

Suffer The Children

By T. E. Stazyk

"I know it's not possible, but it's the way it is. It just is! You better believe it!" Flight Ensign Jeff Godson shouted into his headset microphone.

On the bridge of PanGalactic explorer frigate *Delphos*, Flight Commander Sarah Condrat shivered at the tone of Godson's voice. She had just patched in to the transmission in response to the urgent hand signals from Depp, the communications officer. Condrat knew Godson to be a tough field officer. He was young, but experienced and cool, and she couldn't imagine what had happened down on Plunkett IV to upset him so badly. He was leading the inspection team that had been called in based on rumors about unusual deaths on the planet. A PanGalactic supply ship had notified Central Control and Condrat and her ship had been given the task of investigating.

Not much was known about the Plunkett system. It was rich, largely self-sustaining and seemingly indifferent to the rest of the galaxy. Their society was highly advanced and sophisticated, but some sociologists felt that it was overly regulated and protective.

"What is it Jeff?" she interrupted.

"Mass suicide. Must have been going on for weeks. We scanned the whole planet and found only one person alive. He's not forthcoming. Nothing he says makes any sense. We've taken him into custody and will bring him up, but I doubt if we'll get much out of him. We're ready for evac. Just get us out of here."

"Right. I'll meet your team in the docking hall."

"Thank you Sir. Out."

Condrat handed the microphone back to Depp and said, "Get me Central Control. I need to order up a For-team to find out what happened

down there. And call Doctor Rabb. I want him standing by to meet Godson's party when they return."

"Yes Sir."

Condrat reported the apparent unnatural deaths to the PanGalactic Investigations Division and was promised a complete Forensic team within two ship's days. She then went down to the receiving bay to meet the doctor and await the return of Godson's team.

As Godson and his team came through the airlock Condrat could see that they were shaken. With them was a relatively young male humanoid who seemed to be in a state of shock. He kept repeating meaningless phrases and seemed unable to understand their questions. After the doctor had cleared them, Godson and his crew met with Condrat to debrief on their experience on Plunkett IV.

Unfortunately, the key to understanding Plunkett IV lay with the native they had brought back, and communicating with him appeared to be nearly impossible. Condrat asked the doctor to keep working to learn what he could and dismissed the rest of the crew until the For-team arrived.

Rabb conducted a thorough physical examination and found the native to be in a state of anxiety but otherwise in good health. It seemed clear that the humanoid's mental processes had been severely impaired, apparently by the stress of watching the entire planet kill themselves in front of him. There were limits to what he could do on his own without the For-team but he persevered. Each time he thought he was piecing together a plausible version of what may have happened, the humanoid threw out new and contradictory data which added up to a story just too bizarre to believe. He reported his findings to Condrat. "Now you have to remember that this is all guesswork. We have no firm evidence, just what I think he's trying to say."

"I understand. So what do you make of it?"

"Well, the story on the Plunkett system is that it's highly advanced but overly protective and legalistic. Maybe I'm reading too much into it, but everything this humanoid said sounded like he was reciting regulations and

codes of behavior. To him everything is 'required' or 'prohibited.' I think he might have been some sort of police or enforcer because his world seems to consist of regulations and penalties and punishments."

"But why were they killing themselves? Was it mass hysteria? And why did he survive?"

"I'm not sure. Something happened a few years ago that he seems to think started it. He kept talking about 'new policies.' As far as his surviving, I got the sense that his mental state is not as much due to shock as to disappointment or concern about something."

"Any idea what's bothering him?"

Rabb shrugged. "I think he's upset that he hasn't killed himself."

"What are we doing to prevent him from trying now?"

"Nothing. I don't think he'll do it."

"Why?"

"Because told me he wouldn't"

"And you believe him? What did he say?"

"He said he couldn't kill himself because it would be illegal."

"You've got a whole planet full of people who've killed themselves and he's worried about whether it's illegal? He's crazy."

"I haven't ruled out that diagnosis yet. But here is the logic, if you can call it that. Apparently for some reason the Plunkett society started performing mass executions five years or so ago. About two years ago, the suicide rate started catching up with the deaths by execution until suicides became the leading cause of death."

"But why did they start killing themselves?"

"Well. According to this guy, it seems that everyone agreed with the executions. They thought they were a good idea. The suicides were a way to sort of streamline the process. As I say, life in the system was totally governed by rules and regulations. Everyone thought they were guilty of something, so they felt they would save the government the effort of arresting, trying and executing them."

