria we use to ferment fuel. This planet supports a much more extensive biodiversity and we ought to be able to find something we can use.”

There was a brief discussion of this question but the consensus was to send a landing party. As Kai pointed out, they’d be faced with the same issue on any other planet they encountered. Why not gamble on a tropical planet? If they found a good source of biofuel here, they could ferry enough back to the ship for several more landings.

Gwen dismissed the group to prepare for the landing. She was about to go to her cabin to make preparations when Karl asked if he could have a private word with her. They stayed behind while the rest of the team leaders left.

Karl Maddux was the nonvoting recorder of the exploration team. Officially it was his job to keep records of the ships activities, record its discoveries, and send updates to the Space Exploration Administration whenever the ship was at a location where communications were feasible. Unofficially it was an open secret that he was the Administration’s “spy.” He reported on the actions and decisions of every senior member of the team, especially the commander. His reports could make or break an explorer’s career. The team grudgingly understood and accepted the need for such an individual. Space exploration was horrendously expensive, and the old philosophy of “what happens in space, stays in space” led to abuses. As long as a commander was well liked by the crew, which was almost a given due to the extensive pre-mission screening and training, a commander could “go rogue” and do whatever pleased the crew instead of what the Administration wanted. The crew would unanimously back the commander when they returned. So, the recorder was a necessary, though not a popular, member of the team.

“What’s up, Karl?” Gwen asked when they were alone.

“I didn’t want to raise this question in front of the crew, but what do you hope to gain by visiting this planet?”

“Scientific knowledge!” Gwen immediately responded. “New types of plant life. Animal species. Mineral samples. Knowledge of our universe. Plus enough biofuel to visit several more planets.”

“And what will that accomplish that couldn’t have been accomplished by an unmanned probe?” Karl asked. “You know as well as I do that manned missions are horribly expensive. That’s why private companies abandoned manned missions years ago. They use unmanned probes for their mining, mineral exploration, station resupply, and other commercial missions. Unmanned probes are a lot less expensive and a lot more productive than manned missions. There’s no money in pure scientific exploration, so the private companies leave that to the government. Unmanned probes are more efficient at scientific exploration too, except that the public isn’t interested in pure science. They may ooh and ahh for a minute or two at some new photo of a star nebula, but they won’t spend billions of

dollars to do it. Or more to the point, they won't vote for someone who wants to spend billions of their tax dollars to take pictures of nebulae. But manned missions – those grab their attention. The public likes manned missions because they can imagine themselves as being on one. First man on the moon. Fantastic, but it's been done before. First woman on Mars. Fantastic, but it's been done. First manned spacecraft to travel faster than light. Great, but it's been done. If you want this mission to be a success, you need to find something that's never been done before. Something that will grab the public's attention and make them talk about Gwen Hargrave for years! Landing on this planet will be about as exciting as a field trip to a Kansas wheat farm."

"But our mission is to explore new planets and bring back samples of plants, animals, and minerals," Gwen said.

"Yes, yes. I know," Karl said dismissively. "They have to say that to make it sound scientific. I'm not saying you shouldn't explore planets, just that it's pointless to explore boring ones. You need to explore planets that are exciting. Planets with flowing lava, fantastic beasts, and intelligent life. Planets that will excite the people on Earth who are paying for this mission."

"We've been searching for intelligent life for hundreds of years now," Gwen said. "Haven't found it yet."

"But you and I both know it's got to be out there," Karl argued. "The odds of us being the only intelligent life in the universe are astronomical. We've just got to find it, and we have to find it with a manned mission or there will be no more manned missions."

"You're talking about landing on planets that are dangerous," Gwen said icily. "Planets where I could lose members of my crew."

"I don't want anyone to die," Karl insisted. "That's bad publicity. I just want you to have an adventure."

Gwen stared at him in disbelief. The death of one of her crew would just be bad publicity to him? Finally she spoke. "We've already voted to land on this planet. I'm not going to tell my crew the landing's off because it would be 'boring.' We should get enough fuel to land on several more planets. Maybe one of them will be a little more exciting."

Karl raised his hands in resignation. "It's your decision," he said. "But for the sake of future manned missions, I hope you give some thought to making the probability more than just a 'maybe.'"

The landing craft held twenty people, so Gwen took her five team chiefs and thirteen other crewmembers of assorted specialties. She took different crewmembers on each landing, hoping to make certain every member of her crew got to land on at least one planet during the mission. She would have much rather taken fourteen crew members, but Karl insisted on participating in every

landing. Their tasks were carefully preplanned, so as soon as they landed teams set out to assemble the biofuel distillation unit, search for fuel candidates, take plant and mineral samples, monitor environmental conditions, and provide security. After half an hour the environmental monitoring team reported no toxic fumes or biohazards, so everyone took off their helmets with relief.

