

55

moral compass

**LCTN:** 83-TAURUS-6B (Hyades cluster)  
**CORD:** SAO-93979.0102 (45pc from SOL)  
**DATE:** 2318ce-MAY-5-SUNDAY  
**TIME:** 12:34zulu (local 12:11pst)

The 'night-night' sky from Jacoby's Stump, an island estate complex only a stone's throw from Orpheus Eyot, is shocking for the first time. In the umbra of the gas giant, Chernobyl, it is so dark that the stars explode everywhere—except where Chernobyl is overhead.

At ten Jupiter masses, not yet quite a spectral-Y brown dwarf, it's at this weird sweet spot having puffed up to over twice the size of Jupiter. Double that and it'll start to shrink but, as it is, the first time you look up at the night sky you'll fixate only on the black hole.

A field of stars encircling this dead cavity is surreal to behold.

Now, where Jupiter and Saturn each have over sixty moons Chernobyl has only two, Prypiat and Sokol, which the locals call Smèagol, and between them is the Chakram, a ring of dark dust and soot with a cross-section of five-meters by five-thousand kilometers and hard as hell to see unless the light from Zmeu hits it just right.

Piling out of a Trident Star-Clipper, Hartcourt's personal ship, Jessica, Nicole, Eight, Cap and Peanuts have stopped dead in their tracks while looking up at the sky, with Nicole going, "Holy...hell!"

As a stretch limo approaches the airfield, Michelle Kiel steps up behind them with two SA privates in tow who are also from the stumps, Clint Wanganui and Hartcourt's granddaughter, Sheron Pilliod.

Kiel says, "Bit of a mind popper, aye?"

Nicole is amazed, "Ah, yea, you could say that."

Eight is in awe, "I feel like I'm going to get sucked up into it."

Jessica points up, "This is nucken' futs!" She glances at Kiel, "You did say Smèagol was gonna pop out, right?"

Kiel laughs, "Just watch, to the left... Things here are a tad more whack-a-do than you'd think. Big-C's orbit is counter-clockwise, yes, but it's spin, like Prypiat's orbit around the Churn, is clockwise! Red Love, you could say it's all ass-backwards 'round here."

Clint elbows Sheron and quietly goes, "Ain't that the truth."

Sheron nods in agreement, "Bizarro world."

Peanuts speaks up, "Oh ya, that's right! Your sunset is in the east and sunrise is to the west..."

Peanuts is a cherub, having quit growing around eight years of age but, as with the pre-pubes who stopped growing around eleven, the SA managed to disable the gene that inhibited their development. As it is, all the teeny-boppers have started charging into adulthood, only thinner and less busty, and the cherubs have begun to fill out but it's believed they'll remain petite and not even break five-feet.

Peanuts has just started her transition and still looks and sounds like a child, "I always wanted to see this. I think this is going to be an interesting week."

Behind them is Boxter Hartcourt, after having slipped out of the limo his soothing voice is intoxicating, "It'll be a work week, yes, but we'll squeeze a few fun things in." As everyone politely turns to meet him he spins his finger around and points up towards Chernobyl, "It's any second now, my ladies. You'll not want to miss this."

Just five seconds later, and to the gasps of the new arrivals, the crescent of Sokol flashes as the little moon transitions from the pitch blackness of the umbra to the penumbra and into full light. Because Sokol is moving at a fast clip, with an orbit of 48 hours and 2 minutes, this transition takes only a handful of seconds and looks like the black hole is spitting the little moon out.

As they continue to watch, Hartcourt adds, "Our little falcon is entertaining and I never tire of it." He turns to Kiel, "Shelly, it's been forever. Last I saw of you, you were knee high to a bug."

Kiel smiles and shakes his hand, "It's great to see you again, Mr. Hartcourt."

He leans in for a quick shoulder to shoulder hug, "You're an adult now. It's Boxter, my dear." He nods towards Clint and Sheron, "Let me chat these two up and send them off." He motions them to follow him to the light radiating from the limo, "Let's see you."

With the dimmed headlights behind Hartcourt his silhouette is eerie, even sinister. Clint and Sheron have wondered what they would say to Hartcourt if they ever saw him again, and their pent up courage has suddenly turned tail in his presence.

Sheron is about to cry, "Sorry, Pop."

Boxter actually has affections for his granddaughter and reaches out to her, "Oh, no, my little nipper!"

While giving her a genuinely sympathetic hug, Clint speaks up, also having lost his nerve, "My apologies, Mr Hartcourt."

"Oh, no-no-no-no! I wish we saw this level of determination and independence in you two before you decided to go on walkabout. I would have liked to have...guided you in your self-discovery maybe?" He holds Sheron out and drinks her in, "The family may think of it as a 'fuck you' choice but I, for one, respect it."

Clint is shocked by what he says, so Hartcourt looks at him and smiles, "As they say, the crème rises to the top so, do us all proud and rise to the top in all your endeavors." He looks in Sheron's eyes, "As your grandfather I can only pray for that outcome."

Hartcourt gestures towards the ship, "Your mother is waiting so the Naboo will take you there." He looks to Clint again, "Son, It'll drop you off on the way out." And between the two he sighs big and smirks, "As a couple of misfit toys I think you two are turning out way better than we ever could have imagined. You have my best wishes and your families have been instructed to respect your choice. They never would have done so before this transformation but...I insist they do so now. I have so enjoyed the cringe every time they brought you up in conversation, but what you did took a lot of backbone. Piper and I would like to see you two here for breakfast on Muldjeday morning. It's the only slot we have available to you."

Clint points out, "Sir, we *are* with the Annex now."

Hartcourt frowns, "I wouldn't think of us as...mortal enemies, because that's viewing our current state through a child's eyes." He nods towards the others, "As you can see we can find common ground but, that's where your loyalties should lie. Duty first, then family. Don't be surprised to hear that I am proud of you both."

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The palatial opulence of the estates along the Stumps is in sharp contrast to the Stumpies themselves who's attire tends to be rather simple, even elementary by comparison. Each article donned can be beautifully tailored but nothing in their wardrobes is so busy as to draw one's attention away from their person. They hold themselves in esteem and tend to refrain from the acts of self-degradation by following fashionable trends. That said, here it's the substance of their homes that denote their importance, station and wealth.

It's their digs that speak for them.

In contradiction to the rest of the Stumpy elite, Hartcourt's home has a very simple and earthy décor and furnishings—nothing to draw one's attention away from the plant life in residence because his and Piper's mansion is in essence a massive greenhouse complex. To those with an eye for style, and to the frustration of those born of the Stumps, this home beats everyone else on the island chain by miles and it would be a breach in etiquette to try to top it.

In the atrium-entrance to the mansion, the girls are surprised by the sheer wealth of plant varieties just in this four story room, with Hartcourt saying, "We'll do a full tour this afternoon after Zmeu comes up and we uncloud the glass. Oh, looky here!"

He steps over to the main door and opens it for his crew to wheel a five meter tall saguaro cactus in on its side, and while looking at his guests he smiles, "In collage Piper and I saw pics of this lil' oasis by a place called Tortilla Flats, and we had to go. This saguaro spear is the last acquisition and we finally get our desert room!"

With them passing through, Hartcourt thanks them, clasps his hands together and, "Well, let's go meet the Missus and lunch!"

What surprises everyone is that, of all places, it's the family wing of this huge mansion that is devoid of any and all plants.

With Hartcourt sensing that they notice this, he goes, "Trust me, one needs a break from all the greenery. It also helps that I am allergic to most the flora so I dare not touch any of it myself."

Just then a pretty brunette in a white military day-uniform opens the side door, steps through while holding it for Hartcourt's wife who is toting a tray of bbq brisket and a pile of yabby tails, and when she sees them she yelps, "Well hello, Shelly, and all our guests!"

