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always a pall bearer never a corpse

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Boxter Hartcourt was in New York looking to preemptively block the United Nations from inviting Second Hand to the General Assembly as an observer mission. The news report on the Xhemal is still one day from being released but Maria made a point to send that information, including Cesar's travel calendar, to the Hyades via jpeg. Staff-Sergeant Nelson and Chief Stark's posts, sharing their respective *Black Friday* social encounters, got through loud and clear.

About 7:10 pm local time Hartcourt made a call to a service provider he frequents when he comes to Manhattan. Her real name is Sally Fukushima, but her pro-domme name is Hone-Onna who is a celebrated master of Kinbaku-bi with a touch of sadism. It is said of Hone-Onna that she liberally applies humiliation and pegging and that the safe word is optional while on the clock. If one does take issue with the performance, or tries to top her, she's been known to option aikido, wing chung or sometimes judo for conflict resolution.

At 7:58 pm local time Hartcourt answered the door and it's not long-tall Sally with her petite fluffer-bee Hannya standing there, but Lieutenant-Colonel, Peter Ribot (USMC) and Shane McElroy, retired police inspector of the NYPD. Both are leaning against the door frame dressed as EMTs with a gurney behind them ready to roll.

McElroy grins big with a cheesy, over the top, and blistering piss-poor Aussie accent, "G'day, mate!"

Hartcourt, in his Edo period kimono, was surprised, "Wut?"

With a muffled '*pa-pop*' a plasma jet reached out from a cigar shaped object in Peter's hand that effectively tases Hartcourt where he stood. They strap his limp body to the gurney and off they go.

The beer-run out of One-Klick New York feigned a diplomatic pick up at the hotel, which is not uncommon, and when the clearance was granted the Razorback shot up into the sky for Electra-4.

Now after 437.1 light years, 1 hour, 5 minutes and just a few unaccounted for seconds later it is now 9:03 pm New York time, but 33:40 mst local time here on Sapphire as Peter and Shane roll the gurney with Hartcourt on it into *the office* at the top of the spike.

Harcourt, still strapped to the gurney, is sitting there with his arms crossed and fuming mad as hell. Where Kiplinger has an honest tough exterior, Hartcourt's iron-clad toughness is internalized and well hidden from view. Where Kiplinger embraces and nurtures his outback roots, Hartcourt has eliminated most traces of his accent from an upbringing which he has always thought of as rural, and speaks with a slight American English enunciation – East Coast style.

After over sixty years in public life, Hartcourt has held pretty much every office and ambassadorship that meant anything except holding the reins of power as Chancellor itself—which he views as a dead-stick career ending job. Over the decades he's been able to bounce from administration to administration making himself the nebulous seat of power behind the façade of power which has been pretty much a revolving door for the last eighteen years.

Too many peace lovers had to be reeducated or expunged. Too many, like Kip, have lost sight of the prize and have overstepped their bounds. Now, as Privy Council, he can slap the wonks around and pull the strings he wants pulled and right out in the open while doing so, and with Security Services in his pocket who's got the brass in their shorts to cock-block him? Those who don't know Boxter and see him scurrying around the halls of power view him with rose-tinted disdain. Those who know him, truly know him, believe he's a son of perdition and some would claim he is the very embodiment of Satan himself. That being said what's strange to those people is that his family genuinely loves him for what they see as a good man.

Right now Hartcourt is hopping mad but you can't read it in his face. He may be in the midst of a rage-fit but you won't hear his voice rise a smidge in volume or octave. It's his eyes that give away what he's feeling and if those eyes were lasers then Maria, sitting at the desk in *the office*, would be sliced and diced into quivering, bloody and smoldering chunks.

Maria laughs, "Hey, Palpatine, glad you could make it!"

Harcourt dead pans, "You had your fun."

Maria thinks for a second, "No, not yet, but I will."

Peter asks, "Let him up?"

Maria gestures towards them, "Simon says!"

Harcourt replies, "Thank you."

As McElroy unbuckles him Maria smiles, "Hone-Onna, my god, Box, that's gotta set you back a fuck-ton of scratch for her and her mini-me. You know, if you've been a bad-boy, hell, drop me a line and I can come stomp your shit for free!"