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“I don’t believe it.”

“It seems that somehow they had come to the conclusion that some fundamental part of their existence was unethical and morally unacceptable. As far as him killing himself, remember that this society was unusually structured, controlled and legalistic. Apparently when people started killing themselves to save the government the trouble, there were complex requirements for witnessing and reporting. He’s the last person left so his suicide cannot be witnessed and reported. So it would be illegal.”

“You’re joking. I thought the Plunkett system was supposed to be sentient. That’s just irrational.”

“I agree, but within the confines of their regulatory structure, it made perfect sense. And it’s like he’s brainwashed. He’s not afraid of dying. He’s more afraid of committing an un-witnessed suicide and doing something illegal. Look at this document we found in his belongings. His name is Aaron Brandt.” Rabb handed her an original document with a certified translation. It was some sort of pre-printed form with blanks to be filled in:

I, Aaron Brandt, in order to eliminate any threat that I may represent to the children of Plunkett IV, and to prevent the further diversion of resources to me from the children, do hereby end my life pursuant to criminal code P-C-78-9.6 §56-18 Sec.9.

Signed and witnessed:

Decedent Aaron Brandt

Date _____

Witness _____

Date _____

DOCW Form Number 56-98 (Rev. 854/4)

“You see. He had his form all filled out and ready to go. He just couldn’t find a consenting witness.”

“I can’t believe it. I better have a look at those interviews. Remember there’s a For-team on its way. They might want to take a look at the way we’ve handled this whole thing. I wish we’d left him down there.”

“I wish I could go down there and have a look myself. I think I know where to look for some answers.”

“Not until the For-team arrives. And stay away from Brandt. We can’t risk tainting him. This is going to be big and if we do anything to mess up the evidence I’ll be flying cargo ships and you’ll be giving physicals in a recruiting office.”

The For-team arrived on schedule and joined Condrat’s ship in orbit around Plunkett IV. The team leader and two other members came aboard and very quickly irritated Condrat and her crew with their arrogance and attitude. Colonel Parker, the leader, was particularly difficult to deal with and Condrat quickly decided enough was enough.

“You know, Colonel, the investigation is supposed to focus on the planet, not me and my ship.”

“Technically true, Commander, but you have brought back a subject from the scene and interrogated him without me or one of my experts being present. Accordingly, the investigation scene has been expanded. You have no idea how many of our investigations are tainted by overzealous, or more often, incompetent crews who don’t wait for us.”

Condrat decided not to engage the Colonel in a debate on whether it was better to have left what appeared to be a suicidal lunatic at large alone on the planet. She had earlier briefed her officers and crew on the need for complete cooperation and honesty with the For-team. It was going to be a challenge.

Based on the information they had received and Condrat’s briefing on what had transpired, the Colonel developed his work strategy. He refused to watch the recordings that Rabb had made of his interviews.

“Doctor, you are not competent to conduct forensic investigations, therefore anything you may have learned cannot be supported. I will make my own conclusions based on data legally and professionally collected.”

He did permit Rabb to observe his interview with the Plunkett native. Rabb reported later to Condrat, “I can’t say much for his bedside manner. He practically told the humanoid if he didn’t cooperate he’d be up for murder of the entire planet.”

“You’re kidding. What did he say to that?”

“What do you think? He said ‘I hope so.’”

Normally Condrat and her ship would have been dismissed after the For-team had taken statements from any crew members who had been on the surface but because the Colonel had decided that Condrat’s ship was part of the “crime scene” as he called it and because the team could only make limited use of Plunkett IV’s infrastructure (“no cooperating victims or survivors” according to the Colonel) they were required to remain in orbit and provide assistance to the team. It was a frustrating assignment. Condrat knew that her crew could have been a great help but the Colonel insisted on treating them as if they were part of the cause of whatever had happened on Plunkett IV and kept her completely in the dark as far as what his investigation was revealing.

Godson and his search party had been extensively interviewed and had been back to the surface several times to show the For-team what they had done and seen and to assist in further searching. The initial shock of Plunkett IV had faded and Godson was back to his usual self. He developed a good working relationship with the Colonel’s team (except for the Colonel) based on mutual respect and trust. It was through Godson that Condrat learned the little she did about what was happening.