After putting the tray down she steps up while removing her apron, with Hartcourt saying, "Everyone, this is me wife, Piper!"

"Shelly!" Piper laughs as she gives Kiel a quick hug, "Boxxy, you were right, it is a ginger parade! My gawd, they're all beauties! Let me guess..." She points as she goes, "Ah-um, Eight, Peanuts, Cap, Jessica, and your mum, Nicole! Or, by your tag, Red Hell..."

On the stumps, first introductions never come with hugs, but Piper puts her hand out to shake Nicole's, "I am so thrilled to meet you! Your, ah..." She makes a hacking motion across her own throat, "At the U.N. was, oh, shocking, abrupt, perfectly queued, impressed the hell out of us, I am honored to make your acquaintance!"

Harcourt snickers, "I wanted to cheer when you popped Karr's beanie like a cork but...that would have been a faux pas."

Piper, in long face, "We had to be indignant with the rest."

Nicole is surprised, "You're welcome?"

Harcourt shakes his head, "Oh, to have a whole army of you! I hear that someone may be getting that wish?" He motions for the woman in white to come forward while asking, "Eight, you gave everyone the run down on the Captain, yes?"

The woman in white is Captain Lyn of Security Services, yet before that she was on staff at the Geisha Hut on Nufa. In between those jobs she was on Hartcourt's interrogation table where he had been literally dissecting her into pieces. What surprised Hartcourt is that she gave him all the information he wanted without hesitation and never protested once while he was meticulously butchering her. She screamed up a storm, yes, but not once did she protest or ask for him to stop. It was while drawing her intestines a report came back on her DNA and it was revealed that she was an LNN clone—which meant she was originally an end product of their loathsome operation.

He immediately collected all her parts and had her evac'd to the best trauma center here in New Brisbane and thus started the long process of putting her back together. The army of psychologists that also worked her over all came back of the same opinion—she simply wanted to know first-hand how the others were going to die and thought of her treatment as satisfactory. What came out of this horror show was Hartcourt gaining the most loyal aide and confidant that money could not buy, and as his de facto apprentice he has sought to reward her at every opportunity—like now.

"So, thinking ahead, I refer to Captain Lyn, here, as Cap, and, well, every time I call out 'Oy Cap' I'll have the two of you, like human meerkats, turning to me and the humor of the moment would have a short self-life indeed..." He starts removing the diamond pip shoulder boards from Lyn's shirt and replaces them with crowns, "I believe it would be easier to make this change now so, Major Lyn it is!"

Lyn is surprised, "Sir?"

"Well, you've earned it, and I have been dragging my feet, so we should get this out of the way early I say!"

"I was not expecting this. Thank you, sir!"

"No, you earned this. This is my thanks to you!" He gives her a little hug and, "Now, before we land you on the fast-track to Lieutenant Colonel, we should get to lunch!"

All of them are dumbfounded by the Mexican spread, and as Piper starts to carve and chop the brisket into a bite sized carne asada substitute, Kiel asks, "Char Jar?"

Piper pipes up, "Oh, yes, best ever! I pen and grain feed my beasts a few weeks before I pop and prep. Have a taste, Shell!"

As they all sample the bbq'd bumble, rolling their eyes by how scrumptious it is, Hartcourt has turned on Mariachi music, "If ever a reason to crack a suds and eat ridiculous volumes of food then, ladies, Cinco de Mayo is it!" And while passing out bottles of cerveza, and orange Fanta to the clones, he smiles, "If one is going to appropriate an alien celebration then it's best to commandeer a fun one!"

Piper sighs as she chops away, "I miss the crew."

"Our green-thumb wizards, yes!" Then to the others, "Our Mexican crews, unfortunately, have always been on a temp visa. Truth be known they've kind of rubbed off on us. Collectively, they can be a bit backwards, yes, but they are an industrious, proud people and if I had my way I'd have 'em back—permanently."

Piper snorts, "Yea, try to get a garbo to work."

"White trash, indeed." He steps over to a large screen on the wall and snaps his fingers, and with that the music drops in volume and a video comes to life with a father pleading to the camera for everyone to help find their missing daughter, "Here is the blowback for shutting down the Geisha Huts. We need to bring an end to this too." He turns to Jessica and the rest, "During your stay the rules are simple. At all times we are direct and honest with each other here, so speak freely in front of Major Lyn and Piper. The second rule is to inform me of any necessary action, and hopefully before you take said action." He thumbs back at a picture of the little six year old girl and grits his teeth, "Right now there is a bidding war on for her and if we can collect this little joey before anything bad happens then we shall, but that would be a bonus and not our focus. If things change we will set someone along that path, but the bulk of our effort will be to catch the big fish, the narwhals. Be assured, this is a...privileged freaky."

He shuts off the video and the music comes back, "We've analyzed the sales of suspicious items like, mattresses, painting tarps, and an assortment of drugs and surgical items that may lead back to key participants through their staff. We have it narrowed down to twenty-eight suspects. Our job is to get you four in close to confirm our suspicions as well as quietly extract information on other potential players. Especially those coordinating these activities."

Piper adds, "We really appreciate your help, ladies."

"This afternoon and through tomorrow we will be reviewing their dossiers so that you'll be up to speed on our quarry, but for now I would like a moment alone with each of you, one on one." He looks to Nicole and, "Do I have your permission?"

Nicole nods, "I don't see why not?"

"Thank you, Marshal Burke." Hartcourt turns directly towards Jessica with a smile, "Let's start with you, shall we?"

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Hartcourt's home office moves from room to room and all according to his current mood. Most of the rooms in the mansion have been configured to accept his desk, chairs and conference table with ease. Wherever his whims may take him and at the drop of a hat. This month it's been the fern room under the crystal geodesic dome on the top deck. The newest one with the translucent seams where the triangular plates touch and, like all the glass in the house, carbon printed and impenetrable except by the heaviest mil-grade weapons. This dome offers a spectacular view of the sky and Chernobyl.

"Cutting to the chase, now that you've been exposed, our intel can see that your fingers have been stirring a...lot of pots." Hartcourt sits in one of the three side chairs in front of his desk, and, "Tell me, with so much...busy going on, how are you holding up?"

Gazing at Chernobyl, Jessica is captivated by the glowing light crescent forming along its left side, "How about we cut to the crash, okay? Shit you really want to know."

"Pray-say, what is it I want to know?"

"You want to know what we know about you."

"What creature is not curious by their own reflection?"

Jessica turns and looks at him, and knowing it's better to be direct she points to herself, "*Verum videns.*"

"Truth seer?"

"Maria came up with that one." She plops herself down in the seat next to him, "Eight and I, we function as human polygraphs. It's that simple." Jessica leans towards him a bit, "The problem is, people are full of shit and Maria needs to get to the bottom of things. She needs the truth and that's what Eight and I do. If someone is feeding the Marshal a line of bullshit, which is all the time, then they are also thinking of the truth, with the intent not to reveal it, which is every time. We can read any and all surface and underlining thoughts with little effort and without the subject knowing. During her conversations we identify the lies and convey the actual truth to her. The kewl thing is that we can do this for her in real time."

"So, you do read minds."

"Oh yea, you bet! Like an open book."

"That makes you and Fifty-Two potentially dangerous?"

Jessica sits back and shrugs, "Not really. We're forced to not dig because if we do—those things will become part of your conscious thought so, if we're rooting around in there you'll know it! You'll also know what it is we dug up!"

Hartcourt realizes that, "It would then lose its value."

"Exactly! The subject not knowing, staying off that radar is imperative. People with jumbled and chaotic minds we can run roughshod over with impunity, but people like you, oh hell no!"

He wonders, "How deep of a dive did you make?"

Jessica looks at him and realizes that there is no skirting around the truth, "Honestly? I got stuck in the play pool. People like you who are focused and disciplined are impossible to dick with."

"Or, nearly impossible?"

