

Lost World

By T. E. Stazyk

Captain Jeff Godson swung his explorer scout ship into orbit around the newly discovered planet. As a PanGalactic scout captain, Godson's orders were to search previously unknown sectors of space for planets that the burgeoning PanGalactic Empire could use – either as a source of natural resources or as a place for settlement. As a result of the Empire's Freedom of Procreation Acts, its population and resource consumption were growing faster than its existing planetary range could support. Finding new planets was urgent business. And it looked like they had just found a beauty.

Godson's protocol was straightforward. When a new planet was discovered, his crew of engineers and scientists would immediately assess it for suitability. If the planet had abundant resources, could support life, or be economically terraformed, it was subjected to further evaluation. The primary purpose of further evaluation was to determine if the new planet had existing life forms and, if so, to assess their utility to the Empire. Non-sentient or non-complying life forms were routinely liquidated, while sentient populations that could augment PanGalactic's military and/or technology base were occasionally invited to join the Empire. As a rule, however, it was more economical to simply wipe the planets and acquire the resources.

"Please log the find," Godson said to his communications officer, Depp.

"New planet logged as Zeta-R, Captain."

"Very good. Commence initial scans."

There was a pause as technicians throughout the ship trained their devices on the planet. "Uplinks coming in, Captain," reported Depp. "Ahh."

"What is it, Ensign?"

“Incredible, Captain. I’ve never seen anything like it. Acquisition desirability index at point nine four. Livability index one point oh. Resource availability index point eight niner. It’s perfect, sir.”

“Well, don’t count your bonus money yet,” said Godson. “Initiate life form assessment.”

“Roger.” Depp entered a sequence on his console and waited, then announced, “All systems reporting full bioassay scan underway. Complete assessment and reporting will require four orbitals, sir.”

“Right. Get me the detailed geological and environmental analyses and let me know when the bioassay is complete.”

Godson was resting in his quarters when the results came in. “Ready for your review, Captain,” Depp reported.

“On my way. How does it look?”

“Good news and bad news”

On arriving in the briefing room, Godson found Depp as well as his science officer, Nolan, and his military attaché, Colonel Rabb. After returning everyone’s greetings, he said, “OK, what’s this good and bad news?”

“Depends on who you talk to,” said Rabb.

“Explain.”

“The planet is a gold mine,” continued Rabb. “The population consists of sub-hominids who are essentially in an inert state of torpor. Some of them seem to exhibit desultory aggressiveness toward others but in my opinion, we can just wipe the planet and get on with exploitation and resettlement.”

“Sounds almost too easy,” mused Godson.

“It is, Captain,” said Nolan. “The data aren’t conclusive. I believe we are dealing with a sentient population. Paragraph 58 prohibits neutralizing advanced civilizations until we’ve been able to assess their utility. We need to do further testing.”

“The longer we wait, the less bonus we collect,” said Rabb. “There is nothing advanced about those things. I’m ready to take responsibility for wiping the planet.”

“Thanks, but that’s not your job,” Godson reminded him. “Dr. Nolan. What is the problem and what do you need to do to get an answer?”

“I agree with the Colonel that the population does seem to be largely inert. But there is superficial evidence of a much more complicated civilization having existed here. I need at least two more orbits, and I’d like to launch some probes. And I may have to take down a landing party.”

“Is there any danger? What about this aggression?”

“I believe it is just a reflex action, Captain,” said Colonel Rabb. “As I say, they are incapable of thought. Purely reactive.”

“I’m not so sure,” countered Nolan. “There is abundant evidence of iconographic architecture. We know that is often a sign of artificial allegiances on primitive planets.”

“You mean worship?”

“Yes.” Nolan projected a holograph of some ruined buildings. “You see the ornamentation on these structures. They could be rallying symbols for different ideologies. We’ve seen that before.”

“OK. Do what you have to do. But do it fast.”

Two orbits later, Nolan reported back to Godson that the data from his probes was conflicting and confusing and he requested permission to conduct a surface exploration with a landing party. Godson resisted the pressure from Rabb to overrule Nolan’s objections. He had too much faith in Nolan and was also reluctant to destroy a civilization needlessly.

Nolan’s party had been on the planet surface for only a short time before data began flooding back to the ship’s data modules. Depp was doing some preliminary analysis but he, too, was having trouble understanding the results.

Rabb continually hounded Godson to stop wasting time. "So what if there's history down there. There's nothing any more. Just a bunch of zombies."

"Thank you Colonel. We will wait for Dr. Nolan's report."

"You're costing us money, Captain. I might have to log a protest."

"We're not zapping a population without good reason. And at this point I don't have a good reason. That will be all."

