

TIME: 12:04zulu (local 10:18mst)

"Plata o plomo."

Confused, Bristol asks, "Come again, Marshal?"

Maria leans in, "I waited my whole life to frame the moment like that *and* my ass has got both! You know what I mean, Porter?"

Macquarie nods, "I'm bloody glad I'm 'ere for that one."

Putting her hands together, Maria points them towards the General and, "Ya know, Bristol, you ain't gonna understand that for shit, but maybe this guy can help!"

Suddenly, on the wall monitor behind the receptionist's desk, the face of Boxter Hartcourt flashes up three times the size of God's, "Morning all, Major, General Bristol! Marshal Ramirez, you caught me on a lazy morning but I can always scrounge up time for you."

"Thank you, Mr Hartcourt. We kind of have a situation here."

"Yes, I gather." Boxter gives a long face, "It appears we lost a Second Lieutenant during your...confrontation. How sad."

Bristol speaks up, "Mr Hartcourt, we have orders from Chancellor Tillsdale to take the Church Key and—"

Boxter cuts him off, "I hate to be rude, General, but I do know what your orders are, and since I'm now the acting Chancellor, and you were incommunicado, I was forced to intervene."

"Mr Hartcourt, my orders stand."

"No, General, they do not." Boxter rolls his eyes slightly, "You see, Tilly is no longer with us. In fact, Ny Hopen and all that was there is now a crater...no survivors, and with no radioactivity it appears to be a natural...impact event? A tragic end in the pursuit of peace."

"Sir? The war is over."

"You don't say!" Boxter's face turns sour, "Unfortunately, unless we have an admission of defeat by the Annex then, no, it is not over. This makes you in violation of the ROEs! Let's take inventory, shall we? Today we have perpetrated acts of aggression including, but not exclusive too, armed intervention into a neutral territory, incursion onto an embassy grounds, violence instigated resulting in unnecessary death, and an attempt to detain a recognized *chargé d'affaires*, herself an acting sovereign official who enjoys diplomatic immunity."

Bristol is indignant, "Sir, this can't be!"

"Oh no, it very much will be, so...make like a good fellow and scamper along or, if not, General Dan will have the Sergeant Major take you into custody. Isn't that correct, General Dan?"

Dan looks up at the screen, "Just received the orders, Sir."

"The choice is clear, General Bristol, you can either take the promotion to Army Commander I'm planning to give you on Friday for the fabulous success on Taiji, or...be taken outside and, since this is a time of armed conflict, get shot for a laundry list of capital offenses." Boxter, rubbing his hands says, "The clock...is ticking."

Bristol says through clinched teeth, "I'll be on my way, sir."

With both hands, Boxter makes a shooping motion towards Bristol while saying, "Let's get a move on. Make haste!"

It has not been a good day for Lieutenant Generals and Bristol looks like he is about to blow his top. The indignity of a slap down and dismissal like this is beyond what he can bear, but to voice a protest now means he would face a firing squad on the spot so, in a tight-lipped wide-eyed rage, he pivots around in a perfectly executed about face and stomps off towards the elevator lobby.

The company commander and the Sergeant Major follow him smartly, but Dan turns and looks at Cyzk for just a second—trying her best to suppress the approving smile. She does give him a subtle nod and follows the rest into a waiting elevator.

With them gone, Maria looks to Cyzk, in his tattered fighting suit, and says, "Kacper, you look a little worse for wear."

Cyzk shrugs, "Nothing that a bottle of scotch, a brunette and a couple of days rack time couldn't fix."

"I want to see you and Venk on Friday, noon, for lunch. I'll send you that bottle." With Cyzk nodding okay, Maria points towards the lobby, "Get the fuck outta here already!"

With Cyzk turning to leave, Jacob says, "Did good, man."

Cyzk snorts a laugh, "Bite my ass."

