

PLANETFALL

by Michael A. DeLuca II.

Ensign Paul Schafer did not look forward to cleaning up after the last dissection. He hadn't slept well the night before and was now paying the price. He was only a little lazy, not really tired, but cleaning surgical tools was a boring task. Schafer wanted an out, but didn't have one, so he stalled in the hope that some deity would favor him today and work a minor miracle which would release him from the requirement.

As he carried a tray of waste entrails to the disposal chute, the biology lab's computer terminal signalled for attention. Grateful for the distraction, Schafer put the tray down and switched on the unit. The display showed the department's schedule for the day. A small flashing flag beneath the agenda indicated that a message was waiting. Schafer instructed the machine to show the message, and a window superimposed itself over part of the previous display.

THE FOLLOWING PERSONNEL ARE TO REPORT TO THE SHUTTLEBAY WITH EQUIPMENT APPROPRIATE TO THE SURVEY OF THE THIRD PLANET OF TAU OMEGA AT 1400 HOURS.

SHUTTLECRAFT PILOT LT. LEWIS P. BAKER

CHIEF SURGEON LT. CMDR. DR. LEONARD MCCOY

*SENIOR BIOLOGIST LT. CMDR. DR. FRANCIS GREELEE

SENIOR GEOLOGIST LT. LISA M. BENNETT

SENIOR BOTANIST LT. CARL J. PEREZ

SECURITY OFFICER LT. KEVIN J. FITZROY

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THE PLANET MAY BE OBTAINED FROM THE COMPUTER VIA THE KEYWORD "TAU OMEGA III".

Odd, Schafer mused, *I thought we were suppose to rendezvous with the Ranger in two days.* He stepped through the door to search for Commander Greelee and saw him discussing something with the ship's first officer. The ensign cleared his throat to get their attention, then announced "Excuse me, sirs, Commander Greelee, a survey party bulletin has just been announced with your name on the roster."

"Yes, I know, Ensign. I've already been told. I'll be in to prepare in a moment."

The first officer excused himself, "I'll not detain you any longer, Doctor, as I must prepare for the survey of Tau Omega IV."

"Ah, yes, Mr. Spock, perhaps we can continue our discussion later?"

"Of course." And with that the Vulcan disappeared into his office.

Greelee followed Schafer into the biology lab. He stepped over to the terminal and requested information on Tau Omega III. The screen filled with a map and three paragraphs of text. Schafer approached to see, then asked, "Doctor, did Mr. Spock say 'the survey of Tau Omega IV?'"

"What? Oh, yes! This system has two class M worlds. Don't you find that interesting? Anyway, he's going with his team to Omega IV and I'm going with my team to Omega III. I wonder which is the most interesting." He studied the information for a final moment then stepped away to gather some things. Schafer scanned the display, then keyed for the data on Tau Omega IV.

"I'd say the fourth one. It says here that there is evidence of a civilized society on it."

"My boy, you're prejudiced! Sure, there is intelligent life there. That's fine! But do you know what that means? Their attention will focus on just one thing: the intelligent life. They'll study the people there endlessly, and maybe, just maybe, some poor security officer will look up and say 'Oh, look at the pretty bird!' and that will be the extent of the biology research. No, Ensign Schafer, that's no job for a biologist, that's a job for a demographer. I'm not interested."

"Now read the Tau Omega III report. The planet is teaming with life, but no sign of intelligence. And it's predominantly a tropical world, to boot. A tropical world! The most varied and beautiful fauna exists in jungles, and that's where I'm headed. That's what you would be interested in too, if you weren't so high minded about intelligence." Greelee laughed a little then asked, "How many names are on that roster?"

Schafer looked back at the screen, "Six, Baker, McCoy, yourself..."

"Yes, yes," he interrupted. "Those people are so used to transporters that they forget a shuttle can carry a crew of seven. Would you like to come along, Paul? I might be able to slip you in, and it would look great on your record if you got some planetside experience."

The ensign glanced over at the mess that had yet to be cleaned and answered without hesitation, "Yes!"

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Senior Geologist Lisa Bennett was eating her lunch in the privacy of her quarters when the call came in. She put down her chicken sandwich and proceeded to clear some of the junk that accumulated around her viewscreen. Never a moment's peace, she thought, all I want is a chance to eat my lunch and listen to a little music. When a hole had been cleared in the papers and minerals specimens large enough to see the monitor through, she answered the call. On the display appeared a list of people who were to survey the third planet of Tau Omega. Her name was fourth on the list and flagged by an asterisk.