The biology search team soon found a grove of what appeared to be palm bushes with excellent biofuel qualities. The logistics team began harvesting leaves from these plants and carrying them to the biofuel generator. The biology team continued their search, now looking for edible plants, while Gwen met with her team leaders to schedule shifts to rotate crew members through biofuel generation, security, and exploration. Suddenly they heard a swish and a loud “thwack!” A crewmember who had been carrying leaves screamed and fell to the ground, clutching his side. Near the edge of the clearing they saw what looked like a short human in a kilt pointing a tube at the fallen crewmember. It dropped to all fours and ran with astonishing speed.

“Stick it!” Gwen yelled.

A security crewman shouldered a launch tube and a rocket hissed toward the fleeing figure. Just before it struck it exploded into a mist of sticky glue. The figure fell to the ground, thrashing furiously as it tried to unstick its legs from one another.

The fallen crewmember slowly got up, still clutching his side, and cursing as he hobbled back to the landing craft. He had been struck by a small metal arrow, similar to a crossbow bolt. Fortunately his body armor had stopped it, but he had a huge bruise where it hit. The security team carried the creature that had fired the projectile to the lander. It looked like a cross between an ape and a dog. About four feet tall, it had a large cranium, intelligent eyes, and grasping hands and feet like an ape, but a short muzzle and a tail like a dog. Later, when Val had time to study the scans she made of the creature, she was amazed at how its hips and shoulders were perfectly adapted to walking upright as well as to running on all fours. It was sparsely covered in short black hair, and was wearing strips of leather like a Roman soldier’s skirt and a metal breastplate.

After a short search they found the launch tube where the creature had dropped it. Amazingly strong and lightweight, it used a very powerful spring to launch the arrow. The device must have been preloaded, as it would have taken a lot of force to cock that spring. Indeed, the creature they captured had several loaded tubes hanging from its belt. Security carefully removed these and locked its wrists and ankles in conventional restraints as they dissolved the sticky glue. They tried to talk, but it refused to communicate.

“What now?” Karl asked Gwen.

“We need to release him,” Gwen answered. “Or her. I have no intention of violating its privacy to investigate. Let’s just assume it’s a him. I was hoping he would try to communicate. We’re linked to a computer on the ship that was designed to decode new languages. Its database had every known Earth language, syntax, and facial expressions so it can compare a new language to known language and look

for patterns or similarities. But, since the creature won't speak we can't learn his language. We have no legitimate reason to detain him further."

"But he'll lead his friends back to us!" Carl said.

Gwen gave Carl an "are you kidding?" look. "Do you know how much noise we made when we landed? I'm sure every creature within a twenty mile radius knows we're here. We need him to tell his friends to leave us alone."

She called Quita over. "I need you to get ready to fire an exploding rocket. Something that makes a really big bang."

"I only brought twelve," Quita warned. "This was a minimal security landing."

"I'm hoping this one will keep us from having to use any more," Gwen said. She had the security team bundle together sticks and leaves into a rough approximation of the creature. Then they escorted the creature into the center of the clearing, set up the stick dummy, and walked a couple hundred yards away. Gwen was fairly certain this was much further than the range of its arrow launcher.

"You may fire when ready, Quita."

Quita took aim and let the rocket fly. The dummy was engulfed in a huge fireball, the blast and noise nearly knocked them over, and when the smoke cleared there was only a blackened hole where the dummy had been. The creature's mouth hung open as it stared wide-eyed at the hole. The security crewmen released his restraints and pointed toward the forest. It scampered away and disappeared in an instant.

There were no further incidents that day or on the following day. They continued to explore, gather samples, and generate biofuel, but with increased security. On the third morning Gwen was awakened by Quita. "Drones report multiple warm bodies approaching from the southeast" she said.

Gwen made certain all crewmen were accounted for and notified the orbiting explorer ship of the situation. She stationed five security crewmen in prepared defensive positions near the landing craft. Then they waited. A creature slowly emerged from the forest and stepped into the clearing, carrying what appeared to be a palm frond above its head. It was followed by two creatures wearing glittering breastplates and elaborately feathered helmets. They appeared to be unarmed. They advanced about twenty paces into the clearing and stopped. They could see several more creatures peering out from the forest, but none stepped into the clearing.