Laughing, Jacob pats Cyzk on the shoulder as he leaves, and himself steps into the SA lobby while Macquarie goes, "Well now, I guess you won't be needing us. It has been a craic of a good time! Thanks again for the coffee! We'll show ourselves out."

Boxter says, "If you please, I'm not through with you, Porter."

"What'll be your pleasure, sir?"

"Since the CDF will be taking over offensive operations going forward we've had some changes in our organization. I'm looking for a new base commander for New Darwin and I was wondering if you'd be up to it...Colonel?"

"I've only been time in grade for two years, sir."

"Like that matters?" Boxter's eye twitches, "Mr Jones is now on my exec staff and suggested you! Make me proud. And now that Security Services will be doing actual security work your people will have time on their hands, and I dare say they deserve...a holiday."

"Come again, sir?"

Maria steps in, "It's a slow time here and I got a thousand empty hotel rooms for the next five weeks so Mr Hartcourt and I thought it would be nice to comp you SS peeps two nights each."

Boxter adds, "I understand that morning crisps come with the rooms so I'll pick up chips and evening...chow is it? We will cycle the rest of Security Services after the first of the year."

Macquarie is dumbfounded, "On behalf of our people that's right charitable of you sir, and mum!"

Boxter gives a genuine smile, "It was well earned."

Maria adds, "Porter, you may want to schedule yourself for the thirty-first. This place is crazy fun during Halloween."

Macquarie grins big, "I be lookin' forward to it, Mar!"

Boxter clasps his hands together, "Now if you please, Colonel. The Marshal and I have a few issues to discuss privately."

With Macquarie and his people stepping out, Jacob points towards the doors to the large conference room, by the lobby where Maria came from, "I'm gonna go see the girls and let you two be."

With all of them now gone, Maria says, "Just so you know, Venkatesh has sent the stand down order. Sorry about that one."

"Oh tosh my dear...unfortunately for our General Alcock, that message is being held up by IT security protocol for analysis."

"Are you shitting me?"

"Who knows what it may contain considering the nature of the source?" Boxter drops the innocent act with a sly grin, "Then again, I'm enjoying this way too much to let it...end so soon."

Maria knows it costs the CDF over 150k to train a soldier but, with padded medical expenses the way they are in the Hyades, it's five times that to grow a new arm or leg. Maria had the GMi BER protocol always default to the 'mayhem' option because the Co-op would be contractually obligated to pay for regenerations.

Maria is surprised, "This is gonna hit their budget!"

Boxter agrees, "Deeeep into the red, yes."

Maria dares to ask, "I'm curious, why didn't you go into Taiji and Ngāti Whā with Security Services?"

"Oh, that." Boxter looks like a little kid caught with his hands in the cookie jar, "We had no legal claim to Ngāti Whā and, as for Taiji, truth be known is that the five houses bought out the patent claims over eighty years ago."

"You told them?"

"Most definitely!"

"And they chose not to listen."

"Surprised? If Giáp doesn't prevail on the field you can be assured that the houses will roundly defeat them in the courts."

Maria is confused, "Doesn't explain why you didn't go?"

"Oh that, my choice to avoid those operations was based upon principal. I found them to be...morally repugnant."

"Ya know, I'm gonna miss this. What we got goin' here."

"I beg to differ, Security Services may be out for the duration but you do not get rid of me that easily. Always remember that when God closes one door he always opens another."

Maria nods big, "Yea, but his hallways are a motherfucker." As Boxter laughs with delight she asks, "I'm curious, who you got in mind for replacing Tillsdale?"

He looks right and then left, "Well, there is a whole list of incompetence to choose from but...I was thinking of giving the young Wanganui a shot at it. With ol' Shep gone he'd be a lost little ship for me to ballast in the treacherous seas of state."

Maria just shakes her head, totally blown away by how much they think alike, and points towards the conference room doors saying, "The girls are here. I think they'd like to say hi!"

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Diego is standing on a raised dais by the window overlooking the Kilosphere and the flight line far below. The windows have been darkened to blot out the light with the center panel switched to mirror mode. Littered about is her sister Jessica, the clones Copper, Eight, Cap, Peanuts, her grandmother Ophelia and great aunt Adolphina.