“We’re starting to piece things together,” he told her at dinner one night. It was a very strange place. Like a lot of the wealthy and mature civilizations we’ve seen, they had become lazy. A self-centered society in which the individual was more important than the whole. They even went so

far as to try to legalize safety. There could be nothing that might harm an individual. They developed a law for everything. It got to where they lost the idea of an accident. There was no such thing. Everything was a 'preventable injury,' which meant that someone had to be at fault any time anything went wrong."

"Well, as you say, that's not so unusual."

"True, and the effects on them seem to have been fairly normal too. Economy crippled by over regulation, loss of creativity and innovation, lack of initiative and risk taking. They started a predictable zeta-curve decline about a hundred standard years ago. That meant they were on trajectory to enter a dark age in about another three hundred years or so. Not this time, I guess."

"What happened?"

"They're not sure yet. One thing that seems a little different here is that there was an unusual shift away from looking only for organizational liability and trying to establish personal liability as well. And there was liability for everything. It wasn't just getting compensated if something went wrong with a product, you could even get a settlement if you went to a movie and it made you sad or upset you. Woodley, the anthropsychiatrist says this is the first civilization he's seen where there were more trauma counsellors than lawyers."

"Well if that's true it's not hard to extrapolate a high strung population that made the slightest offence a crime. Usually that resolves itself by people just settling disputes themselves. How did they institutionalise it?"

"Don't know yet. Speaking of which, the Colonel would kill me if he knew I was speculating with you on what might have happened."

"Doesn't he ever lighten up?"

"No, and everyone hates him."

"Can a jerk like him ever really understand a place like Plunkett IV?"

"I doubt it. Careful, here he comes."

"My compliments, Commander. May I join you?"

“Please.”

“I wish to inform you that the investigation is going well. It is too early to draw conclusions but I think we are quite close to the end. I thank you and your crew for their assistance. We no longer need you. You are dismissed. My report will not reflect negatively on you or your crew’s behavior.”

“Thank you Colonel, but we would like to stay to see the end result of the investigation.”

“If it is not classified, you will hear about it through normal channels. Otherwise, you would do well to forget about Plunkett IV.”

Condrat knew that there was no point in arguing. She would never convince the Colonel to let them stay and none of her superiors would intervene to plead her case. She filed with Central Control for a revised mission plan and made arrangements with her crew to get underway.

II

The *Delphos* was on the other side of the galaxy helping a small planetary system with asteroid control when Depp interrupted with an urgent message from control. They were to immediately return to Plunkett IV and await further orders.

When they dropped into orbit around Plunkett IV they were surprised to see a Lucifer-class battle cruiser showing the colors of an interplanetary ambassador. Depp promptly reported to Condrat. “Big power, ma’am. And they want you and Ensign Godson on board soonest for a conference. What’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you when I know.”

As Condrat and Godson made the brief crossing to the cruiser they speculated on why they had been summoned.

“That bastard Colonel is probably trying to stick something on us. But what?”

“Relax, if they were mad at us they would have boarded us instead of inviting us over. Something’s gone wrong, but I have no idea what it might be.”

After arriving at the dock, a flight lieutenant escorted them to a conference room. There were four people in the room and they recognized one as a member of Colonel Parker’s team; the others were all strangers.

“Good afternoon, Commander, Ensign. I am Commander Hynes of the *PG Moloch*.” He motioned to a woman standing next to him, “I’d like to introduce Mitsui Yakamora, Special Ambassador Without Portfolio and General Counsel to the Diplomatic Corps. The Ambassador would like information from both of you.”

The Ambassador was surprisingly polite, considering the incredible power she held. According to the charter of the PanGalactic Federation, she was the de facto head of state of any planet that the Federation deemed unable to govern itself, or that represented an unreasonable threat to the peace and security of the neighborhood. She didn’t have to tell them that she not only outranked everyone else, she was also in charge of Plunkett IV.

“I understand, Ensign, that you were in charge of the landing party that first discovered problems on the planet surface.”

“Yes, Ma'am,” Godson replied wondering what he had done wrong and what punishment they were lining up for him.

“And you, Commander, had contact with the survivor of the tragedy?”

“Not personal contact, Madame Ambassador, but I saw recordings of discussions my medical officer had with him.”

“I see. And you both met Colonel Parker during his investigation?”

“Yes, ma’am. Regularly.”