Godson paced the bridge as Depp continued to shake his head over the data being displayed on his console, "This is crazy, Captain. Oh. Wait. Dr. Nolan reporting. He and his party have finished surface work and will be up shortly. ETA 4377, sir."

"Tell him I want an immediate briefing."

"He's preparing it on the way up."

Godson had never seen Nolan looking so shaken as when he walked into the briefing room. Colonel Rabb jumped up immediately and said, "What is it? Do we wipe them?"

Nolan shook his head. "I don't know. It's the strangest thing I've ever seen. I'm not sure how to proceed."

"What did you see?" asked Godson.

"We can't waste any more time," said Rabb.

Nolan composed himself and began calling up some holograms. Pointing to the projection, he said, "Right. This is problem number one. Here is a representation of the society that these creatures had."

There was a collective gasp as the holos showed an incredibly sophisticated and advanced civilization. "Look at their technology," said Nolan. "They were on the verge of challenging us in space. And their art and architecture. Just incredible. Their science was at least on par with ours in several areas and they were doing amazing things in medicine. Life expectancy was increasing regularly."

"What happened? They seem to have lost it all."

“Exactly. At first I thought that maybe it was something medical. You know, a plague or something like that.”

“Any evidence?”

“No. But when we looked closer, the record of what happened is fairly clear.”

“Let’s see it.”

Nolan keyed in additional instructions. His probes and field work had gathered data on the planet and its inhabitants. He had also been able to tap into huge repositories of data on the planet itself. “Have a look at this. We were able to assemble it from available data. Their archives are just lying open. I was able to scan and download most of it. They had centralized a lot of their recent historical records.”

“So this is a real time simulation of the planet’s history?”

“Yes, but greatly accelerated. Apparently these beings, while advanced and highly intelligent, suffered from some sort of aberration in their intellectual structure. I haven’t been able to determine if it is a fundamental characteristic or a flaw that somehow became introduced, you know, like a bad mutation.”

“How do you tell that?”

“It would take more analysis. But I don’t think it’s worth doing that. Interesting intellectually, of course, but outside our scope.”

“About time I heard you say something practical,” said Rabb.

“From what we can tell, this flaw made these beings highly susceptible to external suggestions. They would allow their higher brain functions to be overridden by these suggestions for no apparent reason. Over time, their higher brains ceased to function and became superfluous. As a result, they lost their cognitive capabilities.”

“So that’s why we are seeing them as catatonic zombies?”

“Yes. Physically they are unchanged, but from a cognitive perspective, they are no better than lower life forms.”

"I'm sure it's a plague," said Godson, staring at the display and shaking his head. "Nothing else could cause loss of brain function like that. Were your decontamination procedures sufficient?"

"Yes, we're clean. But I don't think it's biological."

"Then how could this happen?" asked Godson. "Maybe there is some danger we need to understand so we can protect the Empire from it. Even if it's not a plague, could it be some other agent at work? Chemical poisoning or something?"

"No." Nolan shifted uncomfortably, then looked at Godson. "Captain, what I think we're seeing, and don't laugh, is a reversal of the evolutionary process."

"Impossible. It just can't happen," said Godson.

"That's what we thought, but when you put the information together, that seems to be the best conclusion. Have a look at this time progression." Nolan turned to one of his assistants, "Run sector seven, please."

The holograph had everyone's attention as Nolan spoke. "This is a recreation of the emergence of life on this planet at speed twelve. You see the slow development from unicellular to more complex life forms. Here. This is where these creatures begin to take shape."

"That's an amazingly compressed timeline."

"Yes, their development was unusually fast based on what we have seen elsewhere. From what I can tell, they were aware of that. Some of them felt that because they were so radically superior to other life forms on the planet, and because they couldn't establish a continuum between themselves and any ancestors, they must have been created by an outside force. You know, artificially. By a super being."

"Is there any chance of that?"

"Of course not. You've seen the holo. And we know from studying other planets that these sorts of quantum leaps are not impossible. A lucky

combination of mutations and, as we have on this planet, a perfect environment. Their science knew the truth. But for some reason there were pervasive beliefs in the concept that they were specially created."

"I don't see why that would be a problem."

"Well, it was. They developed a massive myth and worship system built around this super being they believed had created them. The record is full of superstition defeating science throughout these creatures' history. Scientists were actually persecuted. For telling the truth! Developments in medical science were regularly suppressed because they were deemed inconsistent with the world view that these creatures had developed from their superstitions. There were even attempts to suppress their understanding of how their life form and others had developed on the planet. You should see the detail records. They were barbaric. Burning scientists alive and torturing each other over these beliefs."

"But that wouldn't destroy their civilization. Would it?"

"You wouldn't think so. But in this case, it seems that these superstitions were able to impair not only their rationality, but also their tendencies toward civilized behavior. It was their downfall."