"Well, I'll be..." she said aloud. "Computer?"

"READY"

"Display information related to keyword TAU OMEGA III."

"WORKING." After a moment the screen filled with a map and early scanner reports on the planet. The information available was very limited, indicating that this world was freshly discovered.

"Hmmm. A brand new world. Maybe they'll name a continent after me; Bennitia. That sounds nice!" She flipped back to the roster and read the departure time, then flipped a switch on the intercom, "Geo-lab?"

"Geo-lab, Plikin here."

"This is your boss, I'm going down with a survey party to Tau Omega III. While I'm gone, I want you people to be busting your backs to work-up complete reports on that planet."

Planetfall



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we're here, why don't we all go out, have a look around, and let Lt. Baker work in peace?" He thumbed the switch near the hatch, but was rewarded with a silent and unmoving door. Mildly annoyed, he bent down and used the manual control.

The landing party piled out of the damaged shuttle and stood in a small cluster as they surveyed their surroundings. The *Copernicus* sat at the end of a path cut by the shuttle when it touched down. It was a long, rough scar extending straight back several hundred meters to the plateau edge. About 70 meters back, the remains of the shuttle's starboard-side engine nacelle stuck into the ground with one end, leaving the other end to rise out of the ground like some dead, metal tree-trunk. Greelee stuck his head back into the shuttle cabin. "You might as well forget about getting this shuttle off the ground again, Lieutenant. We aren't going anywhere."

Baker rushed out and joined the others. His jaw dropped when he saw the damage. "Oh, well. That's the breaks. I guess we ought to be grateful, though. All that and we're still alive." He patted the shuttle's hull, "You did good, love. I just wish you could have come out in one piece yourself."

"Now what are we going to do?" asked Schafer.

"I don't know about you, Ensign, but I'm going to see if I can repair the communication circuits. They were fried by the EMP, but I might be able to jury-rig something." Baker ducked back inside the cabin.

Lisa Bennit rose from the ground where she had been examining a handful of dirt. "Well, Commander, since we have nothing better to do, why don't we get some work done?"

Greelee grinned back at the attractive lieutenant then said, "Alright, Dr. Brennan, you stay here with Baker and the shuttle. The rest of us will look around. Set your phasers for heavy stun." He stared at the jungle for a moment, then pointed to one of the larger paths. "There. That looks rewarding. We'll stick together for now; if anyone sees anything that interests him professionally, let us all know and we'll stop and have a look. But until we know whether or not the fauna here is hostile, no one is to wander out of sight of the rest of the party. Understood?" He

looked from Bennit to Baker, "Good." The little group gathered their survey equipment together and set off into the forest, each member pointing their tricorder at this and that, or dictating notes into the device for later use.

Schafer was astonished at the incredible diversity the forest offered. It seemed as though each plant was of a different species, no two were alike. He now understood his mentor's fondness for such places; one could spend a lifetime in the jungle and still not classify all the lifeforms present.

As the exploration team probed deeper into the forest, they would occasionally stop and examine or collect samples of plants, animals, or minerals that captured their fancy. Those specimens which proved too large to collect whole were recorded along with any notes or insights that the recorder could offer. Particularly interesting was the find that all the life forms present secreted poisons as part of their biochemistry.

"Has anyone else noticed how quiet it is here?" Lt. Bennit asked. The group stared at her for a moment, then listened carefully. Soon they all grew aware of the unusual silence that surrounded them: Except for an occasional breeze that whispered through the branches of the surrounding trees, there were no sounds at all.

"I thought there was something wrong," admitted Greelee. "You'd expect something more. ASnimal noises or something." He checked his tricorder, then fiddled with its controls for a moment. "Hmm...there's a lot of activity in the ultrasound range. That may be the answer."

"Ultrasound? You mean like bats and dolphins?"

"Something like that, Lt. Bennit, only several kilohertz higher in frequency. This forest is very noisy; we just can't hear it."

Lt Baker shuffled back into the shuttle and sat down heavily in the chair beside Dr. Brennan. His head rolled back as he closed his eyes with a heavy sigh.

Brennan wiped the sweat from his forehead. "How can you stand to work so hard in that heat?" Baker just smiled, "Communications is hopeless. We'll just have to use our communicators and wait until the *Enterprise* is within range." He scratched his wounded hand absently, then added, "Now there's nothing left to do but wait."