“Why don’t we all sit down?” She took a chair at the large table. “I have some shocking news for you. Colonel Parker killed himself two days ago. It is the first time in the history of the Federation that an official has committed suicide in the line of duty. This is a very serious matter and you

and your crew, Commander, are being assigned to my command to assist in finding out what happened.”

Condrat quickly said, “But we couldn’t know anything.”

The Ambassador held up her hand. “Relax, Commander. We are asking for your help, not accusing you. Because of what you do know about the situation here, you are in the best position to work with my team. You see, the Colonel destroyed all of the records his team had assembled. Because he made himself the center of the investigation, no one knows what the team had learned. Essentially, we know about as much as you do at this point.”

“But what happened? Why did he do it?”

“We don’t know. That’s what we want to know. He left a bizarre recording that leads us to believe that he felt that keeping the Plunkett IV matter unexplored would be the best for the Galaxy. He carried on about what he termed, ‘the spread of toxic thoughts.’ You may listen to the recording if you wish, but we don’t think there is much to learn from it.”

“My crew and ship are at your disposal, Ma’am. And I think I understand why you wanted us back here.”

“Yes. I’m afraid that we must make certain that whatever led the people on Plunkett IV to kill themselves was not a disease that can be transmitted. We need to know that Colonel Parker’s death did not have a physical cause.”

The Ambassador touched a button and three civilians entered the room.

“I would like to introduce you to my team. They will be conducting the investigation and I would like you to give them your full cooperation. This is Dr. McCluskey, our Sociopologist, Dr. Aroha, our Legalogist and Dr. Smythe-Hollings, our Neuropsychiatrist. I’ve arranged for refreshments in the next room so that we can talk casually and get better acquainted. You will find that I do not operate like Colonel Parker. Is there anyone else from your staff that you would like to invite at this time, Commander?”

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“Yes, ma’am. And thank you very much. I’d like to call in Dr. Raab, who worked closely with Colonel Parker and interviewed the Plunkett survivor. Also, Ensign Depp, my communications officer.”

“Very well, have them join us.”

“But . . .”

“What is it, Commander?”

“If you are concerned about a disease, shouldn’t we be quarantined or isolated?”

“It’s too late. We have all been exposed to Colonel Parker’s crew and if there is a virus or bacteria that operates on the brain, all of them have been exposed as well. You see the urgency of our work? We need to know the cause so that, one, we can put people’s minds at ease and two, prevent this sort of thing from ever happening again.”

Condrat summoned Rabb and Depp and with Godson they started their joint research with the ambassador’s team. They started by going over the available data, which was primarily the records of Rabb’s interviews with Aaron Brandt and their recollections of what they saw on the planet. Very quickly they were arguing the main hypotheses. Dr. Rabb and Dr. McCluskey, the Sociopologist were convinced that whatever caused the problem on Plunkett IV it wasn’t an organism. Rabb based his conviction on the survivor and the fact that Godson and his landing party had shown no ill effects.

“But don’t forget Parker. He spent a lot more time on the planet surface. Maybe he picked up the bug that way. Jeff and his people weren’t there long enough to get infected.”

“Doesn’t prove anything. This is a nasty case. Parker might just have been overwhelmed by the shock of what happened.”

“I agree,” said Smythe-Hollings, the neuropsychiatrist. “But if it is a bug, how do you explain just one survivor. I would think there should have been none or more than one.”

“Happens all the time in cases like this. Someone for some reason is immune,” said Aroha. “Have you checked him out for blood chemistry, or some sort of abnormality.”

“No,” said Dr. Rabb. “Regulations said we couldn’t touch him until the For-team arrived and Parker dismissed us before we could do anything.”

“Well, it can’t be helped,” said McCluskey. “You might want to check him now, although it may also be inconclusive. Anyway, I’m telling you it wasn’t an organism. Look at the way the survivor behaved. He wasn’t rational.”

“But again that could be explained by an organism that attacks the brain. We know that can happen.”

“Well, that’s what we have to prove. Maybe we can check his brain functions. He’s still irrational as far as I’m concerned so maybe if it is an organism it’s still affecting him.”

“I doubt if that will prove anything,” continued McCluskey. “From what you say he is rational. He is rigorously following some logic that he can’t escape from. The logic may be flawed, but he is quite rational and consistent in his adherence to it. What a case, we can’t even tell if the guy is crazy or not.”