"Yet they still made progress."

"Yes. From what we can tell, the planet's social history went through cycles with science sometimes ascendant and sometimes superstition ruling."

Godson stared at the displays and said, "So what does all this mean? How did they get the way they are. And what are we going to do about it?"

"I think the answer is here." Nolan scanned forward to a point in history. "From what I can tell, this was the decisive moment. You can see that by this time, the sentient population had become organized into fairly diffused tribes, each claiming allegiance to a specific set of superstitions. The superstitions were all derived from the same fundamental idea of artificial creation, but over time minor differences had crept in. And those differences became very important to these creatures. Each of the tribes began competing, convinced that their

interpretation of what we know is a totally erroneous concept of how they came into existence was the correct one. They became willing to kill and be killed over these beliefs. They actually had wars in which the tribes fought and killed each other. Over a superstition, if you can believe it.”

“But they had such sophisticated science. I can’t believe they would give way to superstitions. Their scientists had correctly identified the geological, biological and chemical processes that had given rise to their planet and its various species.”

“That is the paradox of this planet. And why it has taken me so long to complete my analysis. Not only did they believe the theories, they were willing to kill each other over minor differences in interpretation of the theories. It’s clear that these creatures somehow subordinated their rationality to these beliefs. In spite of hard scientific evidence, they preferred to attempt to explain reality with wildly inconsistent and illogical concepts. And then they began killing each other over ideology.”

“That makes no sense. Are you sure your analysis is good?”

“I’m sorry, Captain. I told you I wasn’t sure what these findings would mean. But it seems fairly clear that once they got to the point of killing each other over ideology, the ideology became the most important thing to them. And the ideology did not support rational thinking. They were taught not to question or challenge what they were told. And just as quickly as they had acquired higher brain functions, they lost them. And they have become what you see today. The random violent outbursts that we see are a residual deep seated reflex, lashing out in hatred at any of their kind who they consider ideologically different.”

“I still don’t believe it,” said Godson.

“Neither do I,” said Rabb. “And anyway, this can’t explain everything. This data shows that not everyone was wrapped up in these superstitions. Why were they affected, too?”

“At first we thought they might have been killed by the others. In fact a lot of that did happen. But, as with everything else on this planet, it’s more complicated.”

“You have an answer?”

“Not a complete one. This reversal of evolution had the same effect on all of the creatures, but it seemed to have two distinct causes. I’m not sure which happened first. One, without question, was the over reliance on superstition which mandated the suspension of rational thinking. The other was the result of action by their industrial combines.”

“How?”

“Look at these segments.” He showed a series of holographs showing periods of history of the planet. “Just as the leaders of the ideologies competed with each other for the minds of the creatures on this planet, so did the industries. People became used to being told what to think and what to do to the point that they could not think on their own. They were told what to wear, what to read, and what to believe. Conformity became crucial to them and little by little, their art, science and all aspects of life became homogenized.

“In any event, between people blindly adhering to ideology or modifying their behavior to conform to the image that was portrayed for them. In the end, they all lost the ability to reason. Their higher brain functions atrophied.” He zoomed in on a group of creatures, sitting listlessly in a ruined building. “Brain dead. Vegetables. They literally gave up their powers of independent cognition.”

“Could they have stopped it?”

“I don’t know. Probably not. Anyone who raised a warning flag was condemned as a heretic. Or out of touch. And anyway, they couldn’t have reversed natural selection.”

“But what does that have to do with brain atrophy?”

“It’s the same thing. These creatures lost the ability to think. They ceased to need their higher cognitive functions. Independent thinking became as superfluous to them as a coat of fur is to a creature transplanted to a desert climate. And just as quickly as they developed, these creatures regressed. I’m sure that’s the answer.”

“Is there any hope for them? Could we rehabilitate them?” asked Godson.

“Really, Captain,” interrupted Rabb. “That is totally outside the scope of our mission. I object to this line of inquiry.”

Nolan ignored him, “I doubt it. Although I can’t tell without studying some specimens in more detail, I am quite sure the damage is irreversible. In another few galactic sweeps if we were to come back we would probably see them regressing further.”

“It doesn’t matter because we are going to wipe the planet, right, Captain?”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Nolan, “because they have lost the ability to take care of themselves. These creatures are barely able to feed themselves and they are rapidly moving toward extinction. Captain, I hate to agree with the Colonel, but I believe that wiping the planet is not only practical, but also the merciful thing to do.”

“Very well,” said Godson. “Make sure the documentation complete, file the necessary reports and get on with it. And Doctor?”

“Yes, sir?”

“I still want you to prepare a report on warnings to look for in our own civilization. We can’t risk this happening anywhere else.”

“Yes, sir.”