"Wrong. There is something you can do. Fix the life support system, I'm frying!"

The pilot smiled again, "No can do, Doc, there's not enough of this craft to work with. She's a dead hulk. Those systems that weren't burned out before the crash were smashed after. Why don't you go outside? At least there's a breeze blowing out there."

"You kidding? There might be a breeze out there, but there's shade in here. No thanks".

"Suit yourself, mate, but this hull is going to heat up like an oven. I'm going to have a look at that nacelle that tore loose." Baker rose from his seat and marched back into the sun. He stretched for a moment, then picked up his tool bag and set off toward the remains of the starboard nacelle; whistling an old pub song his grandfather had taught him when he was a boy.

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The survey party had stopped to rest in a small clearing next to a pond. Greelee, Bennit, and Perez were clustered around a small rock out-crop discussing some of their finds, while Lt. Fitzroy was trying to establish contact with the *Enterprise* with his communicator. Ensign Schafer was exploring the clearing in search of other plant and animal specimens.

Greelee was explaining some of his finds to the others. Before him were several flasks containing specimens of a few of the smaller life forms thus far discovered. In one, a tan "lizard" was vigorously rubbing its nose against the glass walls enclosing it; a desperate attempt to escape the alien trap it had no understanding of. In another, a grey, slug-like creature five centimeters in length oozed along on an endless trek around the walls of the vessel, content in the ignorance of its own confinement.

"There are a number of Earth-analogous species in evidence; there are reptiles, like this lizard, and we've seen a number of creatures that can only be this planet's equivalent of birds. These slugs perform the same functions as insects; there are a variety of different forms and each seems to fill a specific niche.

"All of the animals seem to secrete that poison we were discussing earlier, Carl. It seems to be as potent as cobra venom, but I won't be able to tell what it is until we get back to the ship."

"I just want to know what the stuff's for," admitted Perez. "It's obviously important to the plants as well as the animals. I'd love to deprive a few of these bushes of it just to see their reaction."

"It's obvious that it isn't for self-defense, if everything else uses the poison and is subject to ill effects from ingesting it, this wouldn't be a very viable

ecology, would it?" Greelee turned to Lt. Bennit. "Well, Lieutenant, how about getting our minds off this rut and telling us what you've found?"

A smug expression fluttered across the geologist's face for an instant, then was replaced by icy professionalism. "Geologically, Tau Omega III is a normal, class M, tropical world. There is nothing exceptional at all. Mineralogically, this planet is boring. I've found no evidence of special metals or industrial crystals, and most of the rocks I've found are simple silicates. I think this plateau we're on is an ancient volcanic flow-heavily eroded with time, of course. As I've said, there's nothing unusual here at all." The smug expression returned, "Except for this."

The lieutenant reached into her sample bag and withdrew a small stone. "I found this a little way up the path, but I couldn't find anymore. It's made of flint, which is a sedimentary rock and doesn't belong on an igneous formation like this plateau." The stone was roughly triangular in shape, and had been chipped to form a sharp cutting edge and point.

Greelee took the sample from Bennit's hand and examined it in astonishment. "A flint arrowhead? That means there's intelligent life here someplace! Now I'm no anthropologist but I know that wasn't formed naturally. Look at how sharp the edges are. That arrowhead isn't more than two or three hundred years old!"

"Hey, everyone! Come over here and look at this!" It was Schafer, the ensign was standing at the far end of the pond and was genuinely excited by something that he had found. "Look at this! My God, whatever made them must be huge!"

The party rushed over to look at what the ensign was pointing at: a series of footprints, each print about one meter wide by one meter long. A



distance of about three meters separated each print from the other. Greelee bent down and examined the prints carefully. Finally, he rose and announced, "Whatever made these prints is bipedal and probably carnivorous."

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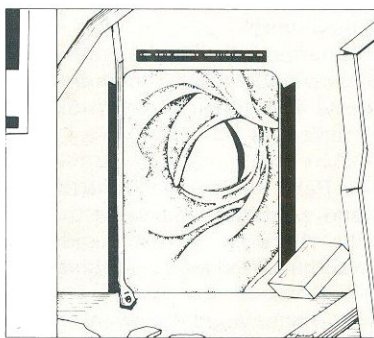
Baker leaned against the damaged nacelle lazily, his back turned to the *Copernicus*. This is a beautiful planet, he thought, so much green, so much life. Suddenly the lieutenant sat up straight and cocked his head; straining to hear...nothing. He felt odd all of a sudden. All about him it seemed the jungle was holding its collective breath in anticipation of some unspeakable event. Like the calm before the storm, he thought.

