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caper emissarius by proxy

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"I love what you did with the place!"

"I haven't made any changes to speak of."

"I see that!" Michal Pitney shakes Vasily Lebedev's hand and, "Your taste and sense of decor is impeccable."

"*Da*, Michal, your sense of humor. People complain that's one missing thing from this office." He turns to Bob and shakes his hand, "Marshal Jackson, *dobraye ootro*."

Bob nods, "Good morning, Secretary General."

"*Nyet*, it's Vasily! Let's be casual like old days, okay Bob?" He guides them to the social pit between the fireplace and the windows, "We should take load off and, as you say, get to point."

Except for the carpet, the office of the Secretary General of the United Nations has not changed one bit since Michal renovated it. This place is a symbol of their station with their working office right next door. Lebedev is the current Secretary General and only a few of his personal trinkets grace this room with his Russian military service and Spetsnaz decorations and mementos on the far wall.

In the pit there's a crystal ice bucket with frozen vodka shots, and after Lebedev hands them out, they raise their glasses with our Vasily offering the toast, "Za zda-ró-vye!"

Michal thanks him, "*Nostrovia! Za fstryé-tchoo!*"

Lebedev nods with a smile, "*Da*."

Now sitting, Bob says, "Thank you for seeing us, Vasily."

"That depends on which hat you want to wear."

"Today, I'm speaking for the FIS and the Annex."

"And on twenty-third?"

"The Annex only."

"And for FIS who speaks then?"

"As agreed, Secretary General, Wilkinson will be attending."

"*On pidaras.*" Lebedev shakes his head, "He is like impotent Zaphod Beeblebrox. You can do better than that me think."

Bob nods big, "Yea, you're right. He is a waste of space, but I just can't chuck him out of an airlock if you know what I mean."

Lebedev's eyebrows raise, "We live in world of possibilities?"

Michal scolds him, "Vasily!"

Lebedev smiles and, "Let us do what they say here in great United States and, talk turkey how 'bout."

Bob, nods, "I'm game for that."

"Tillsdale does not want peace. He wants to destroy FIS and eradicate Annex from existence. He wants to put off peace process until he holds all of Pleiades and, another applicable Americanism for you, possession is nine-tenths of law. He will not let go of anything his Security Services wins for them and, by da way it looks, they'll gift wrap Pleiades with polka-dot bow by end of month."

"Pretty much. What is it you want?"

"All lies behind us...I want to take the wheel of your FIS and guide it towards greater future." Lebedev motions to the room around him, "What you call Urchin Gnome is cloistered, ineffectual, and now it's isolated from human expansion."

Michal points out, "But you did that."

"Yes, towards purpose, yes." While handing out another shot to her and Bob, "I've come to see FIS has real future. It has potential for real government. Not sing-song holdy-hands of United Nations. Admittedly, I always want to purge Steel Annex, but now I see light at end of tunnel. It is tool for FIS to ensure peace."

Bob agrees, "Preach it, brother."

Lebedev nods, "Problem is...I am here, not there."

"We do live in a world of possibilities."

Michal now scolds him, "Bob."

Bob looks at her, "Want peace, Michal? For years we've been chasing our tails and finally, today, we can cut through the bullshit."

"Michal, you are like little Dutch *mal'chik* with finger trying to plug dyke. Peace at all costs is futile effort." Lebedev sits back and, "Noble effort but futile. Tillsdale will not stop so tough choices must be made. I have ally that can turn Security Services against CDF if Annex joins them. If we can do this then peace is assured. War ends."

Michal asks, "How can you guarantee that?"

"There are no guarantees, only possibilities." Lebedev points to Bob, "With him in charge of Annex then you have that power."

"Ramirez runs the Annex, not Bob."

Lebedev smiles, "For our sins, we need scapegoats."

"Scapegoats, plural?"

"Da."

Bob asks, "Let me guess, Tillsdale and Ramirez?"

"They take fall as *caper emissarius*, by proxy instead of us. Do you not agree that public would see them as great perpetrators of war?" Lebedev swirls his hand in the air, "We get public to express venom during talks. This is easy. Groundwork has been laid."

Michal wonders, "How are you going to sway public opinion on a whim? It's not like it's a magic wand you know."