Diego is in a tight green screen corset and leggings, with the dressmaker's changing room application tied into her visual cortex but, instead of flipping through the dresses she is looking down at little Angela whose been staring up at her, so Diego asks in a curt, "What?"

"Pfth'so..." Angela spits—then with a perfect adult inflection, "If a tortoise ate a snail and...died...it would be faster than you!"

Diego is already frustrated going through endless holographic dresses, but this little fart always manages to push her buttons so she snarls, "Okay, six-two-six, get away from me before I strangle—"

Angela throws her hands out, "Okay, Sian! Just sayin' what everyone else is thinkin' but, just remember, this your doin' is between me and my French Fries, okay? Think of the children!"

Angela notices Jacob standing right there in his fighting suit, with his hand held out to her, so she grabs it and climbs up into his arms giving him a big kiss while squeaking, "Hey-hey, Uncle J!"

Jacob asks, "You being good?"

"Me? I'm always good!"

Diego has leaned out to give her father a quick kiss, "You're a rancid little dog turd, that's what you are!" She gives Jacob a kiss and as she pulls away she gives Angela a little cat like hiss, then, "Sorry, father, this shit is driving me outta my God damned mind."

Jacob points out the obvious guy solution, "How 'bout you pick the one that makes you hurl the least?"

"Really, like it's that simple? Here's the Disney Princess roll call, let's sound off..." Diego, through the dress app, with each flick of her hand in the air a dress is superimposed over her as if it was really there, and as she flips through them, "We got Belle, and here's Elsa, the Mulan rouge, the Tiana cake topper!" She gives a two-thumbs up, "That's a beauty and, oh shit, my favorite, the Ariel toilet brush!"

Jacob is trying not to laugh when Ophelia jumps up and says, "You look beautiful in that one *mi mija!* Perfect for *quinceañera!*"

Diego looks up and sobs, "I don't wanna be a toilet brush!"

Adolphina, points out, "I like the cake topper."

Across the room Maria just came in, with Boxter on the wall screen behind her, just in time to see this so Boxter clears his throat quietly to get the attention of the dress designer sitting in front of them, "Excuse me mum, you from Braziers?"

The designer turns and, "Out of Los Angeles, Yes."

"Madame haberdasher, would you be so kind as to entreat an old busy body for an opinion?"

She shakes her head, "I'm at the end of my rope so, sure!"

"You familiar with the Louisiana...French-Dip?"

"It's a cut from the Stumps, yea."

"Specifically, the strapless one with the plunging V-corset that accentuates the hips. Give that one a whirl if you please."

She looks at him and asks, "Would you suggest a color?"

Boxter cocks his head to the side and, "Considering her hair and temperament I would try a...deep dusty rose...matte, preferable." He then points up, "Oh, and as for accents I would do charcoal?"

With her clicking she goes, "Sir that requires the quick release band for the skirt, and that liquid metal tech ain't cheap."

"Well, when one must micturate." Boxter shrugs and, "I have about twenty of them in storage with you in New Brisbane. We should be able to adapt one for this purpose."

"You have an account sir?"

"Hartcourt."

"Hartcourt? That's the biggest account on the stumps!"

Boxter painfully nods, "Yes...I have five daughters."

On the Dias, Diego is finally fed up, "Okay, I'm about done with this shit! You guys pick one and I'll go around with a sack over my fucking head! I'd rather wear jeans and a t-shirt but if I gotta look stupid..." Suddenly the dress Boxter suggests pops up on her and everyone is visibly startled, so Diego shouts, "What! You act like I'm gonna jump out at ya and claw your eyes out!"

Jessica and the clones stand up from the couches, stunned by what they see, as Adolphina says, "Turn around."

"Turn around, what?"

"Look!" Cap says while she spins her finger in the air then at the mirror where, in a fit, Diego does the same but flips Cap the bird.