"No, I say purdy much impossible-impossible, if we're lookin' to keep quiet. Sure, I could go in and date rape your cerebral cortex like there's no tomorrow but that will only make a mess of things and you'd never be the same again—and we like you the way you are!" Hartcourt gives a surprised look, so Jessica says, "Which is truthful."

He is taken aback, "Come again?"

"You, you are a master of deception and by utilizing the truth itself. In your hands it's a weapon, a whip, battering ram, or noose." She shakes her head, "You never feed anyone bullshit, only the truth. You can spin it to do your bidding and, just like my Maria, people who know this fear you." Jessica laughs, "You two are like scary alike."

If you didn't know Hartcourt you'd think that his lips being pursed ever so slightly, like now, meant he was angry, but the little secret is that he is utterly pleased with himself—and angry with himself because he is pleased, so Jessica finishes with, "Not to sing your praises, Box, but...I'm not gonna lie to you."

Hartcourt snorts, "You never did answer my question."

Jessica points out, "The one you didn't ask."

He had to think, "True enough."

Jessica breaths deep and, "Okay, little avocado pickin' garbo from the Chums works his way up to nuevo-Brisber, then Ivy League! Oxford, and Harvard where you met Piper. Why MIT?"

"Oh, that, top notch department of statistics and number crunchers wonderland. It is awe inspiring how one can manipulate a mole hill of...lies into mountainous truths."



She huffs an unintelligible laugh, “They say you married your way into the stumps but the fact is you earned your way. Every step of it. Her family threw up endless roadblocks where you and...Piper.” Jessica looks at him and quietly realizes, “Wow, partners in crime!”

With his face scowling slightly, “What did you see, my dear?”

“Oh, nothing really, but I can add.” Jessica almost smiles as the penumbra, the light from Zmeu peeking around Chernobyl, starts to flood the dome, “Box, I think your secrets are safe with me.”

Harcourt shrugs, “When one expects a monster—”

Jessica finishes it with, “Best not disappoint.”

After a silence he looks to Jessica, “I know Cloé’s father is on your mind. Admittedly, letting Ndosa retire is like castling to protect my rook, yes. His analysis is always spot on and his projections, especially the footnotes, tend to be prophetic and...that makes our more fearful strategists want to put the breaks to our advances. There are those in corporate who are calling to ‘muffle’ those voices and, well, you know how that snowball rolls. I would like to see Ndosa and Siusan enjoy the fruits of their labors...for the long term.”

“Thank you.”

Harcourt then shares, “Two things. First, your brother. They are watching him now, so allow nothing to be traced back to him.”

“He’s an innocent.”

“Everything points to your ‘Alter of Chains’ being a subroutine to your Delphi system. They want...assurances.”

She nods, “Fair enough.”

“This is for your grandfather.” He hesitates, not wanting to say anything but presses on, “Tell Bob that if he and Michal show up to 32-Tau without your mother then Tillsdale and Lebedev will know something is up. I don’t see a work around.”

Jessica gives a grim smile, “We know.”

“I was afraid it may come to that.” Harcourt pats Jessica on the shoulder and, “Give him my warm regards.”

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In the Hyades, on the Corporate side of the fence, sitting in for Nigel Kiel as the acting chairman for the Steel Chain Cooperative is his decades long aide-de-camp, Madeleine Forsyth. What the SCC and the Family Kiel have been dreading over twenty-some very long years finally came to pass. Michelle Kiel has surfaced at last.

Spending all day Monday, with Nigel and Madeleine, Michelle made it abundantly clear that she wants Madeleine to continue to represent her and her daughter going forward. Madeleine was shocked to learn that the reason Michelle's great-grandfather refused to sign over inheritance to another of his lineage was that these two continued to stay in touch with each other via a pair of fictional social media accounts right under everyone's prying eyes.

Their special secret-squirrel fun thing together when lil' Shelly was a kid has served them both when big Michelle went missing.

Nigel was also impressed by Michelle's foresight in adopting Jessica Burke into the family. Legally binding inheritance from her and her daughter now goes to Jessica, then her bother, Seth, their mother, Nicole and barring that their father, Jacob Graves. Then if something were to happen to him it would go to their half-sister, Diego and finally ending up with her mother, Jessica's step-mom, Maria Ramirez.

And with that, Nigel and Michelle had a great laugh because when the rest of the Family Kiel hears the full extent of this new chain of inheritance they will find no amusement, have no cause of action with standing, and no possible wet-work option around it.

Monday was also a day of learning for Michelle because Nigel had a lot to share. By revelation, when it comes to business, Nigel has proven himself to be a predatory bastard. He knows a good war when he sees one and has personally financed the last two against the Annex. At this point the debt liability is so high that winning or losing is of no consequence. Outwardly he is in total support of a quick and decisive victory over the Annex, sure, but secretly to Michelle, and with Madeleine fully on board, he really wants the Co-op to get their asses kicked because there is just so much more wealth to be had when those owing to you lose.

Which is all his peers...and they need this win bad.

Currently, it's Tuesday morning at the corporate towers of the Steel Chain Cooperative. Michelle and Jessica are here to introduce themselves to the dozens of board members who are there to meet their soon to be future, yet non-acting chairman, and breathe a sigh of relief already knowing their Madeleine will continue at the helm.

Instead of BDUs and t-shirts, standard SA duds, out in public Nicole and her clone minions sport a more fashionable mode of dress. Wearing colorful multi-layer, high-end Brisber contemporary cuts, which serves well for out-on-the-town, clashes with what is considered acceptable corporate-casual. Everywhere you see is a rainbow shade of business gray but what distinguishes the Stumpies from the rest is that the 'employees' try to squeeze in splash of style and personality by way of their shirts, ties, jewelry and scarfs.

The thing that has caught their eye is that, like Piper, all the women from the stumps do not dye their hair. The more youthful and in shape a woman from the stumps, with naturally gray hair, the more desirable they are around these parts. If some young stud is looking for the hottest G-MILF cougars in the universe then look no further.

Emerging from this sea of monochrome steps Jessica Burke in a form fitting, jaw-dropping, knee-high floral print dress. This is not only the wrong place for this dress, and the cleavage on display, but the wrong century. Jessica searched high and low for just this fashion statement and it's working like a baseball bat to their skulls.

Everyone there can feel the worlds of attitude radiating from Jessica, which says 'vortex of zero fucks' and they now take back all the rotten things they have ever said about Michelle, including their prayers for her blood-line's abrupt termination.

If this 'thing' stands in line to inherit their world and livelihood then this is a thing they do not want.

Jessica saunters over to Nicole, Eight, Cap and Peanuts, "You guys were right about the pumps. Looks great but sucks ass to walk."

Nicole suggests, "We have the sandals out in the glider."

"Thanks, but I'll cope."

Eight asks the obvious, "You got 'em scared of you yet?"

Jessica deadpans with, "D'uh."

Cap looks out, "Opportunistic, ankle-biting fuckwits all."

Nicole smiles, "A bit harsh, ya think?"

Peanuts blinks, "It has clarity...an' don't forget, gutless!"

Nicole scolds them, "That may be but let's not be obvious."

"Okay, mom." Jessica turns to Eight, "How we doin', Eight?"

"We've already confirmed the six, so we're done here."

Cap adds, "This has been all too easy."

Eight observes, "Gotta hand it to Boxter. He really planned this to the tee, and worked out all the angles for us."

Jessica nods, "That's good to hear. Makes shit simple. Okay, I got one more stupid as hell meeting then I gotta go see Michelle's great-grand pappy. I get to lunch with the Mountain Troll himself."

Nicole nods with a smile, "Okay, we'll go get a bite and come back and see if we can flush some out with Peanuts and Eight?"

Peanuts nods, "Yea, I be bait on da hook!"

Just then they hear Madeleine Forsyth clear her throat, "Hello! Piper was right, this is a ginger parade!"