The pilot rose to his feet and decided it was time to return to the *Copernicus*. He stretched again and yawned, then turned around and froze. Some thing was towering over the far side of the shuttle and sniffing at it curiously. A huge, bipedal reptile eight or nine meters tall; muscles rippling beneath its tan, scaled hide. Baker ducked back down behind the nacelle and drew his communicator. "Brennan! Doc! Come in!" No one answered his call. "Dr. Brennan, please respond!"

"What is it Lieutenant?" came the eventual reply. Unfortunately, Brennan's answer came when he appeared at the shuttle hatch and waved back to Baker.

"Get back, you idiot! Stay away from the door!" Too late. The creature caught Brennan's motion and leaped over the shuttle's hull to face him. Brennan stumbled back in astonished horror at the sudden visage confronting him and ducked as far into the cabin as possible.

Dropping down on all fours, the saurian peered eagerly into the shuttle's narrow doorway. Inside, it spied the the doctor looking back, so it reached in and attempted to grab him.



There was a muffled, high-pitched whine, and the dinosaur quickly withdrew its now smoking hand with a short yelp. The shuttle hatch suddenly snapped closed, and for a moment, the lizard stood silent, considering how dangerous these strange creatures could be.

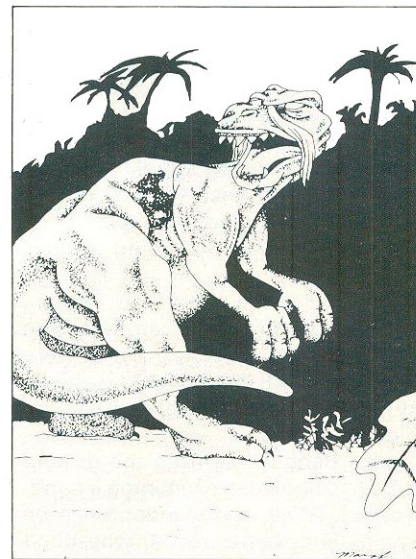
Recovering his wits, Baker quickly drew his phaser I and set it to heavy stun. He leaned against the nacelle and let off a series of six shots that never

found their target. "Blast! I'm out of range." He started to move in closer.

Favoring his wounded hand, the saurian grasped the *Copernicus* and began to rock it back and forth violently. It soon realized this activity was getting it nowhere, so it stepped back a bit and delivered a crushing kick to the craft amidships, crumpling that side and causing the whole shuttle to flip over.

Baker had closed to within 30 meters of the creature, then halted. He dropped down on one knee and fired three more times. One shot hit the creature square in the back, causing the monster to screech. It trembled once, then spun around to face its attacker.

"Damn! Stun doesn't work!" Baker spun the select knob all the way up to disintegrate and aimed once more. The saurian was now approaching him rapidly, but the pilot never wavered. When the creature was only ten meters away, Baker touched the firing stud and wished the dinosaur good-bye. The phaser fizzled once and a weak beam impacted solidly against the chest of the monster. It stopped and bellowed again, but didn't appear hurt badly. A scorch mark was the only visible damage.



"Empty? The bleed'n thing ran out of juice!" Baker threw the weapon to the ground in disgust and looked up at the lean predator facing him. He wondered absently what it would feel like when those enormous jaws crushed the life out of his body; what it would feel like to be eaten alive.

There was another high-pitched whine, and the smell of ozone suddenly permeated the air. The saurian convulsed, then fell to the ground with a thunderous crash, barely missing the shuttle pilot. Baker was terribly confused for several moments until he saw

Kevin Fitzroy kneeling 20 meters off, phaser still pointed at the enormous reptile. Farther behind him stood Greelee, Bennit, and Schafer.

Greelee separated himself from the group, ran up to the predator, and began to examine it. "This is amazing! Reptilian. This creature deserves the label dinosaur if ever any did. Incredible!" He looked at Baker then asked, "Are you alright? What did you do to provoke it in the first place?"

Baker opened his mouth to snap back. Instead he looked over at the demolished shuttle and remembered, "Dear God! Brennan!" He dashed back to the shuttle and began to pound heavily on the jammed hatch. "Dr. Brennan, can you hear me?" He struggled to pry open the door but it wouldn't budge, even with the help of the others.