Jacob huffs and firmly, "Turn the fuck...around."

Diego does so and when she sees the reflection of herself in this dress her mouth drops in total astonishment. She squints, not believing what she sees and, not knowing what to say, tears well up and start to run down her cheeks.

Jacob adds, "I don't think this one will induce nausea."

Diego starts to wipe the tears from her cheeks while saying quietly to them, "Yea, okay, I think...I think...I can do this."

Adolphina agrees, "Ay *chihua*, Diego, that's smokin'."

Angela asks Jacob, "Do I gotta say nice stuff now?"

Jacob puts her on the dias and, "No, but it would be nice."

Angela takes Diego's hand and looks up at her, "I think...oh shit I got a hairball!"

With Angela acting like she's gonna puke, Diego almost cracks up saying, "Out with it, sis!"

"Uuuuu...uuUUu..." Angela, bending over Diego's feet, pukes up the words, "Looks great!" She shakes her head with a deep breath, "Wow, that was hard to get out!"

Diego yanks her in close and Angela shrieks with laughter as Diego starts tickling her, "You little...fricken...chigger!"

Maria is leaning over the couch to get the clones attention, while thumbing back, "Hey, ladies, lookie here!"

Eight turns first and shouts, "Boxter!"

Jessica gives Boxter a little wave as the clones mob him, and as Maria steps up to her, Jessica goes, "He'll be at his Times Square suite on New Years and, since Piper knows everything, he was wondering if Piper could come with?"

Maria asks, "She's cool?"

"Yea, way cool."

"Okay, let 'im know. What about the party for Cloé?"

"Box wants to extend the invite to Diego, Angela and Copper."

"If you're chaperon then yes. What about Scott and Angie?"

"The condo is mine now but nothing changes. They're family and it's their home too."

Maria points out, "You're Angela's mom now."

"Yikes...I never thought about that."

"Have fun with it."

"Little Klicks can be a hand full."

"She's gonna take Nicole's death hard."

Jessica shrugs, "Not when I'm through with her."

"You and Seth gonna be okay?"

"We've had a lot of time to acclimate to this."

Maria looks at Jessica then dares to ask, "You know how they say that big doors swing on little hinges? I have to ask...was there anything you and Seth could have done to save Nicole?"

Jessica looks at her with her father's icy chill, "Flapping our little butterfly wings just to save mother would have been catastrophic. We looked at this from every angle and, honestly, it was the only way to bag Tillsdale...and, one more thing!"

"What's that?"

In the tacnet, Jessica drags and drops a communication queue into Maria's inbox and smiles at her, "Grandfather wants to talk to you. He's waiting on line."

"That was fast!"

"He and Michal compiled yesterday. Mother is tonight."

Maria nods towards Diego, "Come on. Let's see your sister."

As they step up Diego asks the two of them, "Waddya think?"

Maria smiles, "You're giving Jessie a run for the money."

Jessica bobs her head to her, "You look great a-a-and I have to say that dress helps maybe...just a tad."

Diego points to her, "You give people boners walking around in God damned baggies. Just think what you'd do in this dress."

"Naw, I don't think so."

Diego puts her hands on her hips and, "Forest green with crème accents. Think about that?"

Jessica recoils, "You mean Merida!"

Diego leans down, and in Jessica's face, "Merida is a badass an' don't you forget it!"

Maria says to Jessica, "Merida is cool."

Angela asks them all, "Which princess am I?"

Diego, Jessica and Maria all say in unison, "Maleficent!"

Angela thrusts her fists into the air, “Yea baby—me be evil!”

Angela wasn’t fast enough, and with both Diego and Jessica jumping in and tickling her, Angela shrieks with laughter.

Maria taps Jacob’s shoulder, and while pointing to her ear, “Can we talk before you go? I gotta take this first.”

Jacob says to her, “You were right about splitting my teams. Things would’ve gotten out of hand if we did.”