"We already sway opinion!" Lebedev laughs, "All you up here do not listen to news. You listen to what you want to hear. Russians, we cultivate opinion to our need. It has been done. We now just prod sheep and they go baaaa."

Bob sighs, "At this point, Tillsdale does have the upper hand."

Lebedev nods in agreement, "Talks at Thirty-Two-Tau is for show, but peace talks do nothing. They now prepare to expand war after talks. You will see. I give you location of build-up and you do same as you do with Nu Ara attack."

"I caught hell for Thirty-Two Ari."

"This time, Ramirez catch hell. Public opinion will show no mercy and want heads to roll. You just step back into old job."

Bob shakes his head, "I want to be done with this shit."

"Your Cricket Washington I have no objections to taking over as your political alpha, totally likeable but more dangerous than you, I like her, but who will ally with us if you do not take command?"

"Scott Rutledge. He'll run interference for ya."

"Who is this Rutledge?"

"Doesn't matter, all the other marshals will turn on you."

"This is not good."

"Well, if you treat our people right and keep your shenanigans to a minimum then I can leave it in his hands. If you present yourself as a man of the people then Rutledge will back you up, one-hundred percent. He just needs time to acclimate to it."

"So, we have a...deal?"

"Two things, I don't give a shit what you do with Tillsdale but you do not touch Ramirez. Pull her teeth, put her out to pasture, and the transition to Rutledge will be smooth. Hurt her and you'll have Graves to deal with."

"I know of him well, he is problem."

"No, you can secure his loyalty, but if anything happens to her then all bets are off. With Graves there is no negotiation. He cannot be swayed or bought or blackmailed. Kidnap one of his kids and it will only serve to piss him off and, being Russian, you'll understand that."

Lebedev shifts in his seat, "This is true?"

Bob leans in for emphasis, "If Graves ever decided to step in and 'take' command then everyone, I mean rank-n-file from top to bottom, would back him. They'd fall in place without a peep. Even with current forces he could take them and kick all your asses."

"Why does he not do this?"

"Duty? Loyalty? Karma? Fuck'd if I know? Pick one."

Lebedev nods and after a few seconds he turns to Michal and asks, "You have been quiet, Michal."

Michal, with wide-eyed wonderment, "Well, let's take stock! Two soft-coups, manipulate public opinion, and blow up a planet!" Then with perfect comedic flair, "Hell, count me in!"

Lebedev shrugs, "What will take to convince you?"

Michal thinks for a second, and, "I was told to come here with an open mind, so I did. This was NOT the conversation I thought we were going to have but, let's see what Tillsdale has to say on the twenty-second."

Bob quietly mentions, "Twenty-third."

"Ah, ya, twenty-third." She almost snarls, "If what you say is true, and Tillsdale balks at a peace accord, then..." Michal shrugs and, "Count me the fuck in!"

Bob asks, "Just keep you out of the loop?"

"Definitely, keep me out of that loop! Just do it."

Lebedev smiles, "You will protest loudly for show, yes?"

"Yea, but if we can lay the olive branch on the table before you go stomping around in the Hyades then I can work with that."

Lebedev huffs, "Be assured, CDF cannot stand against their Security Services, but nobody can stand against Annex if they option total war. I understand Ramirez' choice, avoiding collateral damage to the cost of her people, but I do question her wisdom."

Michal leans in, "I hate Marshal Ramirez but, wisdom or not, billions are alive because she chose the high ground."

"Many better people dead because of high ground."

Michal leans in further, "You pull off this hat-trick and you'll get my support. I just have to bitch about it at first...for show."

With a smile, Lebedev hands them both a shot, "You now pragmatic as civilian. We not see eye to eye but you have my respect. We will move forward and not speak of this." He raises his glass, "*Davayte vyp'yem za uspekhn nashego dela!*"

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By the entrance to Michal's Turtle Bay condominium she and Bob are staring back at the UN across the street, and after the longest of moments Bob asks, "You hungry?" She shakes her head, *no*, so he says, "But you need to eat." She nods, *yes*, so Bob smiles and announces, "I know just the place!"