Fitzroy drew his phaser again, set it to heat, and ordered the others to stand aside as he began to cut into the wreck. Soon a wide enough hole to crawl through was opened, and the party scrambled in single file to help the trapped doctor. Brennan's body sagged against the far bulkhead, his head twisted at a crazy angle that all present knew was unnatural.

It took 20 minutes for the group to drag the doctor's body from the wreck. He was placed near the shuttle in the rut dug by the initial crash, a blanket draped over him for ritual as much as for keeping the sunlight off. Some concern was voiced about the man's remains attracting other predators, so Fitzroy elected to stand guard duty.

The landing party stood in silence around Brennan's temporary grave for several minutes. Finally Baker glanced around at the group and announced, "We're missing someone." He peered out at the edge of the jungle. "The Spaniard or Mexican."

"Perez?" Greelee spun around to look back down at the path the team had been exploring earlier. He cupped his hand and shouted, "Perez! Lieutenant Perez!" There was no response.

"He's probably out examining more of his precious plants." Bennit offered hopefully.

Greelee took out his communicator and continued to call the botanist. "Lieutenant Perez, do you read me?" Everyone waited for a response. Schafer closed his eyes and attempted to will a reply out of the tiny box. Greelee snapped the device shut and spun back to the group, "I told everyone to stick together! This is what happens when you don't follow orders!" He took a deep breath and forced himself to relax before continuing. "OK, we're going to have to form a search party.

No one, repeat, no one is to break line of sight with the others, understood? Who was the last person to see the Lieutenant?"

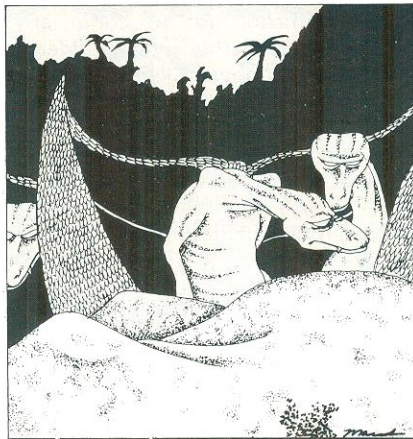
Schafer stepped forward. "He was right behind me on the way back. I know he was there only five minutes before we came out of the forest."

"OK, let's fan out and scour the path and the surrounding area."

Greelee led the remaining members of his command back into the forest in search of Perez, unaware that his actions and those of the others had been observed from above by other eyes.

Five man-sized, reptilian bipeds soon hovered over the remains of the giant saurian; their leathery wings beat quickly against the humid air as they inspected the find for signs of life. When the creatures were convinced that it was indeed dead and not merely resting, they gently set down on the ground and hobbled over to the body.

The creatures chatted amongst themselves as they examined the dead behemoth. Mostly ultrasonic, the main body of the sounds made would have been inaudible to any human ears. What could be heard consisted of chirps, clicks, and high-pitched grunts.



Soon, the chattering stopped, and the winged bipeds extended a long, sickle-shaped claw just behind each wrist. They used these to slice into the tough hide of the dinosaur they had claimed. Quietly and efficiently, the scavengers began to cut away large chunks of meat.

They had the 15 ton carcass stripped bare in just under an hour. Piles of neatly stacked meat lay at regular intervals around the skeletal remains, while two massive piles of waste, organs and such, lay near the dinosaur's head and tail. Their work done, four of the creatures sat down for a quiet lunch. The fifth stood facing the *Copernicus*, contemplating the nature of the strange wreck.

"Fistus, come and join us. Enjoy this free meal which the False Ones have provided." The scavenger tore an enormous chunk out of the meat in its hands and swallowed it whole. But Fistus ignored him. He stretched his wings once, a seven meter span of leather, then folded them snugly against his back. "I don't believe these are the False Ones. They are...different, somehow." He pointed back at the shuttle, "Their machines are not adorned with the image of a great winged beast."

"It could be a deception," the other countered. "Just as the image itself is a deception. Besides, if they were not False Ones, then why would they need such things to fly? Surely the All would grant them wings and a proper flight. And they kill as easily as False Ones, too. No, they are False Ones, Fistus. Accept that and eat."

Fistus agreed with his companions argument, but could not shake the curiosity about the fallen machine before him. Abandoning his friends, he approached the machine and examined it. He soon found a small opening and squeezed in.