“Well,” said Condrat. “It seems to me that we ought to spend more time debriefing him. See if there has been any change for better or worse.”

“Do that,” said Smythe-Hollings. “In the meantime, I’ll work up some brain physiology tests.”

McCluskey said, “If you don’t mind, I won’t join in just yet. I want to review the history of the Plunkett system. I’m sure there is something in the past-- something in the way this society was set up, that will tell us the secret. I can’t ask the right questions until then.”

Over the next several days the group interviewed Aaron Brandt several times, individually and in groups. They learned a lot about his background and events on the planet, but he didn’t help them much with the investigation. He made it clear that he saw himself as being caught in a

unique and terrible situation. He was legally and morally obligated to kill himself and therefore he wanted to do it. He had been culturally and socially conditioned to do it. But that same conditioning prevented him from doing it because the laws that called for him to kill himself also required there to be a consenting witness to make sure he did it.

Dr. Rabb shook his head, "Have you ever heard of a society that legalistic? How could this happen?"

Smyth-Hollings replied, "I would have thought it impossible. My tests have shown no physical or organic problem with his brain function, blood or nervous system. But I simply can't believe that this tragedy is strictly social and behavioural. The problem I have with McCluskey's theory is that someone should have stood up and said, 'This is crazy.' But no one did. And things like this don't happen overnight. This takes years of conditioning. Why didn't anyone see it coming?"

Just then Condrat paged the entire team, "Dr. McCluskey has asked for a team meeting at 45 hundred."

As soon as the team assembled, McCluskey started the meeting dramatically. "I think I've figured it out. I can't believe it, but it's the only answer."

"Let's hear it," said Condrat.

McCluskey explained that two unusual things about the survivor had always struck him. "First, his motivations are all based on laws and regulations. Has anyone been able to get an emotional response about anything from him? No. He's like a robot. Second, does anyone know what he did for a living on the planet? Is there a connection between that and why he survived?"

"You know," said Dr. Rabb, "I'm not sure exactly what his job was. I gather he was some sort of civil servant, like a lawyer or a cop but I couldn't tell."

"No, you wouldn't be able to figure it out from what he said," said McCluskey. "I've read up on the history of the system and I know. You're

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right, he was a mixture of lawyer and cop but his title was ‘Compliance Auditor.’ His job, folks, was to make sure that people killed themselves when they were supposed to.”

“You’re joking.”

“Really, that’s a little incredible.”

“Not at all if you look at the history. The death penalty became so common that the government outsourced executions to the condemned themselves. And people were willing to do it. But the social structure was so legalistic they needed to make sure people actually did it. So they got people like our friend Brandt to check. He had to fill out a report certifying that the death had occurred. If there was no report, the execution was considered not to have taken place. And no one wanted to have the fact that they didn’t do their duty and kill themselves haunting them forever.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Yes. It got out of hand and Brandt here has revealed the flaw in the system. He certified the last execution and then looked around for someone to certify him and said, ‘Oops.’”

“But how could such a thing happen? How could things get to that point? And what did they all feel so guilty about?”

“It was easy. Once they started on the path, every next step was perfectly logical and justifiable based on the last step. No one ever stepped back and asked if the path made any sense. Why don’t I show you this holo I made based on key points in the history of the system? Of course this will only show what happened after the system joined PanGalactic but everything important happened after that time.”

The holo was fascinating. It showed an incredibly sophisticated culture that made brilliant use of technology and science. The culture was diverse and had rich art forms. The education level of the inhabitants rivalled any other system in PanGalactic. The holo quickly acquainted the team with an enviable civilization.

“Of course, it’s impossible to point to a date and say, ‘That’s when it started,’ but I think right here is as good a place as any,” interrupted McCluskey.

The holo showed a series of events, closely spaced over several years which importantly molded public opinion and changed the legal system in subtle ways. Eventually, it reached the point where in virtually any social transaction the parties were identified as ‘victims’ or ‘perpetrators.’ There was no such thing as an accident. Every misfortune could be traced back to a perpetrator, whether it was the manufacturer of a piece of equipment or the user. In divorce cases, people began to portray themselves as victims of the institution of marriage and the person who convinced the judge that they were the bigger victim would win the case.