“But, they didn’t. I wanna knock around a few ideas on how to stick it to homer between now and Polaris.” Maria pats him on the back, “Thank you for getting them out.”

Before she turns away, Jacob says, “Pallet extraction.”

Maria wonders, “Of what?”

“Loaded down with Pacman and a handful of droids.”

Maria thinks about it and smiles, “That would keep ‘em busy, now wouldn’t it!” She heads for the lobby, “Give me a minute.”

Jacob calls out to her, “I want back in the shit.”

With a laugh, Maria says without turning back, “I know, that’s what we’re gonna talk about.”

While entering the lobby Maria clicks on the queue and, within a few short seconds, Bob answers, [“About time...”]

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“Then again, I got all the time in the world now.”

Stone Garden, run by the Steel Annex, is as gorgeous as any other hosting world but with so few permanent residents it has been optimized to run in real time and it’s the only ghost host world in existence that does so. All commercial worlds lag terribly and Vegas³ itself has recently upgraded to 45% of real time and that’s considered a premium selling point if you can believe it.

As a ghost if you were to get a call from the outside world the network is forced to overclock you to compensate for the lag, and this processor push makes your surroundings matrixy slow.

Proper etiquette at most of these worlds is for one to step out to a private spot before amping up, but in the Garden it’s exceedingly common for the residents to get outside calls—all because most everyone is now operating combat tech in the real world. Funny thing is that it’s not at all unheard of for someone to get rung up by a copy of them self out on a mission, which can get comical to say the least.

Unlike most ghost hosts, specifically Vegas³ again, the Garden does not have dozens upon dozens of instances of the same map overlaid on top of each other. Real estate here is a one shot deal and, because this is Bob, he gets to score a beachfront lot.

A new resident stepping out into the Garden, that is after dying and compiling, is greeted by a guide looking to set them up with a residence, as well as resolving outstanding estate issues, but Bob knew this was coming so he was already prepared for today.

With their glass-tastic beach chalet behind them, Michal is transfixed by a tacnet memory of his, one that she is actually standing in and watching in the third-person. On the beach before her is eight year old Nicole, naked and playing in the surf with Snoopy when he was a juvenile raptor. It took a lot of editing to seamlessly model and merge this memory with the beach outside his property but, because Michal is enthralled by it, he realizes that it was worth the effort.

Maria says over the link, ["Sorry, Bob, I'm spread thin!"]

Bob laughs, "Yea, but for once I don't give a shit."

["I guess that zero fucks given must go hand-n-hand with being dead! I'm curious, do you feel it?"]

"Feel what?"

["Most people say they feel something is missing when they cross over to the hosting worlds. Do you feel that?"]

Bob thinks about it and, "No...but they say I didn't have a soul to begin with so that's probably why I don't"

Maria laughs and, ["Okay...so, wazzup?"]

"I'm watching Michal watching my forty-five year old memory of Nicole playing in the surf on Second Hand with Snoopy."

["Well, we're walking down memory lane first thing."] Maria then realizes, ["Wait a minute! You're half your age now, right?"]

"Yea, so is Michal, it's kinda weird and cool, but for the first time in years I can think clearly."

["Hey, you got a new CPU!"]

"It's shocking to realize how much advanced age can actually cloud your thinking."

["You were only eighty!"]

"Yea, but this is like I got a tune-up."

Maria laughs again, ["Okay, so...what's on your mind?"]

"Clarity."

["That's three syllables. I'm willing to hear this out."]

"There were things I heard and things I saw, and I didn't add them up when I should have. See, when Cricket had Jade, Jessica said something to me that should have set off alarms but it didn't."

["That was probably Jessie's doing."]

"I figured that, but it was the unknown divisor to a formula that was staring me in the face. She said we had an unexpected ally."

["Boxter?"]

"She didn't say and, when I pressed her she wouldn't say, but I can hedge my bets that we're not supposed to know."

["I will say this, Boxter has got something up his sleeve but it ain't about us. My gut says he's got somethin' else going on."]