Lt. Perez had vanished as surely as if he had never existed, and it was a disconsolate Greelee who finally ordered the search terminated. Though they had searched a large area, no one ever discovered a shred of evidence indicating the botanist's fate.

"There's nothing more we can do for him, Commander," Schafer offered. "We'll just have to wait for *Enterprise* and hope sensors can pick him up."

Greelee smiled at the ensign and patted him on the shoulder. "I doubt if the ship's sensors will do any good with the abundant lifeforms on this planet clouding up the readings. I can't help wondering what happened to him, Paul. He was one of the best in his field. If he's dead, it'll be a terrible loss." He called out to the others, "OK, everyone, lets start heading back. This is useless." The entire two kilometer trek back was made in silence. It was hard to believe someone could just vanish. Yet, in such a place as this, underestimation of the indigenous lifeforms could be dangerous.

As they cleared the forest and approached the shuttle everyone stopped at once. The body of the predator was now a skeleton, and four winged creatures were sitting next to it, feasting on its remains. "My God," whispered Lisa Bennit. "What are they?"

"They look like...like harpies." offered Schafer. Indeed, although the creatures lacked the feathers of a traditional harpy, the impression that they

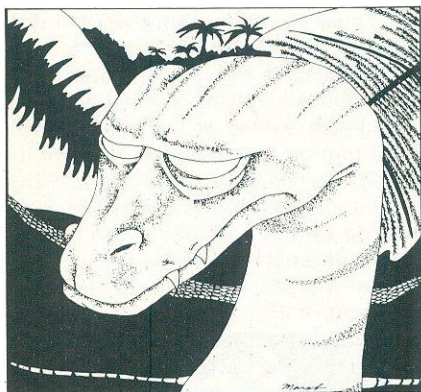
were straight out of Greek mythology was overwhelming.

"I'll circle around for a closer look." Greelee started to move to a spot behind the wrecked shuttle which blocked the harpies' view of him, but they spotted the motion and stood in unison. Abandoning stealth, the biologist straightened and slowly approached the creatures, hands raised to demonstrate his non-aggressiveness. They had not yet seen the other humans.

The harpies became extremely agitated at the human's approach and one chirped an order to the others. Two harpies leapt into the air and landed behind Greelee. The other two split up and completed the circle around the human, one of them extending his sickle-claws.

The landing party observed all this, Schafer recording it on his tricorder. When they saw the one approach Greelee with murderous intent, Fitzroy drew his phaser, set it for stun, and took aim. Just as he was about to fire, however, a fifth harpy emerged from the shuttle and tackled its comrade.

Greelee used the ensuing confusion to back out of the circle and observe from a safe distance. The newest harpy rose to its feet and confronted the other that had intended to attack, pointing to the other four members of the landing party. Obviously, it had been watching from the viewports of the shuttle.



The biologist approached the harpy who had defended him and extended his hands, palms out. "My goodness, you're an interesting find," he twisted his head this way and that in an attempt to observe as much detail as possible without threatening his new-found friend. "You're sapient. That makes you very rare, did you know that?" He pointed carefully to the wings and continued, "There aren't too many sapient beings that can fly independently as well. The Skorr are the only others I know of." The harpy was now chirping musically back at him.

Greelee reached down and quietly withdrew his communicator. "Ensign Schafer?" Paul responded. "I want you to come up here, very carefully, and bring me a tricorder. Out." Schafer's arrival caused some momentary anxiety, but this soon quieted down with the help of Greelee and the lead harpy. The creatures were scanned and the results noted. The tricorder wasn't capable of providing a great deal of biological information, but it could record visual and audio data and thus preserve the event. "Paul, go into the shuttle and get me one of the universal translators out of the back." Schafer complied and slipped through Fitzroy's hole.

A moment later he poked his head back out, obviously disappointed. "I can't get into the back. The door's jammed." He climbed back out and rejoined the Commander.

Greelee stood for a moment, considering options. He pulled out his communicator again and signalled Fitzroy to bring the others up. As they approached, the harpies began to react nervously. When Baker, Bennit, and Fitzroy closed to within a few meters, four of the harpies panicked. Screeching at the survey team with ear-shattering volume, they extended their sickle-claws and crouched ominously, warning the Starfleet officers not to come any closer. The situation was suddenly quite volatile, a powder keg of mistrust that was in desperate need of disarming.