If there ever was a cougar that could compete with Nicole, it would be Madeleine. In her plain-Jane bone-white dress, it actually accentuates all the right curves and for a Stumpy this is risqué. She wasn't on their list so they paid her no mind...that is, until now.

Turning to her, Jessica smiles and makes the introductions, "Madeleine! This is my birth mother, Nicole, and my cousins Elsa, Charlie, and little Maddie."

Madeleine is enthralled, "You are all so, as they say in the city, smokin'!" She leans down and hugs Peanuts and takes her by the hand, "Maddie, is that for Madeleine?"

Peanuts smiles, "Yes mum!"

Petting her forearm, Madeleine assures her, "You are going to be such a beauty like your sisters, cousin and aunt!"

"Wha?" Peanuts huffs and nods towards the others, "You mean these bags of ugly? I should hope not!"

Madeleine laughs, "You are very much like your Jessie!" She looks up and, "I would love to get to know you all. I may be absent from Brillig on Wednesday, but how about Friday lunch, maybe?" Then to Jessica, "See you inside, love!"

They watch Madeleine walk away, and it's when she steps into the conference room, out of sight—they all start to breathe again.

Noticing this behavior, Nicole asks, "What's going on?"

Trying to hide how creeped out she is, Peanuts looks like she's about to hurl when she says, "She was stroking...my arm."

Eight slowly turns to the others, "They mount the arms."

Nicole asks, "Mount the arms? What?"

Cap says to her, "To a strap on."

Nicole mouths the word 'mount' and, "Oh, my God!"

"I want to kill her..." Says Peanuts, quietly, then with Eight, Cap and the whole collective joining in, "...slow."

Jessica thinks, "Now I know why we have the fifth wheel!" She looks to Cap and asks, "You're connected, right?"

Cap nods, "Yup! And, she's bidding on that little girl!"

Jessica breathes, "The rest of us have things we cannot pull away from so this is in your court. You need to track her every move. Dog her every step. Make sure she wins that bid."

“Cakewalk, Jess! That murderin’ bitch is mine.”

Jessica to Nicole, “Cap is going to need the Major on point.”

Nicole senses, “I think Box will be agreeable.”

“Her name is, Isabelle.” About to cry, Jessica transitions into an iceberg with, “The only opportunity you and Major Lyn will have to intercept Isabelle is at the point of delivery. You got this?”

Cap snarls, “You’re God damned right, I got this.”

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In the Hyades, on the political side of the fence, you have the standard three branches, yes, but it’s in the legislative branch where things have gone topsy-turvy. You have two Parliamentary bodies, the House of Representatives and the House of States, but those are antecedent to the lowly Corporations Commission—which was a joint effort by the two legislatures to control the businesses and resource cooperatives operating in the Hyades, and not the other way around.

It’s funny how things don’t turn out as planned.

People have lately taken to calling it the House of Cul-de-Sac. Other names that have been bantered around are House of Gridlock, House of Cozenwealth, and of late came the House of RICO. Not that those statues would have any power outside the United States, but to the astute proletariat it has a nice ring to it!

Anyway, if the Chancellor can keep an issue quietly in cabinet, within the purview of the administrative function of their respective offices, and not stupidly draw the rapt attention of the Corporations Commission, then shit will get done.

Running toe-stepping interference is via the Privy Council.

There are two Privy Councils in government, that is you have a Privy Council in the form of the cabinet and advisors, and you have the Privy Council in the form of an office holder voted on between the legislative bodies as a formality to rubber-stamp the submission made by the Corporations Commission. The position was supposed to serve the members of the Commission by gaining a voice in the executive branch but, as it turned out, Boxter Hartcourt serves the greater good.

And, now knowing Box, they don’t dare unseat him...

It’s Mimisday, late-afternoon, and over the last two days Eight has been shadowing Hartcourt—and has absolutely loved every minute of it. Most people in government think of him as the Commission lackey but those at the highest levels know the truth. Also, none of them, not even those on the very tip-top have been briefed on the

facts surrounding Fifty-Two and Scarab so they have no idea if they should be *on garde* or not. Introducing Eight as, Elsa, his latest toady assistant, and a strikingly anime-beautiful toad at that, many have wondered where the loveable Captain Lyn has gone off too but no one thought to ask because they prefer the eye-candy so why jinx it?

Nobody will realize until it's too late how dangerous this little young and drooling-hot toady was to have around in her stead.

Over the last two days the thoughts of every person, man or woman, entering the offices of the Chancellor has betrayed them. Capital crimes and deceptions abound, and notes have been made of all for Hartcourt to follow up on as it suits him, leverage usually being the first option, but of the nine they were there to confirm—another twenty entrapped themselves, and when the Honey Badgers dig and collect data in evidence then it's onto the "B-List" they'll go.

As of fifteen-hundred hours, eighteen have made it to B.

In the huge expanse of the outer offices to the Chancellor, Jessica is stepping up to Nicole and Peanuts in much less provocative clothing, and as she approaches, Nicole motions her to stay with Peanuts as she steps away, "Just be a sec!"

From a distance they watch the conference room as they hear yelling behind the door, with Jessica asking Peanuts through their standard mind-link, <"So, how's it goin'?">

Peanuts smiles, <"Eight has been texting Colonel Britt like a fiend, and it's been an avalanche of, what the fuck? I mean I can't believe the shit some of these people have been up too!">

Jessica's eyebrows rise in surprise, <"Box said that corporate was a 'symphony of discord' and for government?">

Peanuts nods, <"I know, a 'cacophony of wretchedness' but I have to say it's more like a, cavalcade of motherfuckers.">

Suddenly, the conference room doors fly open and Chancellor Tillsdale stomps out while yelling back, "I'm taking a piss! If someone doesn't have a fix by the time I get back then the bloody Push-Starts can starve for fuckall I care!"

As Tillsdale vanishes around the corner the Indian Community delegation rush into the vast waste of space and go the other way. With a number of people also filing out, Eight, in her 'whoa-gray' corporate suit steps up and is about to bust a gut.

Jessica asks verbally, "So, care to fill us in?"

Eight blurts out, "Onions!"

"Hu?"

"Fricken' onions! I text'd your mom 'bout it."

Hartcourt has slithered up behind her, "So, Eight, love, are you finding the process of government...engaging?"

Eight is fighting back the laughter, "Sir, if this issue wasn't so absurd...hell, this is a laugh riot!"

Hartcourt nods in agreement, "Real world realpolitik can be challenging...at times." He clues in Jessica and Peanuts, "See, it's the embargo. Pakistan and China, who ignore it, their crops have had a down turn so we turned to Mexico who...tried to buy from the U.S. and they tend to be noseys sods, and well, you guessed, embargo!"

Eight asks, "Okay, I gotta know, fourteen-hundred tons or four-thousand tons? I mean that is a huge difference!"

"Oh! I have ten-million little Indians in-country so, that's the difference between not-rioting Hindi's and happy Hindi's! I honestly would go as far as to...kowtow to see all the Hindi's happy." He sighs, "The arti-onions just don't have that...pop they're accustomed too."

Jessica wonders, "You aren't serious?"

"You're getting all the Sikhs. I'll trade you!" He then nods, "I'm putting up a greenhouse to see if we can produce a local varietal that would satisfy their...discerning palate and, well, considering the overwhelming demand I'd venture to guess it might be profitable?"

Peanuts huffs, "That would be a lot of cheddar."

"At a five-percent margin, still, yes." They all give him a look so he shakes his head, "Mustn't be greedy."

Nicole hands Hartcourt her PBDi after having stepped up and says to him, "Here, it's for you." He looks at her funny so she prods him along, "You put it up to your ear and talk. Trust me."

Hovering the thing over his ear he says, "Hello?"

From it they hear Maria's voice, "Box! How the hell are ya!"

He looks up and, "How quaint!"