“Now watch this,” said McCluskey as the holo summarised a series of legal cases in which prisoners successfully sued the people they had committed crimes against for causing them to be in jail, employees sued employers if they weren’t promoted when they thought they should be and children sued parents because they thought other parents treated their children better than they were treated.

“I can’t believe they would let that happen,” said Rabb.

“It gets worse. And here is where they pass the point of no return,” replied McCluskey. “After that kid won the suit against his parents. It was things like that that set a new baseline for logic. Sending parents to jail for being parents might have been crazy, but it was logical based on earlier decisions. And then later decisions were made in light of that new environment.”

“How did that work?”

“It was a progression. First you sue someone because they make a faulty product. That makes sense. Then someone pushes it farther and sues a movie maker for breach of contract because they didn’t like the movie. And they win. It’s not too crazy a leap of logic. But they didn’t know when to stop. If you can sue a studio for making a movie you don’t like, why not sue

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your parents because you aren't as smart, or athletic or lovely as you want to be?"

"I think you're oversimplifying."

"You make up your mind. Because of the victim mentality they had developed they decided that almost every problem in their society must be related to something that happened in childhood. It became illegal to discipline children in any way because it would damage their self-esteem. Pretty soon, any dealing with kids became a legal minefield. They appointed a 'Minister of Child Welfare' and eventually that person became the number two person in the government and on some things could even overrule the president."

"Must have been great to be a kid."

"Yeah, but then you have to grow up. And that was another problem. Once these kids started to grow up and were expected to run a business, government, or even a household, it turned out they couldn't. They had been so sheltered from reality, they couldn't function. You couldn't ask anyone to do something or correct them because those things had been engineered out of them in childhood. Because as children they could threaten to sue anyone who did anything they didn't like, they were lost as adults. And once this Minister of Child Welfare was in place, you were lucky if you only got sued. Most things that upset children ended up being considered felony child abuse. I'm telling you, it was one dysfunctional society. Look at this. It's the recording of the swearing in of the Minister of Child Welfare."

"But by itself that probably not such a bad idea."

"Yes, but they made everything into a black/white, us/them, either/or situation. The pro-child lobby articulated everything in terms of 'if you aren't for us, you must be against us.' It got to the point that every demand, no matter how irrational was accepted because people in high positions were afraid of being branded anti-child or pro-abuse."

"Yes, we've seen that before as a political strategy. But usually those things are managed by the political system."

“In fact, that’s kind of typical. There was that lunatic Ven-Rab in the Antares system, McCarthy in the old Sol system and that race in the Fomalhaut system. All of them sort of died out.”

“Not here, however. Unlike those other societies, remember that this one had become law-based. They stopped challenging the validity of the laws they enacted and kept following them. Once they had a cause like the children there was no stopping it. Everyone became their own personal cause. Near the end they had over fifty cabinet posts, each minister an advocate for a narrow focus group. The system constitution, which hadn’t been changed significantly in over five thousand standard years, was amended over two hundred times in the last one hundred years. They had amendments covering virtually every aspect of life, mostly about what you could say and think so you wouldn’t hurt anyone else. They had a cabinet minister for pet welfare and a constitutional amendment saying no stray animal could be put down without due process.”

“I can’t believe it. How come they never came up for investigation by the Demo-review?”

“Because every law and amendment was enacted by popular vote.”

“Oh, boy.”

“Yes, this one is going to keep us busy for a long time.”

“Was there ever any significant effort to slow things down?”

“Oh yes, but it was political suicide and almost literal suicide. A few years ago a Vice President decided to campaign for president on a “Stop the Madness” platform. Unfortunately for him, he picked the wrong cause to fight. The Child Lobby was waiting for him and after he made a speech in which he said that most Plunkett citizens felt that there were “adequate safeguards protecting children” they went after him. He narrowly escaped criminal prosecution for advocating child endangerment and the agenda had been set. Anyone who was against the dictates of the Child Lobby was an abuser, if not in fact, at least in temperament and after that, no one got in their way. Look at the laws they passed. Full constitutional rights to all citizens

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from birth on. That means no parental consent for anything. Parental consent was considered an outmoded vestige of patriarchy. Age limits on things like drinking, driving, and voting were considered discriminatory and were abolished. But then if a five year old crashed a car, they would blame the car manufacturer or the kid's parents for creating an unsafe environment. They had a universal child allowance of the equivalent of seventy-five thousand new dollars a year to any person under the age of twenty-eight who did not have a full time job. They had universal health care, including full psychiatric coverage. Cosmetic surgery, including tattoos and tattoo removal were also included. Any citizen under the age of twenty-eight had free access to an attorney."

