

Unexpected Utopia

By T. E. Stazyk

"I don't care what your sensors say! It's not supposed to be there!"

Ensign Depp shrugged. The captain might not believe it, but there it was. An inhabited, developed planet dead ahead of them. Depp persevered, "Captain, all instrumentation checks are nominal. The charts must be out of date. Or there is some sort of anomaly."

"All right," said Lieutenant Commander Sarah Condrat, captain of the PanGalactic Empire, Inc. scout ship *Valkyrie*. "Slow down and put us into orbit so we can get a better look. We've got to figure out what we're dealing with. After all, if there is an uncharted planet, we have a duty to log it."

"Roger Captain. Executing." As the ship slowed, Depp read out the data as it came in. "Mass, oh point three. Rotational speed alpha six, primary, unknown at this time."

"Any evidence of life? Are they looking back at us? Any defensive posture?"

"Negative."

"Continue scanning."

"Yes, ma'am."

As a PanGalactic scout ship, the mission of the *Valkyrie* was to explore a preassigned quadrant of space in order to identify planets which could either be used to settle some of the PanGalactic Empire's burgeoning population, or which could provide valuable resources to feed the massive demands of the Empire. Each PanGalactic scout ship was outfitted with scanners to assess such important criteria as resource availability, suitability for settlement and, very importantly, existence of a sentient population. Condrat's duty at that point was to learn as much as she could about the planet and send a report to headquarters where further decisions would be made.

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Before sending the summary of their findings, Captain Condrat held a meeting with her officers to review what they had learned. She wanted everyone to be in agreement as to what they were dealing with before she sent in the data. She always did that anyway, but in this case, with a previously unknown planet, she wanted to be extra careful. Godson, the Executive Officer, started the briefing. "It's the strangest thing we've ever seen. According to the data, this planet is a paradise."

"What does that mean?"

"It is perfect by every measure. It has a sentient population that is completely peaceful. The population load is optimal. Resource consumption is optimal, with almost no reliance on non-sustainable resources. Quality of life measures are confusing. They are a strange mix of primitive and advanced. They utilize no sophisticated communications or transportation modalities but they are organized into well-designed communities and living structures are comfortable and up to our standards. Education level is high and they seem to have almost no government in the traditional sense. Everyone just sort of does what they have to do. There seems to be no law enforcement either. Obviously, this raw data has to be confirmed and clarified with on-site observations, because it doesn't make a lot of sense. There seems to be no class structure. No ruling class, no upper or lower class. No poverty. As I say, it's too good to be true. A paradise."

"This is scary. A planet that isn't supposed to be here turns out to be the ideal of what a planet should be. I don't like it," said Condrat.

"Yes," said Depp, "but we sure could learn something from them. It looks like they've gotten it right."

Condrat shook her head, "Not by PanGalactic standards. That planet is way too underpopulated and there is profligate underconsumption of resources. It looks like a good find to me. I think we'll all be getting a bonus out of this one."

“Yeah, but I’d still like to know what it’s doing out here. A solo planet circling a class nine primary and neither of them on any chart we can find,” said Godson. “I agree,” said Condrat. “Depp, see if you can run some retrograde projections of the area to see if there has been a configuration shift. Report to me when you have the results.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The meeting broke up and Godson and Depp walked back to the bridge. “You know,” said Depp, “I have an idea, but I didn’t want to mention it in front of the group.”

Godson laughed, “Why? Too crazy?”

“Something like that. It’s history, not science. You remember the story about the Sol acquisition?”

“Sure. It’s the basis for the PanGalactic charter. PanGalactic merged with the Sol system and adopted its population and resource management practices. It was from the Sol system that we got the Universal Right of Reproduction laws as well as the Freedom From Responsibility clauses in our Bill of Sentient Rights. All beings have a right to reproduce and are entitled to access to resources such as food, energy and space. But what does that have to do with this system we just found?”

“I’m just thinking here. At the time of the merger, there was this rumor going around that before they perfected the terraforming and population resettlement processes that we adopted from them, the Sol system had experimented with setting up new planetary systems. There is no official record of any of this. The idea was to set up prison planets where they would send criminals. They wanted a crime-free society, but population and resource pressures were sending the crime rates sky high. They were running out of room for prisons so they tried to resettle the worst of the worst on uninhabited planets. *That they created.* The concept had lots of political support, but technically violated various human rights charters so it was cloaked in secrecy. Records of

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the project were destroyed and the locations of the planets were blacked out. Think about it. Where did we get our star charts from? The old Sol probe project. So they wouldn't include prison planets would they?"