"I believe they want a parley," Jean suggested.

“That’s what it looks like to me,” Gwen answered. “Jean, I want you beside me with the communications link. If we can get them to talk, even among themselves, we may be able to learn something about their language. Karl, I want you on the other side of me. You said we needed to find something exciting, here’s your opportunity to see it firsthand.”

“What about me?” Quita asked.

“I want you back here to lead the security teams if things go sour,” Gwen answered. “They appear to be unarmed, so the three of us need to go unarmed. You wouldn’t do me much good standing unarmed in the open.”

Gwen led the other two out of the landing craft. They slowly walked toward the creatures and stopped about four feet away. Gwen started to raise her hands, palms forward, to show she was unarmed, but stopped when the creatures flinched. Apparently that wasn’t a gesture they understood. She dropped her hands to her sides and simply said “We come in peace.”

The creatures stared at her, seemingly perplexed. Gwen wondered if they’d ever before encountered an intelligent creature that didn’t speak their language. Was there only one tribe, one language on this planet? She tried a different approach. She pointed to Jean, Karl and herself and said “Human.”

The creatures stared at her for a long time. Then the one with the most elaborate helmet pointed to each of them in turn and said “Deng.”

Gwen pointed to herself and said “Gwen.”

The creature with the elaborate helmet pointed to itself and said “Kwan-Deng.”

Through similar gestures they learned the other two creatures were named “Tan-Deng” and “Bontoo-Deng.” Did all creature’s names end in “Deng?” Or maybe that was a family name, and the creatures weren’t called “Deng” after all. By patting the ground Gwen learned the planet was called. “Tonton.” Or maybe that was just their word for dirt. In English, the planet Earth is covered with earth, so maybe it was the same here? Language could be so confusing.

“We’re learning a few words,” Jean said, “but it will take forever to learn a language at this rate. We need lots of words, so the communication software can look for patterns and infer meanings. It can monitor multiple conversations at once. Can you get them to talk among themselves?”

“I’m running out of things to ask about,” Gwen said, still maintaining eye contact with Kwan-Deng. “Anybody got any good conversation starters?”

Karl looked down at the ground. Then he picked up three golf ball sized rocks. The Deng stepped back a bit, unsure of what he was going to do with the rocks. Karl began to juggle them. The Deng relaxed and watched, seemingly fascinated. Gwen had no idea Karl knew how to juggle, let alone that

he could do several tricks while juggling. The Deng started to talk among themselves while they watched. Once Karl tossed a rock, seemingly out of control, but it bounced off the side of his head and fell back into the pattern. The Deng broke into a low, guttural clucking which Gwen assumed was laughter. Several Deng stepped out of the forest into the clearing to get a better view.

Karl concluded his juggling routine with a bow. The Deng thumped their palms against their chests, which appeared to be a form of applause. Then Karl reached over, pulled a coin out of Gwen's ear, and tossed it to Kwan-Deng. This generated a burst of conversation among the Deng, including the ones in the forest. Karl very gingerly stepped forward, reached out, and pulled a coin out of Kwan-Deng's ear, much to Kwan-Deng's surprise. Karl gave that coin to Tan-Deng, then pulled a coin out of his ear which he gave to Bontoo-Deng. This generated much conversation and chest slapping.

"I'm all out of coins, and all out of ideas" Karl said as he took a bow.

Gwen gestures with her hands toward Kwan-Deng and hoped he understood this meant "your turn."

Kwan-Deng barked a couple of words and a Deng stepped out of the woods holding a stick about three feet long. He began twirling it like a baton, tossing it from hand to hand, hopping over it as it twirled, and tossing it high in the air while spinning around and catching it, still twirling. The humans applauded this performance heartily while the Deng shouted encouragement. After this act the humans and the Deng took turns performing stunts and acrobatics such as handstand, back flips and walking on hands, culminating when Gwen approved a request from six crewmen who came outside and formed a human pyramid, a trick they'd learned in survival training.

Things quieted down after the performances. Then Kwan-Deng looked directly at Gwen and said "Attoo tangbar?"

"I'm fairly certain attoo means 'from,'" Jean said. "I don't know what tangbar means, but I suspect he's asking where we came from."

Gwen looked at Kwan-Deng and said "Attoo Earth."

Kwan-Deng looked taken aback. "Kane tangbar?" he said.

"Kane is a negative term, meaning 'no' or 'not,'" Jean said. "I think he's surprised we're not from tangbar, wherever tangbar is."