"I've heard enough. Tell us what happened."

"I'm getting there, but I want you to appreciate exactly how bad it got down there. Very quickly, child abuse had been made a federal crime with a mandatory death penalty. And the definition of child abuse grew constantly. As an example, a news agency got into trouble over the reporting of tragedies. There was an air travel accident and the agency had failed to note how many children were killed and injured. They just said that so and so number of people were hurt. Key persons at the agency were convicted of 'failure to properly inform the public about the magnitude of the tragedy' because they didn't say how many kids were killed. They lost their license."

"I think what really started it was the case of a teacher who wouldn't let some kid bring his pet to class. She was allergic to it and it made a mess and a lot of noise. She felt it disturbed things and said no. The school backed her up and the kid claimed that he was traumatized. The teacher and the head master were charged with capital child emotional abuse and "unreasonable deprivation of the joys of childhood" and they were both executed."

"And they let it happen?"

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“There was no one to say no. It was the start of the avalanche. They made one of their worst mistakes when they raised the legal age of childhood to thirty-five.

The child lobby took over management of the government spending budget. They decided that any government dollar that was not going to a child represented ‘anticipatory child abuse’ and they attempted to eliminate all such programs. The military was supposed to be the first to go.”

“I can’t believe they even had a military.”

“Oh, yes. It’s part of the PanGalactic charter, don’t forget, so they had to. But only old people were in it. In fact, being in the military became a condition for receiving any government benefits if you were over 35.”

“What?”

“Almost all corporations had long since terminated their pension plans and as a result, most retirees relied on some form of government assistance. Well you couldn’t have all that money going to old people instead of children. May as well make the old people work for it. No one had a choice. Of course a lot of people thought it was insane, but the public interest campaign made it clear that anyone who disagreed with the plan was against the welfare of children and therefore must be an advocate of abuse. Several protestors against the proposal were arrested and charged with anticipatory abuse. But what really started the process was when the general in charge of the army killed herself after being indicted on dozens of endangerment charges.”

“How exactly does a general in charge of an army of old people endanger children?”

“Her undoing was to authorize the removal of child locks from the standard infantry rifle so that the new senior citizen army could use them. Some of the older soldiers found themselves unable to work the mechanism and were unable to qualify in marksman training. However, the Protection of Children from Firearms Law specified the death penalty for anyone who knowingly endangered a child by removing or tampering with a child protection device. There wasn’t a lot of sympathy for the general.

Suffer The Children

“A year earlier, executive managers of a gun manufacturer were also charged with endangerment after three children figured out how to defeat the child locks on their parents’ guns and killed 24 children at their school. The managers were found guilty of negligence for designing a device that was not foolproof and sentenced to death. A number of teachers at the school were also given long terms of imprisonment for failing to prevent or detect the bullying that was occurring which drove the boys to do the killing.”

“I see where this is going,” said Dr. Rabb. “At some point everything became a threat to children and the death sentences started piling up.”

“Exactly. Just as Brandt told us early on. We just didn’t have the framework to understand it. Then people became convinced it was their responsibility to kill themselves because executions were costing money that could have gone to children.”

“But wouldn’t something like that have died out eventually?”

“No. The hard liners were the last to go. The birth rate dropped off sharply, especially after children started killing themselves. For them it was a combination of guilt over the resources they were getting and depression. They were afraid they were guilty of depriving other children. Plus there was probably a huge amount of depression over the fact that eventually you would grow up and not be a child any more. Your buddy Brandt was responsible for going around and certifying what people were doing.”

“And what about Parker?”

“He figured out what had happened and couldn’t deal with it. Apparently he wasn’t as tough as he acted.”

“Or maybe he realized he was just like Brandt.”

“That’s my theory.”

“Are we sure there’s no one else alive down there?”

“Absolutely.”

“So what’s our plan?”

Suffer The Children

“Well, it doesn’t look like there is much point in further study. It’s pretty obvious what happened. I say we pull all this into a report for the ambassador. And then try to forget about this place.”

“No. That’s the last thing we want to do. PanGalactic has to know all about this and start looking for warning signs in other systems. I’m afraid this could happen anywhere.”