As Hartcourt steps away Nicole asks, "Any word from Cap?"

Jessica nods and transmits mentally, <"Forsyth won the bid. Delivery is twelve-thirty at the 'normal place' which I'm not going to share with you guys yet. Cap had to extract that from the caller. She was able to tie into his head and now she's uncovering a whole network working out of Ipswich. Wherever that is?">

They all breathe a sigh of relief, with Nicole asking verbally, "So, where's Cap?"

Jessica grits her teeth and, <"Cap and the Major have gone rogue with a company from the Honey Badgers. She'll contact us tonight but...she wants Forsyth for herself.">

"The fuck!" Nicole blurts out, with Jessica giving her a look. Nicole purses her lips tight and, <"I'm NOT authorizing this!">

<"That's good 'cause they're not asking! Hartcourt got a text from the Major and his inclination is to put the breaks to the whole thing, but if any of us interfere or stampede Forsyth's location then we lose, Isabelle."> With Nicole's nostrils flaring out, Jessica tries to calm her, <"Chill, mother. We'll talk to Cap tonight with Hartcourt.">

Taking the cue, Nicole breathes deep, and as she starts to calm down, Peanuts jokingly prods Eight while talking like Hartcourt, "Well, my little butter-up cup, we just may get our wish yet!"

Nicole looks at Peanuts and as she starts to bear her teeth Hartcourt shows up and hands Nicole her PBDi device with a brisk, "Thank you, Marshal!" He clasps his hands and, "So, with us all here, I heard from the Major and we'll discuss their situation tonight."

Nicole asks, "You gonna accept Ramirez' offer?"

Just then Nicole gets a text from her, *Have fun with Tilly!*

He smiles, "I'll be taking up the Marshal's generous offer to help us out with our Hindi situation but, to grease the wheels she suggested, and I agree, that...you present it to Tillsdale personally."

Nicole gives a suspicious eye, "Why me?"

"Well, he's afraid of me, yes, but he is also afraid of you too! If I take it to him he will think of it as a set up and delay the shipments but if you present the offer from Marshal Ramirez then...he will be forced to accept with open arms and...happy Hindis!"

"Just like that."

Harcourt gestures to Tillsdale's office, "I beg of you, breach the fortress of solitude. Your sudden appearance, just by walking in, even sans the head-choppy blade, should still put him off balance."

Nicole steels herself, and before she heads to the Chancellor's office, Eight asks Hartcourt, "We import 20 tons a week. How?"

"Oh, that! A rampaging sauropod on Second Hand, destroys your v-farming ops to snack on your crops. The U.S. President and their State Department won't challenge the Marshal. The transports will touch-and-go in New Sydney and push on for here!"

Jessica then telepaths to him, <"So, what about Cap?"> He looks at her, realizing that she can talk to him like Eight without the N2 interface, <"I know when and where the delivery is to Forsyth.">



Hartcourt looks around and takes a shot at thinking his words, <"So, you do! The Major has yet to share that tidbit."> He leans in, "Let's talk quietly." They pull in and he continues, "I must admit that I am guilty of having allowed my people so much...leeway in taking the initiative. I won't change my policies but this is one of those moments where it can prove to be a...potential problem? Cap is determined to be a hands-on inquisitor for a day...or two."

Nicole asks, "Then what do we do? We gotta stop 'em!"

"I'm inclined to agree...and pull their plug but let's not act, as you might say, knee-jerk? We have invested a tremendous amount of time and effort in our little enterprise here. We have to ask ourselves what the blow back would be if we...choose rashly? We simply cannot go charging in. I fear Cap and the Major have us over a barrel."

"I know Cap. I cannot authorize this."

"Nor can I approve, and nor would the Marshal if she were here but, consider this...at what age is one granted consent to being raped, bludgeoned and murdered? I don't know of one by statute?" He nods at Nicole, "Hubby bubby bumps, remember? Wasn't that the painfully humiliating end to your tormentors you dreamed up when you were, what, six? At what age is someone allowed to return the favor? You definitely had ideas then." He shrugs, "The issue here is one of consent. Cheating these young...women from 'returning the favor' all because they're, tell me, nine weeks short of *the majority* and making that choice for themselves? Then again, in case law, ascension for clones is anchored to the date of viability so do the math? Either way, thwart their claim to Forsyth and we...earn their resentment."

Nicole looks at Eight and Peanuts who both say, "She's ours."

Struggling with this, Nicole pleads, "I can't make that choice."

Again they speak as one, "We're not giving you that choice."

Hartcourt points out, "I believe they're determined to see this through but, for appearances, there is always room for compromise."

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The Brillig is a party held on each Wednesday after high-moon for the upper crust Corporate Stumpies. The narwhal-elite used to fight over hosting the damned thing but nowadays it's a budgetary excess that few can take on lightly. Only a handful of participants, like Hartcourt, can afford the elaborate parties from before the war so, just like last time, they've all agreed to tone down the pomp and excess for the duration because most everyone in the Stumps is feeling the pain. With the mining operations between here and the Pleiades just starting

to see a profit, the money is beginning to trickle back in—and that has pulled many back from the brink of disaster.

Gone is the live band and ice carvings and huge waiting staff comprised of actual human laborers. Now it's piped music, the cheese mountain, chocolate fountain, and the self-serve food bar.

Hartcourt's office has been moved to the new desert alcove by the central ballroom, attached to the atrium, and while flanked by Piper and a Colonel Britt, of the Honey Badgers, he looks out over the five-hundred attending the party and goes, "So, that's everybody. Ladies, you have completed the task and uncovered much...more than we thought possible. I do not believe that a simple 'thank you' is enough but that's...all I have to offer."

Piper adds, "We are indebted to you."

"We should enjoy the party!" He turns, "Having fun so far?"

Jessica speaks up, "Ya, surprisingly it's a blast but, I have never been undressed in the minds of so many people at one time."

With the Eight and Peanuts nodding in agreement, Hartcourt laughs, "Oh, that, well, look how stunning you all are in those gowns and gingers are...shamelessly fetishized over." He turns to the Colonel with, "I think we have our lists complete, Colonel?"

Britt nods, "Yes sir. On the A-List we have thirty, including Forsyth and her wife, Kiara. On the B-List we have fifty-three and on the C-List, excluding the nineteen Ipswich targets, we have the one."

"Ah, yes, Shep...o! Shep." He looks to the girls and makes a shooting motion with his hand, "C-List is the, *breeze-block surprise*."

Britt asks, "Sir, isn't Shepard Wanganui to stay on the C-List? All his victims were catch and release, and he didn't kill anyone."

"Yes, but in four decades he wouldn't...stop. *À ma douleur*, move him to the A-List. He gets the Full Monty." Hartcourt then asks, "You still of the opinion that the Major has lost her edge?"

"Sir, the shrinks say she's overstimulated from the work."

"No, Colonel. Lyn's problem is that she's satiated. Her blood thirst has been...quenched. I ask only to make sure your people will be ready to pick up the slack? Since the Major will be assisting Cap I want them supervised. EVA-Spray, and all dangerous power tools, torches and chemicals are to be handled by the Major or your people."

"Yes sir."

"Because of Forsyth's calendar we have a need to push this up to Thursday. Let's meet at the airfield at one-hundred hours. I'll have coffee and pastry provided for our people." He then points to the

Colonel, "And, since you're here, I have a regiment that will need leadership. Ground action is coming up and I would like to offer it to you. You are welcome to stay, you've done a bang-up job, but the regiment slot comes with a promotion. No need to answer yet."

"Sir, if you don't mind, I'll stick with the Honey Badgers."

"Oh...if you must." Piper hands Britt the shoulder boards of a Brigadier General, "The badgers are now their own detachment. We're setting up a satellite shop in Langley, that's in Virginia. It's now a joint effort but, your people will spearhead as the...enforcers."