Harcourt was getting off the gurney and stops for a second thinking about what Maria just proposed in jest, and she is a right beautiful sprite of a woman to drink in, so he jests back with a little smirk, "Something to think about."

Maria wags a finger at him, "Never look a gift horse in the mouth I always say."

He looks around and the windows to the CIC are blacked out, so he adds, "I'll put you on my speed dial." He then sits on the side chair in front of Maria and asks, "So, what are we doing here?"

"Right now, we're waiting."

"Will it take long?"

"No! Just a few, and we'll get ya back to your shinju-taka-ushiro thang! Leave it to the Japs to make an art out of misery."

"Small talk then." Harcourt shrugs, "How's Bob?"

"About as good as can be expected. His new job sucks."

"I hear the FIS is a bit of a cluster-fuck."

"Ya, but it's coming together."

"And if it wasn't for Bob?"

Maria's snorts with wide eyes, "You're right about that!"

"Haven't seen you since the funeral. How are you?"

"Good. You know, Box, I really dug the eulogy you gave for Chancellor Caffyn. It was genuinely beautiful I might add. You need to come say words over my dumb-ass when I take a dirt nap."

Harcourt smiles at that thought, "Looking forward to it."

"I bet you are." Maria then gives a little laugh, "How many memorials for chancellors have you officiated, four? Five?"

Harcourt puts up seven fingers so Maria gives a low whistle and says, "You know, sitting in the crowd for Caffyn and I could feel the love the people had for you. It was amazing."

"Really."

"One comment stood out amongst all the others because it got the most laughs. *Skeerd* laughs, but laughs."

"Now I'm curious."

"They said, oh, you're gonna love this." Maria clears her throat for comic timing and continues, "They nodded in your general direction and said with a (sigh) always a pall bearer never a corpse."

"Ya don't say." Hartcourt is amused by that, but he has to hide it, "So, who had the stones to express themselves?"

"Ah, it was..." Maria taps her chin in mock contemplation, then jabs that finger towards him, "Oh ya, it was Tillsdale!"

"So, the rat bastard has a backbone after all."

"Ya know, five years ago I tried so hard to connect all you'z guys to that geisha hut thing and I couldn't make any of it stick to him or you, and ya know what I found out about you?"

"Those pervs? They deserved what they got!"

"That's the point! I couldn't find the dots! You have a streak of morality and that surprised the fuck outta me. Box, you are all about murder and mayhem, and wanton destruction, and more murder on top of motherfucken' murder! Christ, dude, you're a God-damned Xiaolin master at evil shit, but you know where to draw the line and I can respect that!" Maria gestures to both her and Hartcourt, "If we weren't on opposite sides of this equation I'd take to my knee and beg to be your apprentice, honest-injun! But, as it is, I'm here in this capacity to put the fuck to your day."

"If I'm such a bother why not just kill me?"

"Why?" Maria feigns confusion for effect, "Why in the hell would I off you when you're so predictable!"

Harcourt is confused for real, "That's odd, I've spent my entire career *not* being predictable!"

Maria, with perfect comic timing, thrusts a finger at Hartcourt and cries out, "Exactly!" Hartcourt's eyes almost bug out when she says that, but his cold exterior does well retaining them as Maria elaborates, "You are a web of possibilities! You're not a channel of regimentation like most politicians are. When your people jumped the gun six months ago...wow! I did *not* expect that!"

Maria knew it was him and pinning it on his underlings, the reaction deferring the stupid choice he made to them, didn't show on his face, or his eyes, but the redirection did throw him off and that showed up in Aussie speak, "That was a bit of a flop about, screwing the roo and all but, understand, I am coming after you."

"I expect no less! In fact, I challenge you to t-bone me."

Hartcourt states, "You're throwing the gauntlet down."

"Box, baby, I don't got all day!" Maria notices that the link up she was waiting for was in the queue so she grins, "Get your lil' sith brain cookin' up a plan and lets do this."

Hartcourt nods, "Challenge accepted."

"Awesome!" Maria then hits a button and calls out, "Deputy Marshal, Cyzk, I have Boxtter Hartcourt here with me. What's the story?"

["Marshal Ramirez, the mission went off without a hitch. We have closed the area of operation and are Echo-Three lite."]