Kevin Fitzroy, however, was not a diplomat. He was a well trained security officer whose duty was to protect the other members of the survey party from any threat. His execution of those duties set off the powder keg as he drew his phaser. Chaos erupted. One harpy who could not help but interpret the lieutenant's action as hostile vaulted into the air and landed beside the man. As Fitzroy spun around to face it, the harpy swung its arm in a graceful arc, plunging its claw into Fitzroy's right forearm. Dropping his weapon, the man screamed in agony and fell to his knees, blood flowing freely from the wound as the harpy withdrew its crimson appendage. Spinning to face a horrified Schafer, it raised its arm once more, preparing to impale the young ensign.

But Fitzroy was not completely incapacitated. Fighting off the haze of shock, the lieutenant lunged and struck the creature hard in the back with his shoulder. Howling with rage, the harpy spun again and desperately sliced at the evading human.

Greelee was shocked at the way the meeting had disintegrated. Though the harpy he had been examining remained

close by and non-belligerent, the others had taken to attacking the human party. As he watched, Lt. Bennit drew her phaser, only to have it knocked from her hand by a well-placed swat. The harpy closed and herded her towards the shuttle. The landing party consisted of scientists, not soldiers, and they were no match for the aggressive harpies. Greelee decided to even the odds with his own phaser, but discovered that he had been disarmed by the winged reptile he had been examining only moments before. The creature eyed the mighty weapon curiously, then tossed it aside and pushed the biologist against the shuttle.

Schafer was pinned to the ground by another harpy, his hands holding his aggressor's arms and deadly claws at a distance. The ensign drew his legs up and shoved the reptile backwards. He reached for his phaser and fired as the harpy lunged back at him, hitting the creature in the stomach. Its body quivered for a moment as though a high-voltage charge ran through it, then the harpy collapsed to the ground. Schafer scrambled to his feet and pointed the weapon at another, only to have it knocked from his hand as a thrown rock snapped his wrist back.

Baker almost enjoyed the fight he was waging. A brawler by nature, he wasn't as hampered as the others by superior harpy agility. As one harpy flew over the pilot's head in an attempt to get behind him, Baker reached up and grabbed the creature's three-toed foot; an action which caused the flying lizard to come crashing to the ground prematurely.

As suddenly as it had begun, the incessant, shrill cry of the harpies ceased and the creatures halted their attacks on the humans. All eyes turned to view a spot just a few meters in front of the shuttle as six pillars of sparkling energy coalesced into six humanoid forms. Now out-numbered, three harpies shot into the air and circled above at a safe distance. The fourth stood quietly for a moment and exchanged somber glances with Lieutenant Commander Greelee, then picked up his stunned comrade and rejoined the others in the sky.

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Baker spotted a familiar face sitting alone across the mess-room. He grabbed his tray from the processor and wound his way to Lisa Bennit's table. "Hi, there," he said as he sat down. "Mind if I join you?" A brief smile answered his question. "Great. Well, the rendezvous with the *Ranger* went smoothly, so they tell me." Another smile. "Yes...hmmm...you haven't

touched your...what is it? Chicken salad sandwich. Not very hungry, huh?" He attacked his T-bone with a vengeance. Again she smiled, then stated distantly, "You know, its hard to believe that only two days ago, everything almost..."

"Ah, but it didn't. The cavalry arrived just in time, so there's no need to dwell upon it. McCoy discharged Fitzroy today. Everything's fine again."

"What about Brennan? Or Perez? They aren't..."

"Don't think about that," Baker interrupted. "It only gets you down." He pushed her plate at her. "Now eat."

She grinned at the pilot, then picked up her sandwich and took an exaggerated bite out of it. She noted a fresh bruise on the man's forehead and mumbled through a filled mouth, "What happened to you?"

"Oh, that. I hit my head on a low bulkhead on deck seven." He changed the subject. "Listen, a few of my friends and I are throwing a party down in shuttle maintenance at 1800. Would you care to join me?"

Once again, Lisa Bennit smiled.

Paul Schafer was disconsolate. Ever since the landing party returned

to the ship, Commander Greelee spent all of his time in his office pouring over the notes he had made during the survey. That left Paul to continue his studies alone without the benefit of first-hand advice to guide him. Somehow, he felt he wasn't getting all he could out of the textbooks without Greelee's presence. The feeling wasn't without merit. Dr. Greelee had authored a number of texts that were required reading at most Earth universities as well as the Vulcan Institute of Advanced Space Studies.