Britt is surprised, "Thank you, Mr Hartcourt!"

"See you Thursday, sunrise...General and, if you don't mind, would you personally oversee the work on Shep?"

Britt couldn't resist, "By your command, Dark Lord."

Hartcourt also could not resist, "Gooooood."

Everyone, even Piper, rolls their eyes and try not to crack up.

With General Britt gone, Hartcourt, in deep thought, wonders, "Have you ladies sampled the food from the tray on the left?"

Nicole asks, "The one labeled, *Moi à Merde?*"

Jessica, Eight and Peanuts all chuckle at that so Hartcourt asks them, "*Parle Français?* None of the Stumpies do."

Peanuts nods, "*Oui.*"

"A beautiful language. It's just that talking in French is like trying to speak with a mouth full of...toes. Anyway, Piper and I were in the Bayou and, always peckish, we stopped at this little Cajun hovel, so close to the swamp the crocs would come out and snap at your goolies, and on the menu was this something called...gick.

Piper laughs, "We had to try it!"

"It was calling to us! Beef, poultry, sausage, with shrimp, diced tomato, Cajun seasoning and oodles of cheese. We did swap out the, ah, macaroni for a petit penne but, you get the idea. Narhwal's can't seem to get enough of it...gick. Tart it up and if it looks right they think of it as ambrosia." He motions to Piper, "Sweet'art."

Piper nods, "Well, ladies, here's tha top paddock shite for ya. From the Forsyth financials we find these pohmmy-rats paying for their Geisha fix through three different children's charities. We can now connect the dots from the distribution data—to the donations and the customers themselves. Our Badgers are going to be busy."

Hartcourt reflects, "They'll be required to be more...discreet off-world but, I like to think of us as doing...the Lord's work."

Eight speaks out, "They deserve what they're getting."

"Retribution." Hartcourt nods and, "Have you ever been close to a planetary magnetic pole? If you have a compass, the closer you get to magnetic north the more wobbly the needle—not knowing where to point, and when you are right over it, it spins crazily. The identical is true in the south, but...point being, as an analogy, society follows suit in lockstep! The closer you get to the tippy-top, or the lowliest rungs, the more drunkedly feckless then...truly malfunctioning one's trusted moral compass." He sighs, "We should get to the party."

Nicole asks, "Boxter, now that Madeleine and Kiara have been picked up, and Isabelle is safe, how long is this gonna take?"

His head rocks back and forth, thinking, "They've probably started the ostomy prep. During that they load the trauma microbots and shock block. That's twelve hours. They'll force them to sleep and wake 'em up all strapped in with a vein full of glucose, torpedo and a vodka drip. It's then, well...the party barge sets sail."

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When Madeleine Forsyth and her fembot of a wife, Kiara, first became Geisha connoisseurs they simply bagged and suffocated the children when they were done with them right in their bedroom. The last few years with having to bid on uncooperative garbo-curs they stepped up their game and converted a service room by their garage into a kiddie bondage, molestation and kill chamber.

And for the Honey Badgers how convenient was that!

All day Muldjeday, in that very room, they worked Kiara over while she was dangling from the ceiling. Madeleine, strapped tight to an EMT gurney, watched as the love of her life is horribly tortured, repeatedly raped, flayed and chain-sawed into pieces. This all-day affair wasn't for the benefit of Kiara, she did murder children, yes, but was for the benefit of Madeleine who pressured her into it.

Madeleine, fatigued from all her own wailing and crying, was given a shot to sleep so Cap and Lyn could also refresh and reboot.

It's now very early Wagyl day morning and Lyn is setting up for today's client. While Cap wheels Madeleine in on a surgical table, strapped down in stirrups and head bolted in a stationary halo, Lyn hangs what's left of Kiara up with ice tong hooks in the ears.

Major Lyn is athletic and thin and in an ultra-tight waterproof green-screen suit with anchor points marked by little white dots. It's obvious they intend to superimpose polygons and skin over it but with Cap, however, she's in this high-tech sprayed on body suit.

With a working persona that goes by the name, deCap, our Cap is shiny black from head to toe in what looks like in a professional cosplay cat-woman suit but without the cat accoutrements or textures of any kind. Her huge blue eyes and shockingly bright red lips, with everything else enveloped in black, leaves one guessing that Mr Popo must have had a little girl at one time. Okay, one with plump breasts and a sizeable dick but a girl just the same.

The *idée fixe* here is to give Cap the most original and vividly frightening look possible—and the Badgers nailed it.

All hair from Cap's body had to be removed so that the sprayed on suit could stick. Indestructible, the material was originally conceived of as an EVA space garment, but here it functions like a body condom for the work at hand. Less than a millimeter thick if you look real hard you can see the aerating channels and crosshatched carbon fiber under the glossy surface.

Except for the rape provided by Cap, which she's uniquely equipped for, Kiara was mostly worked over by Major Lyn. Cap spent most of her time hanging out with Madeleine, sharing the moment and giving blow by blow commentary but, for today, Cap will be attending to Madeleine herself.

Lyn is handing Cap a tab of torpedo, anti-nausea pills and a shot of vodka, "You up for this, Cap? We wake her and it's on."

Cap yawns, "Aaaah, yea. I'm good. Let's do this."

"Okay, your 'deCap' persona is demented as fuck, and I never would have guess it would have this much impact! I mean, wow!"

Cap huffs a short laugh, "That a good thing?"

"Wacky and snarky...who'duv think it'd be that morbidly psycho?" Lyn puts her hand up and, "Okay, let's review!"

With Lyn giving the hand signals, Cap says what they are, "Stop, slow, speed it up, and fuck it up!"

"Pace yourself." Lyn steps around the table and starts to give Madeleine the shot to bring her around, "Just like how you were stuffing Kiara yesterday. Slow and methodical and pick up your pace and build up the intensity gradually. You were perfect yesterday, and that applies to everything you'll be doing today. Pace yourself!"

As Madeleine starts to come around our Cap breaths deep and transitions into deCap by quietly saying, "Okay, deCap...let's rawk."

Now deCap, she smiles big while watching Madeleine open her eyes and collect her bearings. Madeleine quickly realizes that her head is bolted in and her body is cinched tight. Looking up she sees Kiara's

head and chest cavity hanging from the ceiling in tatters. With freshly applied cosmetics, Kiara's undamaged face actually looks alive and peacefully asleep—which makes it all the more terrible to see.

With Madeleine's crying sputtering into broken sobs, deCap says in comically-big slow words, "Mooorning! Sleeeeee weell?"

Madeleine shrieks, "Just kill me!"

deCap pulls back, "Just? Just sounds so...meh! Naw, Maddie, I'm here to K-K-K-KIII-LLLL you! An' we got a lot of ground to cover!" She thumbs towards Lyn who is standing next to her, "Piccolo, here thinks I should pace myself so how 'bout we start light?"

Madeleine cries out, "Please!"

With a rage, deCap gnashes her teeth, "Alright, a consensus!" Switching gears again, and with the goofiest wide-eyed guffaw of a laugh, she holds up, "How 'bout we kick things off with Mr. Table Salt and, our bachelorette, the lovely Miss Dermatome!"

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It's been seven hours and perfectly paced. Cap, maintaining her character as deCap without a hiccup, has raised the bar on torture porn for a hungry public. That is, if anybody ever gets to see this.

Madeleine has been thoroughly and completely sliced and diced and torn limb from limb, and she would have been dead hours ago if it wasn't for the shock block and microbots keeping her blood pressure up and the silvery trauma maintenance compound tamping off the blood-loss. The torpedo and vodka mix spikes all sensation for a user, but pain intensity will increase with progressively higher levels of torpedo. At toxic levels the pain is so extreme that the medical community has referred to it as, Trigeminal Neuralgia Totum Corpus.

Which is their way of saying, hate to be you!