"That's great to hear." There was genuine relief in Maria but she continues to show the infinite confidence necessary for the moment, "Would you be so kind as to inform Mr Hartcourt who you have with you?"

["With us is one, Ranch Kiplinger and his son Dylan."]

Without flinching, Hartcourt states, "That's impossible."

Maria looks at him, "Sure about that?"

Hartcourt's eyes stab at Maria, "Positively."

Maria asks Cyzk, "Hannah and Maya, how are they?"

["They are on another ship and we'll meet up with them at the rendezvous in about an hour."]

"How's Mrs. Kiplinger taking all this?"

["The report is that she's got colorful language skills."]

Maria gives an amused smile, "That's to be expected."

Hartcourt clears his throat, "Yabbering on a radio is not evidence of a successful mission, Ramirez."

Maria agrees, "You're right!" Then to Cyzk, "Deputy Marshal, can you give us some video of Ranch and Dylan?"

["Give me a second, Marshal."] After a not so pregnant pause the screen beside Maria's desk comes alive with the video of the interior of the drop ship, ["Okay, Marshal, here's the feed."]

With the video fuzzing out and popping back into focus every ten seconds or so Hartcourt and Maria see Ranch Kiplinger and Dylan strapped in the racking and each with a bottled water in hand.

Kiplinger gives a cheer towards the camera on Cyzk's helmet, ["Hey ho, Boxy! Bet you're mad as a cut snake!"]

Maria cuts the audio and in silence they see Kiplinger continue to talk and laugh and tussle the hair of his son.

After a few long seconds of watching the feed Hartcourt asks a single word question, "How?"

Maria opens up the audio and asks, "Cyzk, pan around so we can see the breach team."

The camera pans onto three of the Xhemal who are clinging to the racking. With happy chirps and whistles they wave to the camera then Maria cuts the audio off again.

A hurricane of rippin-pissed rages around Hartcourt, but like the eye of the storm you don't see it in him except for the little flair of his nose and barely audible deep breath he takes. The superbly executed one-upmanship demonstrated by Marshal, Maria Ramirez and her people was so wonderfully played that, in spite of the anger he fights to control, in Hartcourt's mind it was worth the humiliation of being abducted and dragged out here like this.

Hartcourt's hands rise and he gives a lite round of applause, "I have to hand it to you, Marshal. Bravo! I've done this very thing to so many people that to have it pulled on me like this is...humbling. My congratulations are in order."

"Well, Box, I don't expect it to make you feel normal or human. You're way past that."

"You mean, past redemption?"

Maria thinks about that with a grunt, then, "We weren't going to let you kill this one. Kip is a good man but, Jesus, dude, you were planning to whack his entire family too!" Maria then laughs, "Now, I can understand Hannah! As hot as she is she's a psycho when she is on a tear, but the kids?"

"Little pawns." Hartcourt shrugs with a descending register in his voice, then nods towards Maria, "We *will* find them you know."

"Oh, really?" Maria thumbs at the screen, "We go through all this just to have your minions hunt him down, just like that?" Maria leans forward slightly, "Never in a million years will you be able to find them where I'm gonna put 'em."

"That another challenge? If so I am up for it."

"Thought you would be, and then I asked myself what would Boxxy do? If you were gonna play me how would you go about it? And like a light bulb *popped* over my head, there it was!"

Maria tosses a file across to Hartcourt who opens it up and after a few seconds of scrutinizing it he looks up, "What's this?"

Maria points to the file, "That's what you'll be looking for. That's Kip's future address on Sapphire, across the street from me I might add, his new name, job...hell, everything!"

Harcourt eyes scowl with confusion, "I don't get it."

"Before you got here Kip had a choice, we either put him and his family on ice, or we do this! We laid it out and he chose this!"

"This makes no sense?"

"No? Well, ya, let me 'splain!" Maria sits back, "On every one of the planets in the Hyades we have an assortment of drones hidden, hundreds of them, standing by to do our bidding which we have never really used because we've had no use for them. It's more like one of those just in case if we ever needed them it's better to have them there than not have them kinda thing, ya know?"

"Get to the point."