The ensign sighed. Well, it had only been two days. Soon Greelee would rush out and share all his newest findings with his student, thereby making up for the lost time. Schafer glanced down at the Canopan Sand Eel he had been dissecting and decided he needed a break. He rose from his stool and began to collect all the internal organs he had removed from the Eel and piled them into a tray. After several minutes of cleaning up, the lab was once again orderly except for the tray of eel parts. As he carried the tray of waste entrails to the disposal chute, the biology lab's computer signalled for attention.

Schafer stopped in mid-stride, cocked a suspicious eye at the terminal, and continued on his way to the chute. Let someone else answer the damn thing this time.

EPILOGUE

Fistus sat on top of the wreck of the *Copernicus* and stared silently at the beautiful stars of the night sky. He was confident that the strangers that had visited here were not the False Ones. They were never so peaceful, never so curious about their surroundings.

True, they had weapons that could kill with ease, but Renus had been touched with their light, and he did not die. Fistus sighed. They could have learned so much from these creatures. But now they were gone, leaving only the hulk of their machine.

Fistus suddenly froze as he heard movement from the edge of the jungle. "The shuttle, at last! I thought I'd never find it! Hello, who are you?" Lieutenant Perez stared up at the winged creature in surprise.

Fistus looked down at the human as if he was the answer to a prayer. ■

TAU OMEGA III: PLANETARY SUMMARY

by Michael A. DeLuca

The following is the ST:RPG Datafile concerning the planet which is the setting for *Planetfall*, this issue's fiction. Gamemasters who wish to use this setting in their campaign should use the following information.

WORLD LOG

System Name: Tau Omega
Number of Class M Present: 2

World Name: Tau Omega III
Position in System: 3
Number of Satellites: None
Planetary Gravity: .8 G
Planetary Size:

Diameter: 10,400 km
Equatorial Circumference: 32,000 km
Total Surface Area: 408,000,000km²
Percent Land Mass: 27%
Total Land Area: 110,160,000km²

Planetary Conditions:

Length of Day: 28 hours
Atmospheric Density: Terrestrial
General Climate: Tropical

Technological/Sociopolitical Index: 111120-33
Planetary Trade Profile: None Known

Mineral Content:

| | |
|----------------------|-----|
| Normal Metals: | 33% |
| Radioactives: | 23% |
| Gemstones: | 10% |
| Industrial Crystals: | 8% |
| Special Minerals: | 2% |

TAU OMEGA III, PHYSICAL DATA

The Tau Omega system is located at bearing 341, Mark 8 relative to the UFP Central Navigation Beacon; placing it about twelve parsecs from the Romulan Neutral Zone in the direction of the galactic Core. The system is composed of eleven worlds in all, including three gas giants, five class D planetoids, a Mars-like world, and two class M planets, Tau Omega III and IV.

Tau Omega III is approximately 112 million kilometers from its sun, and has no natural satellites. It has a day of 28 hours, twelve minutes, and 53 seconds, and a gravity of .9 G. Planetary diameter at the equator is 10,400 km, with an equatorial circumference of 32,000 km and a surface area of 408,060,015 square kilometers.

The planet has a normal atmospheric density only 2% greater than that of Earth. Its surface is 73% water, with the land existing in the form of one giant continent and thousands of smaller islands. The continent, tentatively named Bennitia, is riddled with lakes, rivers, and swamps, and has only a few scattered deserts. Because of this abundance of water and because of Tau Omega III's proximity to its primary, the

world is classified as tropical, although there are examples of other climatic types in the upper latitudes and within the larger mountain ranges.

TAU OMEGA III, SOCIO-POLITICAL DATA

The life of this world closely parallels that of Earth's during the Upper Cretaceous Period, with large reptiles similar to dinosaurs as the dominant form of life. However, it should be noted that these creatures have evolved a considerably more advanced intellect than those of Earth, with sapience evidenced by at least one species, the Harpies.

Harpy society is tribal. A leader is selected by non-violent aerial competition, and he/she leads for life. Each member of the tribe serves in a specialized job. These jobs include hunting, defending the group (a guard-like position, the whole tribe participates in warfare), maintaining the fire (a religious occupation), the construction of new huts or the maintenance of old ones, picking berries and such for dietary supplement, and caring for the ill.

Most Harpy tribes take shelter in cliff-dwellings. These structures are built of mud and grass in the hollowed-out cliff faces inaccessible except by air.