"You're crazy, Depp. Are you trying to tell me that the paradise planet is really an old prison?"

"Now you know why I didn't bring it up in the meeting."

"Yeah. And forget it. At least until you can explain how a prison turns into utopia."

"It's worth thinking about. Apparently they made four of them. You know, prison planets. According to the rumors, on two of them anarchy ruled and over time all the people wiped each other out. On the other two a warlord law of the jungle system was in place. Just like in any prison, I guess. Only on these prison planets there was no structure of control. No guards. There was nothing to stop them from turning into wild animals, which seemed to have happened."

"And no one knows about these systems?"

"No. All records were suppressed. All I've got is rumors that have bounced around for years. No legitimate historical record even makes reference to them, or if they do they call them unsubstantiated rumors. Or conspiracy theory. But you know, it would be interesting to review the Company exploration records to see if something like this has ever happened before. A previously uncharted planet that just turns up and happens to be inhabited. And the captain would probably agree that it's a smart thing to do. That way she can see how someone else may have handled it and cover herself."

"Maybe. Can you find that out?"

"Sure. If it's not classified I should be able to get my hands on it."

"Then do it. Now."

"I'm on it."

Within an hour, Depp called Godson. "I found it. Ha. I was right."

“I’ll be right there.”

Depp showed Godson the records. There had been three different PanGalactic scouting missions where uncharted planets had been discovered. Two of the planets turned out to be uninhabited, although there was evidence of a destroyed sentient culture. They were acquired by PanGalactic for their natural resources and no negotiations had been required as the planets were uninhabited and claimed by no other system. The third planet possessed a sentient population of unusual viciousness. There was virtually no social structure or government and the people killed each other over any provocation. The only reason the population hadn’t died out, given their enormous death rate and low life expectancy was their phenomenal birth rate. In keeping with PanGalactic policy, the crew determined that the population could not be pacified, and was a clear and present impediment to resource acquisition. Accordingly, the population was cleansed by PanGalactic enforcers.

“So that accounts for three. And you say there were four?”

“That’s the rumor. What do you think?”

“It’s totally circumstantial. And maybe explosive as well. There are a lot of Sol representatives on the Board. Who knows what would happen if they found out PanGalactic had whacked a whole planet of their people, criminals or otherwise.”

“What should we tell the Captain?”

“The truth, I guess. Let her earn her pay.”

Condrat listened carefully as Depp nervously outlined what he had thought and what he had subsequently learned.

“This is fascinating,” she said. “I’d never heard any of this.”

“I didn’t want to say anything because it is just rumor and conspiracy theory sort of stuff. But if you look at the logs, the crews who encountered those other planets had identical experiences as ours. A planet that shouldn’t have been there, but was. They called them in and you see the result.”

“The only problem I have is that it sure doesn’t look like a prison planet. I would expect it to have turned out like the others.”

“That is a problem. And who knows what HQ will do with them when we report it. I almost wish we hadn’t found it.” Depp made a gesture over his charts as if he were destroying them.

Godson and Condrat looked sharply at Depp. He was hinting at one of the few capital crimes in the PanGalactic system—suppression of a planetary find. Condrat surprised them by saying, “You know. I agree. If it’s as good as we think, why ruin it. But we don’t have that option, do we.”

They all stared at the charts and reports in silence. Finally Condrat said, “Here’s what we’ll do. I don’t know about you, but I have to know. Let’s go down there and find out what’s going on.”

“But how are we going to contact them. Their communications systems are too primitive for us to tap into. Not only that, there’s no central government. Who do we contact? All we can do is go down there and say, ‘Take us to your leader,’” said Depp.

“Sounds risky,” said Godson.

“But there’s no evidence of any kind of violence. They are perfectly peaceful.”

“True, Captain, but our instruments won’t tell us what kind of superstitions they have. If we drop out of nowhere we might trigger some racial memory that gets us killed.”

“We’ll be armed, don’t forget. And we can bring down an S-force to cover us if you’ll feel better.”

“No weapons. If they are truly peaceful, we don’t want to show force. Where do you want to land?”

“See this?” Depp asked. “It seems to be the largest settlement. It’s on a river so we could use that for protection. I say we drop right there.”