The idea is to push the subject over into, what the Major calls, the EEGad Crescendo—where the brain overloads in a total white out which it does not recover. Madeleine has been a tough cookie to crack and between the mind blowing agony, and deCap's zany behavior fraught with sardonic wit, they have chipped away at her psyche to the point where she is at the brink of no return. Abject horror has been their leverage here and deCap is the game changer.

The abdominal cavity, from the diaphragm to the pelvic floor, has been pretty much cleared out. During this process, deCap tried to mix and match parts with what was left from Kiara and it was here that Madeleine started to lose her mind. Loss of consciousness from

mental overload is infrequent but, to prolong her life, Lyn has been administering doses of adrenalin to keep those eyes open.

To Madeline's tearful moaning, deCap thrusts herself in and repeatedly slams and grinds her body into Madeleine, "Oh, my God! You are a fantastic lay! Has anybody ever told you that?" Surveying her terrible condition, "Can you just imagine what kind of hot-mamma you'd be if you were whole?" deCap stops, thinks about this and points out, 'Oh yea, that's right! That was this morning!"

Looking down, and deCap goes, "Hey! I can see my dick! You gotta see this!" Yanking on the halo, which doesn't budge, deCap looks to Lyn and says, "Hum, I think I'm gonna need a hand!"

They suspiciously left one of Madeleine's arms intact for just this moment. Major Lyn whips a straight razor around the socket and in a flash the arm pulls away with a simple tug. To the howls of a wounded animal, deCap positions the arm under Madeleine and threads it through her pelvic floor. There is screaming at first—with shrieks that follow as the elbow passes through.

With the upper arm anchored tight in Madeleine's rectal canal, the freakishness of seeing her own forearm and hand popping out of her open abdomen is patently horrific-reciprocity, and it shows.

deCap waves the arm with the hand flopping while saying in a squeaky voice, "Hello!" She shakes the hand while saying in a gruff voice, "Pleased to meet ya!" deCap, manipulating the hand like a puppet, now makes the hand look around and again in the squeaky voice, "Well, isn't this a fine mess!"

The hand, acting surprised by Madeleine's untouched breasts, turns back to deCap with the squeaky voice, "Oh, may I? Those are some nice breasteses! Can I play with 'em! Pweeeze!"

deCap rolls her eyes, looks side to side, then in her normal voice, "Okay, you have my permission and, thank you for asking!"

As the dead hand flops and strokes back and forth over Madeleine's breasts, and through her tearful sobs, deCap partially covers her lip movement with her free hand while the little squeaky voice says, "My, these are fantastic! You should get in on this!"

deCap laments, "It's hard to find polite little ones anymore. Etiquette has gone—right out the window!" She looks in Madeleine's eyes and says with a tired sigh, "I think we're all gonna need a cigarette after this." Looking down, "Damn, those are nice tits!"

Madeleine, exhausted, pleads, "Nooooo!"

Still looking down deCap shifts gears, perks up and tolls with delight, "Hey, look! Kidneys!"

0011100-0010111-01110011-0110001-0110101-0110000-0011110

In the family wing at Hartcourt's mansion, Eight and Peanuts have their feet up in soft recliners while in a deep telepathic bond in support of Cap while she works Madeleine over. Sitting across from them is Jessica, monitoring their progress, and standing by her as an observer is Hartcourt with his hand on Jessie's shoulder.

Jessica has linked herself to his mind so he can also witness 'deCap' at work, and in that she has bounced him back and forth from between Cap, Madeleine and Major Lyn's point of view.

Jessica is fully aware that they have plans with what they are recording here, and Cap is now in on it. With Lyn in a green-screen suit, and with all the N2 hi-resolution scanners and cameras placed everywhere, this says *high production values* so something is clearly afoot. Hartcourt already had the evidence he needed to go after those first twenty-eight, and yes, saving Isabelle and catching Forsyth, her wife and the others was clearly an unexpected bonus, and yea they could have stomped everyone's guts out to get to the Ipswich crews, but the bottom line is they didn't need Jessica or the clones in the first place. Jessica is aware that Hartcourt has experienced immense joy in having them here, and so has Piper, but what's going on now is the real reason for this deception, and what surprises Jessica is that she won't dig for an answer because...she'd rather be surprised.

Suddenly, its face-palm time for the three. Hartcourt, on the other hand, curls his lips in an attempt to suppress his amusement.

His closed-eyed trance is broken with Piper touching him on the arm, "Boxxy, the family is here in the atrium."

Hartcourt taps Jessica's shoulder, "Love, I need to decouple?" Now disconnected, he looks to Piper, "And our little sprig?"

"They're pulling up with her now." Piper, noticing both Eight and Peanuts squirming in their recliners, and Jessica just shaking her head, ventures to ask, "Do tell, anything interesting to share?"

"deCap, has proven to be...imaginative?" He pulls Piper aside and says, while making the hand gestures, "You know that silent film chap with the dancing dodgers on forks? Cap has her kidneys on retractors and...Maddie is not holding up to the visuals well."

Piper is embarrassed to admit, "Smashingly brilliant!"

"Dare say!" He motions her on, "Let's attend to this."

In the atrium they are faced with the heartwarming sight of the little girl, Isabelle, as she shrieks and throws herself into her



parents arms. As the three cry with relief, Boxter is moved by the moment, but Piper knows what this look in him really means. His brow pitches down and his lips purse ever so slightly, and if one is a shrewd observer they could see the cyclone of hate that rages inside him breach his stony exterior—and like that it's gone.

Too many have slipped through their fingers. Too many of the entitled, those thinking they're above it all, getting away with wickedness all because...they can. And who's to stop them? Well, for the first time, Hartcourt has a whole battalion of likeminded people, as well as intergovernmental cooperation, and how awesome is that?

"To fight evil one is required to surpass it." Hartcourt says quietly, then turns to Piper and gives her the sweetest little peck on the lips, "I think we have our tools now."

With a gleam in her eyes, Piper gives him a coquettish smile, "My love, it's been a long time coming!"

They step up and Hartcourt says, "Well now, a happy ending."

The father hops up and shakes his hand, "I want to thank you, Mr. Hartcourt, Sir! I am in your service. My life is yours."

Harcourt waggles his head, "Sounds like music to my ears." With Piper giving him that look, he smiles, "Buuut, let's hope it does not come to that. Mr Smyth, you were in the CDF for a spell?"

"Twenty years, Sir. I made Staff Sergeant."

"Yes, vertical movement in the Defense Force is...difficult. Plateau and they push you out so...if you're looking for a job?"

Smyth notices Nicole in her Annex BDUs behind Piper, and as he stares at her, "Sir, I can fight. I'll kill spooky for ya."

"Let's not be too hasty, Mr Smyth." He smiles back at Nicole, "It was a cooperative effort! We have the people who did this but there's more. The job I have in mind for you will be with the crew specific to this work but, for now, I need you and the missus to go back and keep up the...charade. Little Isabelle needs to stay out of sight for a couple of days so we can collect...all the monsters."

"Just say the word, Mr Hartcourt. I am indebted to you."

"Oh no, Mr. Smyth...little Isabelle is saddled with that debt."

Harcourt kneels in front of Isabelle, "I'm your Uncle Boxter. Do you wish us to get all the monsters?" She nods, yes, "Excellent, so for the next couple of days you will stick like glue to your Antie Piper, here. Don't leave her side. Now, to pay us back you need to do these simple things: always tell the truth, at all times do the right thing, and get good grades so you can go to college!" He looks at her parents,

"Ivy League is a possibility, but let her...discover herself. Shall we?"

Isabelle squeaks with a shy little, "Yesssir."

He smiles and wags a finger at her, "Its Uncle Boxter! Let's run along and get some noms in you!" As Piper takes her by the hand and leads her towards the family wing, he stands and turns to the parents, "Okay, let's put those sad faces back on! When this is over we'll move your family to the...West Banes. Great shopping and topper-than-notch schools! It goes without saying, in this line of work, we have the best life insurance to be had." He wonders, "By chance, Sergeant Smyth, do you know the Ipswich area?"