"You're gonna love this because it's so you..." Maria sits up and drives the point home, "You know how we have Fifty-Two all buttoned up here? Well, it goes both ways. Your family, your whole family. Let's review, your children, your grandchildren, your great grandchildren, their uncles, aunts, your dog—everyone!" Maria jabs her finger into the table, "They're all being tracked by time-stamp every minute of every day and those combat drones are keeping tabs on all one-hundred and eighty-three of them." Maria sits back, "If Kip gets a hang-nail, if Hannah gets so much as a split end even, those fuckin' machines are going to launch."

"That's not your style."

"No, you're right. It's not, but it is what Kip chose to do to protect his family because you were playing that game with him. So in like, your family gets the Sword of Damocles treatment and, you know what the really big relief I feel is? It's outta my hands now!"

"You're not in the loop."

Maria notices the red light flashing for her so she adds, "Nope, an' don't you forget that, *pandejo!*" She hits the button and asks Cyzk, "You guys ready for the shot?"

["Affirmative, Marshal. Twenty seconds."]

The screen switches from inside the drop ship interior to the outside of the ship. About a kilometer away from them, and trailing at five o'clock, is the Chancellor's space plane. Over the speaker they hear Kiplinger radio to the Flight Director Operations center.

["FIDO, this is Kiplinger, on H-One, we're initializing orbital insertion A.G.P. in fifteen seconds."]

["We copy. Go for A.G.P., H-One"]

On the screen they see the orbiter start to use the directional gravity fields to maneuver the space plane towards a correct orbital path. As it begins to drift away the plasma cannon on the side of the Warthog flips open and a plasma node, without the plasma, is fired into the space plane smashing into the latter half thus shattering the cargo bay and ripping a wing off.

Kiplinger's voice is a bit frantic, ["Mayday! Mayday! H-One has been hit by space debris. Aft section is blown to...ah, fuck all!"]

The cabin blows out throwing the wreckage into a crazy twirl, and with that Maria gives a mock fright, "Oh, the humanity!"

The craft was still in a suborbital trajectory and immediately starts back towards the planet in a death spiral. It would take over thirty minutes for a rescue mission to reach them but, as it is, the ship will hit the atmosphere and start burning up inside twelve minutes.

The FIDO continues to call out to H1 with no response.

"Thank you, Cyzk. We're done here."

["Over and out, Marshal."]

The video and audio transmissions are cut and Hartcourt just sits there as Maria advises him, "So, with that telemetry you had your little accident after all. Ah, well, another memorial service."

Harcourt has been t-boned yet again by Maria, "You're gonna keep them on ice indefinitely I take it."

"On the down-low. In plain sight. I got a million of 'em!"

"We *won't* be hearing from them...right?"

"You just saw them die! That isn't enough?" Maria thinks about it for a sec, "Ya know, Box, in this job I had to learn how to let go, but this is where you gotta take it from me and let it go. Let it slide. Let it be! With that shit burning up you are not even going to find a scorched chromosome out of the debris."

Harcourt again gives another lite round of courtesy applause, "Touché, Ramirez, touché."

Maria smiles, "Does this mean Bob and I are *not* going to get an invite to this funeral?"

"Try holding your breath. Blue would suit you well."

Maria motions for Peter and McElroy to take him back, "Well, it's been great and all but these two gentlemen need to get ya back to New York. I have another pressing engagement. Busy-busy!"

Peter says, "Sir, we can have you there by ten-twenty."

As Hartcourt stands Maria laughs, "Oh ya! Speaking of black and blue, we paid Hone off and tipped her very well, so if you're still in the mood I'm sure she'll give you our money's worth. Said she'd be waiting to hear from you. Don't try to top her or you'll be in deep yoghurt, dude."

Hartcourt asks, "That sage advice?"

Maria ponders while she stands, "Academically, if I were into that sort of thing? I'd have to say I'd be a frog-tied kinda babe."

Hartcourt thinks about it and nods, "One never knows."

Maria steps past him and at the door to the CIC she turns to offer one last dig just for giggles, "You know what I saw in your face tonight, now that we've had our little fun?"

Hartcourt shakes his head *no* wondering what's going to puke out of Maria's mouth next, so she says, "Outta you I see Bugs Bunny shaking his fist and declare: *of course you realize this means war!* Now, doesn't that provide clarity to these proceedings or what?"

Insult upon injury galore but this one was priceless, so much so that Hartcourt actually laughs, "That it does."

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