Their landing craft settled down well outside the settlement in what appeared to be early afternoon. Condrat, Godson and Depp headed toward the settlement. It was disconcerting. Although the fields and layout looked like a subsistence farming village from ancient history, the buildings were modern and comfortable looking. The streets and paths were paved and the “village” was spotlessly clean. Obviously, the inhabitants had seen their lander coming in and a group of four was moving to meet them as they approached the village.

Again, the experience was disturbing. They were humanoid but they certainly did not look like subsistence farmers. They were clean, healthy and well dressed. They also looked relaxed and confident as they approached Condrat’s team. Their attitude was relaxed and they didn’t seem to be carrying any weapons. One, the largest of the four, in fact looked positively exhilarated. When they got close, one of the inhabitants called out, “Welcome to CP Two.”

Condrat, glancing at Godson and Depp, said, “Thank you. I am Sarah Condrat, commander of the PanGalactic scout vessel *Valkyrie* and these are two of my officers, Godson and Depp.

“We welcome you all,” said the person who had greeted them first.

“See. I told you,” said the large man. “It was only a matter of time. It had to happen.”

“Not so fast, Three-five-eight, let’s get to know our guests first. Hello. I am Seven-four-nine and this is Block D,” he said, indicating the settlement with a sweep of his arm.

“That settles it. I’m convinced,” whispered Depp to Godson.

“We assume you come from space. We have no vehicles such as yours. Three-five-eight here has been telling us that we are not alone and that other peoples exist beyond the stars. He is thrilled to be proven correct.”

Three-five-eight beamed. “I have many questions for you.”

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“I’m sure you do,” said Seven-four-nine. “But I’m sure our guests have questions as well. And may like to see our Block. Let’s take some time to get acquainted.”

The landing party ended up spending the night on CP Two and by mid-day of the next day, they had a complete picture of how the planet operated. It was simplicity itself. Seven-four-nine and Three-five-eight had answered their questions and shown them the planet’s available archives and it had proven to be a fascinating story. There was no question that the planet had been settled approximately one thousand standard ago as a prison planet of the Sol system. The planet originally had no infrastructure, but was rich in natural resources. The initial shipments of prisoners were on their own. Because the prison population was a reflection of the overall population of the Sol system, the planet had a good cross section of the professions and the prisoners over time were able to provide for themselves and build a city. Eventually groups left the city and started new cities and the model for life on Confinement Planet Two emerged.

The cities were at constant war with each other. Mostly the wars were fought over control of resources, but also there were a number of ideological wars. Once the initial shipments of prisoners established the basics of survival, individuals started remembering differences in race, religion and class and the society fragmented along those lines. At the low point of civilization on the planet, everyone could name at least a half dozen other groups of people of different cults, races or classes who would have killed them on sight and life became short and ugly. The only people with a reasonable amount of security were the warlords who controlled the cities or important resources, including the addictive substances on the planet. Some of the warlords associated into cartels in an attempt to control resource allocation and to enhance their level of control. They had private armies, and the leading cause of death for warlords was assassination in a coup staged by their own private army.

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Over the years, shipments of new prisoners to the planet stopped and people forgot that there was a world outside of their own. For the most part, they also accepted conditions on CP Two as the way life was supposed to be and continued to live their short, violent lives. Then something unusual happened. A very powerful warlord emerged who was able to consolidate power and become the sole ruler of the planet. The only thing the people of CP Two understood was fear and power and Six-six-six wielded both. But he had been an unusual person. His hunger for power was driven by a desire to be free of fear and subjugation. He felt that if he became the most powerful person on the planet, he would be liberated and much to his surprise, by the time he held absolute power on the planet, he did feel that life wasn't all that bad. Of course, he always had to fear an overly ambitious subordinate who wanted to acquire power or wealth, or a frustrated member of the population who decided to take out his anger on Six-six-six, but for the most part he found himself happy.

"And that," said Three-five-eight, "is when the planet found itself truly blessed."

"By a dictator?" asked Condrat.

"Yes. He was truly unique and decided that what had happened to him should happen to everyone. Underneath his brutal exterior was a thoughtful and intelligent visionary. He asked himself what was making him happy and he realized that it was freedom from fear and a sense of control over his destiny. No one had ever had those things on this world before. He decided that everyone should share his good fortune and he formed a council to study the issue and find out how that could be done. Fortunately, he didn't announce what he was doing and for years the council worked in secrecy, first they developed a plan and then they started to implement it, all the while remaining invisible. All of the recommendations of the council were implemented as ruthless orders by Six-six-six. Of course no one would have made the sacrifices he demanded, but he made them orders."