With a knowing smile, "Like the back of my hand, sir."

"Bonkers! We have a project starting there week after next!"

With the parents gone, Boxter and Nicole quietly slither back in behind Jessica who asks, "Okay, Box, what's a snappin' yabby?"

It's time for Hartcourt to assume face-palm position, then say, "Well, this does not...bode well for Madeleine by a long shot."

Nicole asks, "They're that bad?"

"Remember the tasty little lobster tails we had last Sunday? 83-T Cherax Mandiblus. Their mouth has an octo-shearing assembly. 'Muricans call them Chawdads, but...these make Earthly crayfish seem like cuddly plush by comparison." He thinks for a moment, "Come to think of it, if they chew through the exposed diaphragm it's over."

Jessica notes, "They've packed a kilo of trauma compound over it. They're starting to dip her in now. Real slow."

"For a finishing move this is going to linger." He thinks for a second, "By the way, did Mr. Hand have an exit performance while approaching the, I assume, barrel of yabby's?"

Jessica raises her hand and flails it around, "Oh no! Not this! Oh, the humanity! Noooooo! (she huffs) You get the idea."

Nicole shakes her head in wonderment, "I gotta hand it to ya. This takes capital punishment beyond medieval mode setting."

"Well, if we were going for capital punishment then I would tend agree with you." Hartcourt notices Nicole's confused look so he elaborates, "Madame, killing is a convenience, conflict resolution even, not...punishment. For effect, punishment requires the four-R's. That being reflection, realization, regret and repentance."

"Then what are we doing here?"

"Prolonged retribution? Come to an untimely...gruesome end and, before sending their loved one's file to a hosting world, the estate

can excise the file to the last peaceful sleep cycle and...bad memories be gone! We, before they get their hands on it, copy that period and append the file, tinker with the time stamps, and when they, a subsidiary of mine, truncate what they think is the bad—the file ends up with the hosting service complete. No missing memories.”

“Shit serious! Can’t they sue?”

“Why, yes, but only in the jurisdiction of residence or demise, and here it will take seven years to reach judgement but to do so would require a review as to...the why. That’s public record.”

“They can pay to recompile.”

“On demand, yes, but Madeleine has paid for the Taj Mahal. Then again, no estate would part with any funds...knowing the why.”

Nicole realizes, “Then it’s buck up or opt out.”

Harcourt touches his nose with a smug grin.

Jessica adds, “I wouldn’t let them opt out.”

“Jess, it’s not our choice but, who knows what’ll happen in the real hereafter and...oh, to be a fly on that wall.”

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On the flight line here at the Jacoby’s Stump airfield, at the foot of Hartcourt’s starship, stands Major Lyn and Cap, wrapped in a blanket and cold after having the EVA skin removed. Milling around them are over three-hundred Honey Badgers, sucking down coffee and donuts while waiting for the command to launch. Each one of them, man and woman, have managed to pay their respects to young Cap with a nod, a casual salute, or a reverent, “Thank you, Mum.”

To the Badgers, without exception, Cap is now an iconic hero.

Cap knows that her time as ‘deCap’ has come to an end, and that an A.I. will pick up the pace going forward. Madeleine and Kiara got what they deserved and Cap really wanted her hands on them, but she also resented the two for compelling her to make that choice—and that is the key, the A.I. discovers, as to what makes deCap special. The thing is that Cap hated the work but pushed on—and she took that bitterness out on the subjects at hand. The A.I. noticed that while working on Madeleine there was always those little delays and constant moments of doubt...yet a will to maintain course in spite of them.

Humor masked her revulsion to the work—and of herself.

Though Fifty-Two sports a collective awareness, each part has their own personality and desires and some of their little clique would

have relished this task. Knowing this, after the fact, Cap realizes that it was better that she did it. She is the most aggressive of them but, as tough as she is on the outside, right now she's on the verge of a breakdown because with idle hands the doubt is creeping in.

With the light from Zmeu starting to fill the sky in the west, Hartcourt's limo drops in and sets down a few meters from the ship. Eight and Peanuts leap out and reach Cap first, followed by Jessica and Nicole with Clint, Sheron and Michelle Kiel hanging back. Eight and Peanuts showing up to shower Cap with hugs and kisses helps her pull it together. General Britt quickly walks up, snaps a salute to them all and this is returned, and respectively in kind, by Nicole.

Handing out Honey Badger pins, Britt says, "Ladies, I wish we had more time but we have to shove off in a few. We really appreciate the help this last week. You have our sincerest gratitude."

Before they could respond, Britt steps to one side as Hartcourt approaches, "Well, our little...industrious strays have returned!"

Major Lyn speaks up, "My apologies, Sir."

He puts up a hand, "Major, no apologies for what you believe was right, but always accept the consequences, right or wrong."

Cap looks at Hartcourt, "Sir—"

He quickly reminds her, "It's Boxter my dear."

"This is my fault. It's all on me!"

"If I were looking to give you a complex then I would wholly agree but...the fact is the Major should have known better. Discipline must be maintained and examples...need to be made."

Cap pleads, "Boxter, it was me!"

"I assure you, Lyn maintains her rank and stays on track for Lieutenant-Colonel, but a penance must be exacted. I will be fair and kind." He gives her a hug, "Major Lyn will be fine!"

Cap is about to bawl, "I'm holding you to that."

"By the way, we scanned Forsyth's stock pond and confirmed, the final tally is ninety-eight dead from the cloning facilities and five little ones from the Chums. We could differentiate those by their chipsets when we pinged. So, just in case you had any...misgivings about your efforts, Piper and I thought you should know."

With Hartcourt making the goodbyes with Jessica and the rest, the information he just laid on Cap starts to sink in, and with a few deep breaths—all the doubts and self-hate simply washes away.

...Just like that.

With everyone heading up the ramp, Nicole hangs back to say, "Boxter, honestly, I came here last Sunday wanting to cut your fucking head off, on general principals, and now...all I want to do is to give you a big hug and a slobbery kiss! So, what'll it be, dude?"

"Oh! Well, choices...if the latter is preferred I'll opt for that!"

With a snort of a laugh, Nicole gives him a quick kiss, a big hug and heads up the ramp, and as the ship taxis away he turns to Major Lyn, "So, Major..." He brings his hands together and gives a small round of applause, "Well done."

"Thank you, Sir."

"You know, I'm glad it wasn't Eight."

"Why's that, Sir?"

"Eight would have...enjoyed this. Cap didn't."

"Neither did we, and that's why she worked out so well."

Jokingly, he snits, "Speak for yourself!" As Lyn chuckles at that Hartcourt asks, "So, what are our tech's settling on?"

"The tool is on the Doom-N2 engine."

"Everything has the Doom kernel. The framework is?"

Lyn shrugs, not wanting to say it, "The action part is from the 'Kim Possible, Access Ark Adventure' but the conditional-choice and admin components are...from 'Blue's Clues Ghost Hunt.'"

His shoulders sag in an almost face-palm because that last IP was built on the 'Hellraiser' VR-mod of the Doom-N2 game engine, "You do see the irony in this?"

"Yes, sir." Lyn tries to not burst out, laughing.

Harcourt says to Britt, "Well, me thinks we should scramble?"

With the order given the Badgers high-tail it to the waiting floaters and gliders, and as they pile in, Hartcourt turns to Britt and Lyn with, "The wickeness of the wicked shall be upon thyneself. Ezekiel is usually my go-to guy for these...moments but, here today, Psalms is in order... Psalm ninety-four : one to be exact."

Britt nods, "I fully agree, Sir."

"The reigns are yours, General." He sweeps his arm towards the Badgers, "Sally forth and let our people shine!"