Gwen tried to make her voice as reassuring as possible. "Kane tangbar," she said. "Attoo Earth." She looked up and pointed to the sky as she said "Earth."

The Deng fell silent, except for some quiet murmuring. Kwan-Deng and the others slowly backed out of the clearing into the forest and disappeared, never taking their eyes off the humans until they were hidden by the trees.

“Well that could have gone better,” Gwen said.

That evening Jean came to Gwen’s cabin to talk.

“I’ve been reviewing the recordings,” Jean said, “and the computer has had more time to analyze the conversations. We still don’t have a clear meaning for the word ‘tangbar,’ but it was used a few times by Deng on the fringes of the group. It seems to have had a positive connotation when Karl pulled a coin out of Kwan-Deng’s ear, and a negative connotation when the Deng who was doing a back flip slipped and landed on his back.”

“Meaning?” Gwen asked.

“It’s possible the word was used as an expletive,” Jean answered. “The software gives that a 40% probability, but it can’t suggest a meaning based on the recordings. This is pure speculation on my part, but I wonder if ‘tangbar’ might be the name of a deity, or possibly the deity if they worship only one. You know, the way we might say ‘God!’ with awe when something amazes us, or ‘God!’ in anguish when things go wrong.”

“So when Kwan-Deng said ‘attoo tangbar’ he was asking if we came from God?” Gwen asked.

“And you said we didn’t come from God but from Earth, which he probably assumed was a competing deity. You pointed at the sky when you said it.”

“I might just as well have said we came from Hell,” Gwen mused.

“Maybe you did,” Jean replied. “For all we know the word “Earth” means hell in their language. You made a reasonable attempt to communicate with them, and something just got crossed up. It’s not your fault, and it’s not their fault.”

The next morning Gwen ordered the crew to disassemble the biofuel generator, load it into the landing craft, and prepare for departure. They had barely begun the disassembly when drones reported a large number of warm bodies to the southeast, and scattered but growing numbers in the woods surrounding the landing craft.

“That’s it,” Gwen said. “Leave the generator. Get everyone on board now and prepare for departure.”

“But without the generator we can’t visit any more planets,” Habib protested. “We’ll have to terminate the mission.”

“We don’t have enough fuel to visit another planet anyway,” Gwen answered. “The generator is useless to us without fuel to make another landing. I’m not going to risk losing any of my crew by

staying on this planet while we wait to see what the Deng are up to. And I don't want any Deng to die attacking us, just because I accidentally insulted their god. We're out of here."

After they docked with the ship and left the planet's orbit Gwen asked Karl to come to the conference room for a private talk.

"I wanted to thank you for breaking the ice yesterday when we met with the Deng," she said. "That juggling routine was brilliant. Just what we needed to get a conversation going. It didn't end the way I'd hoped, but that was my fault, not yours."

"I don't think it was anyone's fault, really," Karl said. "No one's ever communicated with an alien race before. You did the best you could based on the information you had at the time. Can't expect the dice to always roll your way."

"Anyway, I hope we got enough data to justify this mission because we need to return to Earth to refit. We'll be entering a wormhole that will take us to Earth's vicinity in about two hours."

"To hell with the data," Karl said. "You found intelligent life. We've got video of humans meeting with aliens. This is the most successful mission in the history of space flight. This mission will stimulate the curiosity, and the funding, needed to continue manned exploration for decades!"

Gwen hesitated before her next statement. "Karl, I probably shouldn't tell you this, but I don't want you to be blindsided when we get back to Earth. I've programmed our navigation system to delete all records of our position and the position of that planet once we enter the wormhole."

"What?!!" Karl said in disbelief.

Gwen nodded yes. "We need to maintain our positional data until we find the wormhole, but after that it's gone. You know as well as I do that unless we ditch that data, there will be endless 'follow-on' visits to learn more about the Deng, to help them progress, and probably even tourist trips to the planet. The Deng deserve better than that. We've already disrupted their lives too much. There will be myths and legends about the creatures from another deity for generations. In a few thousand years, when they've evolved enough to travel through space, and if they want to contact other species, we can meet on somewhat equal terms. But not now."

Karl's look of astonishment gradually faded to one of thoughtfulness. "A wise decision," he said.

Gwen thanked him and told him to prepare for the wormhole. She realized she may have misjudged him in the past. On the other hand, she still didn't trust him enough to tell him she'd discussed this long ago with other explorer ship commanders, and they'd all agreed to keep the location of intelligent life a secret. They'd also programmed the unmanned probes to do the same.