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Seven-four-nine took over. “He realized that he wouldn’t live forever but wanted the work of the council to continue. So he left nothing to chance. He staged his death in a coup in which his closest advisor on the council was made the new dictator and the ongoing work of the council was virtually guaranteed. It is the end result of that work that we enjoy here today. Peace, prosperity and happiness.”

“How did they do it?” asked Godson.

“Six-six-six had a simple philosophy. For example, he would say that because humans need air and water to live, air and water should be given value. It was an easy concept to sell because people were used to cartels controlling everything, so a cartel to control air and water was natural. But then he changed things around. He said that everything should be valued based on its contribution. He said that the problem on CP Two and on our home planets was that people were valued more than anything else, regardless of their contributions. That, he said, gave rise to unnatural and inequitable relationships. So people had to be measured on their contributions and would only be entitled to the resources of the planet based on those contributions.”

“That sounds pretty extreme.”

“Not at all. Once he commoditized everything it was easy to establish relationships between use and replenishment for every resource. He pointed out that for the most part, human habitation on CP Two was negative. What did the average person contribute? Nothing. They were born, consumed resources, were miserable, made other people’s lives miserable and died. What was the point of that, he asked. He realized that only the huge death rate was preventing the population of the planet from getting out of control and that in time, we would destroy ourselves. We were valuing our miserable lives more highly than the resources on which we depended and more than the future of our race. And at the same time, we were treating the animals we slaughtered for food better than we were treating our children.

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“The council started to require people to justify their decisions to breed. It became impossible to people to have children and then forget about them. The parents had to plan for the overall cost of the child to the society and they had to be ready to pay it. Of course in those days, it was possible to make directives like that and enforce them. Only fifty percent of children lived to puberty given the rates of starvation, disease and violent death in those days. So if the council mandated the execution of families who didn’t comply with the new regulations, no one complained.”

“I can’t believe it. It sounds barbaric?”

“Barbaric? That was the world we lived in. You think we were inhumane because of what we did. The reality was that we had given up our humanity long ago. We were so focused on resource acquisition, protecting our possessions and asserting our perceived rights that we effectively became no better than wild animals. Now we are human. We know our niche in the scheme of the world. It gives to us and we give back. We share things. We respect each other. We realize that life and this world are gifts and we work to protect them. We take responsibility for our individual lives and when we feel that we no longer can make a contribution to society, we voluntarily end our existence. That becomes our final contribution to ensure the continued success of our world.”

“We don’t put ourselves first, is a good way to sum it up. That was one of Six-six-six’s ideas. ‘You are not the most important thing in this world.’

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

“What was not to be believed was the impact it had. In a few generations things had completely changed. A sense of responsibility suffused our world. People recognized that their existence represented a cost to the resources of the planet so they looked for ways to contribute and lessen their impact. We found ways to minimize our consumption of scarce resources. We optimized our population and that was the best thing of all. As a result of our efforts, the

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warlord structure collapsed. Everyone took a role in the direction of their block. Because we matched the number of people with the available resources there were no longer reasons for killing and violence. Our world had changed from hell to utopia and by careful self-management of the population we have ensured that it stays that way. The underlying philosophy now is that no individual is more important than the society. We do not assert our rights. Each person sacrifices some rights but the society as a whole benefits.”

Back on the bridge of the *Valkyrie* there was a short discussion. “I say we get out of here and forget we were ever here,” said Depp, repeating his initial assessment.

“You know we can’t do that,” said Godson. “We’d all get the death penalty.”

Condrat ignored him. “Could we do it? What do our logs show? Have we logged anything yet?”

Depp responded. “No. I can take care of the time gaps if we wipe the orbit and transit time. There won’t be any trail.”

“Godson?”

He paused, then said, “I say we do it. If we log this, PanGalactic will just undo everything they’ve done. Worse, can you imagine what the public policy people will make of them and their history? Everything PanGalactic does is based on the value of the individual and the universal right of procreation. Just the opposite from CP Two.”

“So that’s it. We continue on as if nothing happened, we don’t report the contact and hope that whatever is masking the planet and keeping it off the charts continues to work.”

“Yeah. Until they decide to develop space travel and come out and save the universe.”