As they walk the three blocks down 43<sup>rd</sup> to the corner café at Lexington, across from the Chrysler building, they drink in the beauty of the trees, grass streets and cobble stone sidewalks. Here there are no billboards or placards, and after about block, Michal takes Bob's hand with a smile—and in no time she pulls in close.

Beating the lunch crowd, they get Bob's regular table.

Every time Bob is in New York he finds his way here and gets this table, and he's been doing it for 45 years. The SA office occupies three floors in this building, as well as the flight deck on top, and even though the café has changed hands three times in that span of years, the SA does most of their catering from this café so the staff keeps up on who's who with the Annex. Today is truly a momentous occasion because for the first time Bob has brought someone along.

The waitress brings a menu only for Michal, who asks Bob, "You know what you're having?"

"I get the same thing every time."

"I'll take a stab at that too."

"It's beef."

Michal nods then shrugs, "Considering the meeting we just had I'll make an exception." Then to the waitress, "I'll have what he's having."

Bob motions for them both, "Lemonade and fries."

With the waitress gone, seeing the look in his eyes, she asks, "Is this the place you found her?"

"Yea, that little shit zeroed in on me, sat in the chair you're in, we had lunch and...my life changed." He grimaces slightly, "I know that I could pull the memory up but I really want to remember it organically." Bob smiles, "Funny thing is, the second lunch gets here, and I smell that flame-broiled burger, it all comes back in a flash."

Michal ventures to guess, "That day meant a lot to you."

Bob wonders with mock and awe, "What clued you in?"

"I dunno, it just looked obvious, and speaking of reaching into the clue bag of obvious...we're gonna die."

Bob nods, yes, so Michal says, "I figure you already know how they're gonna come at us."

Again Bob nods, yes, so, "We gonna beat 'em to the punch?"

Again, as expected, Bob slow-nods, yes, so Michal asks what is really on her mind, "Am I gonna feel anything?"

Finally he shakes his head, *no*, so Michal jokes, "Just as well, they're threatening to foreclose on my condo come November."

Bob is all kinds of miffed, "God damn it, Mikey! Why didn't you say something, hu? I'm here to help for Christ's sake!"

"It's not your fucking responsibility!" She points to herself, "Me putting everything I had in this wasted effort is my choice."

"Let me guess, you sold off your chip to Vegas<sup>3</sup> right?"

"Those funds kept me afloat for the last year."

"I've got ya covered. You're going to the Stone Garden."

Michal is surprised, "You can do that?"

"Seriously, come on, there's no cost involved, and no escrow, and you're you! We get open access to Vegas<sup>3</sup> and you'll just love the place I have set up!" Bob then looks at her and leans in with a scowl, "By the way, I already picked out the carpets."

"Da'fuck!" Michal scowls back, "Its tile or you can piss off!"

Nose to nose their scowls morph into a suppressed laughter, and as that laughter dies down their lips start to lightly brush up against each other. They feel and draw in one another's breath in this lingering, almost kiss—which is having such an effect on Michal it's getting hard for her to remember to breathe.

Before they make full contact, Michal confesses, "I love you."

With three light strokes of their lips touching, Bob couldn't resist and says, "I know."

Michal gives him the look, and goes from putty in his hands to a brick of fired-bisque by saying, "Okay, Han!" She sits back and is chuckling quietly, "That was actually funny. Perfect timing!"

Bob asks hopefully, "Can we pick this back up when we get to your place or am I gonna haf'ta beg?"

With the food being delivered, Michal smirks, "I dunno, beg maybe?" Then very quietly, "Or, take a cold shower...asshole."

The second the aroma from the flame-broiled burgers and saucers of balsamic vinegar hits his nose—all the memories from that day, oh so long ago, come rushing back. Bob's eyes blink while he takes a deep breath and whispers to himself, "Wow."

Michal notices that something is up, "You okay?"

Bob nods but says, "No...I offered her the job of managing our security to shut her up, but I spent the last few years trying to talk her out of it. I tried to explain that this day was inevitable."

In her own epiphany, Michal suddenly realizes why Tillsdale is fashionably late for everything, and with this new understanding she thinks out loud, "Nicole has to be there!"

Bob has already resigned himself to this, "Yup."

"You gonna tell her?"

"Nope." With sad eyes Bob looks to Michal, "I can't, now."

"That's fucked up."

"Tell me about it."