"Nobody in the FIS and the greater intel community believe in our reported losses. Boxter should be turning over every rock looking for U-Turn, but he's not. It's like he knows what we're doing, and he wants us to hit Polaris. It's like he's serving it up on a silver platter."

["Okay...gimme something to chew on."]

"Tariffs."

["That's two syllables. You can do better, dude."]

He laughs, "Okay, I heard that he's flipping investments like crazy. Get this, he was the controlling shareholder to the company that was importing from Ngāti Whā, and it was directly responsible for pushing that attack, but he offloaded the last of his shares days ago."

["I don't get it?"]

"Okay, hemp products, paper and textiles, tobacco and wine are imported by that company and the tariffs are astronomical. If they make Ngāti Whā a protectorate the tariffs go away—but the market is already used to paying these prices so they'll keep it jacked up."

["And the punchline is?"]

"It's all about how they budget ops! See, they're bettin' on the come. Co-op business interests put up the budget for a mission and, in turn, they directly reap those benefits but, if things go ass up, its they who have to offset that variance out of pocket, and a loss here is something they cannot walk away from. The question is, where is all the capital for this coming from? Who the fuck knows?"

["That would be Nigel Kiel."]

"The Mountain Troll?"

["Yea, Michelle told me, but he's not tugging any strings."]

"Is he betting against them?"

["Oh, fuck yea! He'll profit if they win, sure, but if they lose he'll make off like a bandit however, he won't do anything overt to trip them up directly. It's gotta be someone else though."]

"Why is that?"

["Nigel cut them off months ago, so my question is...who had the funds to pony up for Taiji and Ngāti Whā?"]

"Well, it's time I share, Boxter sold off all his capital interest in the Co-op and he's diversified into God knows what? Reports are that his tentacles are in everything now. He's the only one on the Stumps not strapped for cash and the only one, other than Nigel, with that kind of handy scratch."

["Okay, for you, just today, Boxter pulled Security Services from all offensive operations. The CDF is swingin' their own dick from here on out, so if he did front that loan to finance those ops—then he would be betting against them."]

"Yup, but Jessica won't say who it is."

["Look, if we find out that Lebedev was full of shit then it's imperative that we do not deviate from Polaris."]

"Yea, but if Vasily was right, Box would want us to hit Polaris."

["We got ourselves a bastard of a paradox here. Look, Bob, I appreciate the heads up but I can't put time into wishful thinking right now. I got a war to fight and a *quinceañera* to plan for."]

Bob laughs and, "You mean the quinceañera to fight for."

["Ain't that the God's honest truth! At least she's not puttin' up the fuss we thought she would."]

"Michal wanted to be there."

["We'll figure something out."]

"Okay, you go unfuck the world an' we'll chat later!"

With Maria gone, Bob slowly slithers up beside Michal and takes her hand, and while they watch the real to life 3D Nicole and Snoopy splash, play and chase each other, Michal squeezes Bob's hand, "This was an important moment for you."

Bob thinks about it, "We were very much alike, Nicole and I. Bad childhoods, ya know. But, this moment for us, it was the very first time we both felt actual happiness."

Michal gnaws on that and throws out, "And all the time you spent with me before this-here?"

Bob's shoulders sag, "You know what I mean."

She looks at him and grins, "Yeaaaa! Had ya goin'!"

"Oh, before I forget! Jessie is gonna bring Nicole over in the morning after her mother compiles."

"She can do that? She's not SA."

"You'd be surprised what she does for us." Bob looks at her and nods back to the chalet, "Wanna check the place out? You can pick out the first room we christen."

Michal grins big, "Sure! I feel a carpet burn a-comin' on!"

Bob shakes his head, "Seriously?"

She gives him a quick kiss, "Just giving you shit."

As they walk-in-arm slowly towards the chalet Bob smiles, "Hey, on Ny Hopen, you got me back, and good!"

Michal pulls in close, "I know."