

Opportunity Lost

By J. Michael Squatrito, Jr.

Kona Bali knew this would be an historic day as he climbed into his space suit. Minutes later, he arrived from his decompression chamber and approached his landing craft.

A colleague helped adjust his sensory instruments before opening the hatch to the vehicle. "You will make us all proud today." Kona nodded and smiled.

An array of instruments and sensors greeted him as he nestled into his seat. The hatch lowered and sealed with the sound of decompressing air. Kona flipped a switch and the communications link illuminated.

A voice filled the cockpit. "Prepare for biohazard mist." A fine haze enveloped the spacecraft, followed by the sound of gases bonding to the craft's hull.

"Biohazard shield complete."

Kona pressed several buttons, being sure to activate his ship's sensors in the correct operational order.

The voice spoke again. "Preflight checklist complete." A slight pause. "Prepare for engine startup."

Kona swiveled in his mobile cockpit chair and gripped the steering device. The whir of the ion engines filled the area.

"Primary engines engaged."

The eager spaceman looked up to his left and watched a blue light blink three times. After a second delay, the docking bay doors of the mother ship opened, revealing Kona's true objective.

The spaceman's eyes widened, his heart raced faster. Outside the doorway sat the planet that he would investigate. Centuries had passed before his people invented the technology to travel through space, and an even longer time elapsed before they ever found a trace of extraterrestrial existence.

That day finally came. Kona recalled the joy and anxiety he felt when learning of the undeniable proof of alien life. For decades, they followed the steady stream of intelligible radio signals, which led them to this point today.

“Prepare for tractor beam disengagement.”

The ion engines whirred faster. Kona scanned the control panel a final time. All was well.

“Tractor beam disengaged.” Another slight pause. “Fire engines.”

With a rush of adrenaline, Kona blasted the engines forward. The spacecraft propelled out of the docking bay and sped through the emptiness of space at half the speed of light. The small planet grew in size with every passing second as Kona’s ship rocketed ever closer.

Kona’s people had detected massive amounts of life forms long ago, and he knew that a thriving civilization existed on the surface below. Unbeknownst to these beings, someone had arrived that would change their way of living and thinking forever.

The spaceman maneuvered the vessel at the proper angle to enter the planet’s atmosphere. He knew the beings below had the technology to detect him and he had to reach the predefined landing coordinates before that happened. Bringing the spacecraft to the dark side of the planet, the vessel eased through the atmosphere.

A misty covering shrouded Kona’s vision, but he guided his ship effortlessly. His eyes rounded after passing through the low level clouds. Massive amounts of an unknown liquid lay below him, stretching for as far as the eye could see.

In the distance, he observed spots of illumination on what appeared to be solid ground. Kona eased forward in his seat, fascinated. Alien creatures are creating those lights! At that moment, he knew that he was the first of his race to view an alien culture with his own eyes. They had sent countless probes to the planet in the past, all with varying levels of success. But to actually *see* an alien city firsthand? Words could not express how he felt.

The vessel steered to the right of the alien metropolis and ventured further from the unrelenting liquid sea. Large amounts of vegetation appeared below him as the vessel drew closer to the landing site. A moment later, the craft hovered two hundred feet above the planet's surface.

Kona knew he could not communicate with the mother ship in fear of alerting whoever to his presence. His spacecraft was equipped with the best tracking devices, video imaging, and an array of scientific instruments. Kona's commanders would document and analyze his whole trip before officially making first contact.

As the ship began a gentle descent, Kona peered out the windshield, locating an alien residence. Several soft lights glowed from inside a structure. Kona stared in wonderment. How did these creatures live? What was their purpose?

His heart raced faster. A telemetric imaging device guided the ship to the ground. A second later, Kona's spacecraft touched down on the planet – I have landed on an alien world!

Pressing a sequence of buttons placed his ship in a passive mode, which would alert the anxious explorer should anything approach the vessel within a five hundred foot radius. The planet's new visitor grabbed his specimen containers, then prepared himself to leave the craft.

Kona engaged the landing plank, which descended to the planet's surface. A doorway opened and he walked down the strip. Stopping before he reached the strange soil, he gazed downward, knowing he was the first of his race to step onto an alien world. Full of pride, he took that step.

The ground was firm and unlike the land he was accustomed to. Vegetation towered over and around him. Kona opened up his container and began to collect the myriad of flora.

The alien visitor could barely contain himself, but he knew his orders dictated that he spend no more than thirty minutes on the planet's surface. Kona had played out this precise scenario hundreds of times in the simulation laboratories on the mother

ship. He knew the vegetation would be useful to study, but he longed for something more alive.

Turning to his right, Kona recalled the alien structure he saw. No, your orders are to gather specimens! He reached for another piece of foliage, placing it in the container. Kona looked over to the right again, seeing the faint illumination a short distance away.

I cannot pass up this opportunity! I must investigate, in the name of science and exploration! Kona hurriedly scampered past his spacecraft and through a thick area of vegetation. A minute later, he found himself on the outskirts of the foreign dwelling. His heart pounded in his chest.

Undeniable proof of intelligent alien existence! His sensors alerted him that there was something definitely alive and moving inside. Kona thought for a moment, wondering if he should just go back to his assigned task, but his mind yearned for more.

Against his better judgment, he darted toward the dwelling. Several buildings made up the complex, with one of them having a large, open doorway. His sensors flashed repeatedly, signaling the abundance of life forms.

Kona carefully approached the opening, using his instruments to guide him in the waning light. Outlines of creatures appeared everywhere. His heart pounded, seemingly ready to burst from his chest. Kona's environmental sensors adjusted his airflow to accommodate his shallow breathing and his body returned to a relatively normal state of excitement.

To the left of the structure sat a mechanical vehicle. The spaceman scanned the object, fascinated at what these creatures might have used it for. With his imaging scan completed, he began to focus on the next structure. An internal cue reminded him that he had less than ten minutes before the completion of his mission.

Kona had just begun to make his next move when a sensor alerted him of movements from behind. The alien visitor turned to see a bright flash, then a searing

pain filled his chest cavity. Horrified, he dropped to the unfamiliar ground, his bodysuit sending him an overload of information.

“Catastrophic system failure. Mission Aborted!”

The phrase rang inside Kona’s head and he knew what that meant. A final indicator informed him that his internal systems were compiling an event log of his mission and that his external suit would cease to work in five seconds. Without his bodysuit, he would become vulnerable to the planet’s harsh environment. Furthermore, no one would come looking for him.

A final transmission on a preprogrammed frequency alerted the mother ship in a little more than a nanosecond that the mission failed. Then, system abort. Kona’s life force waned the moment his bodysuit turned off. Pain overtook his body, his damaged heart beat irregularly, and his breathing became erratic.

Before death relieved him of his anguish, Kona saw two creatures approach him. One hunched over and seemed to look into his eyes. Then, all went dark.

The creature stood back up. “Jesus, Jeb, I think it’s a goddam Martian!”

The second person lowered his rifle. “I told ya I saw somethin’ in the sky! I’m gonna call the sheriff! Get away from that thang!”