

75

short straws

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In her capacity as the acting Secretary General, *Pro Tem*, Cricket Washington has been playing the General Assembly of the Federation of Independent States like a fiddle, and today they are all dancing to her tune.

The thing is, the hundreds of ambassadors sitting here in the GA think they've been dancing to their own separate and unique tunes that they composed, but that's the kink with the modern-experimental symphonic abstracts. Each of the musicians is reading the music and playing the notes and bars that they themselves wrote in contribution to it but, with a conductor adept at editing and compromise, to the observer it all comes together complete, in concert, with the *fortissimo* crescendo here cresting in about twenty minutes—at about the time the sweet potato pie is being served.

Lest we forget, Cricket is providing lunch and as the jingle goes, 'Nobody turns their nose to KCMoe's!'

For a podunk Kansas City BBQ, this thing stormed the culinary world when it finally branched out from Clay County three decades ago. It was Clementine Ozo, Jose's mother, who inherited it from her parents after they resurrected the family business once they figured out how to smoke the cheap vertically-farmed meats when nobody else could pull that off. Clem took the reins and was the impetus for the expansion and elevating their menu into mainstream consciousness. Even their Vegetable Bakes will poleaxe the taste buds, so if one is not calling the vegans in for first dibs on that then the fur will fly.

When one enters the lobby to the Spike you walk right into the concierge counter. To your left is an admin satellite office for the SA, and to your right you have the new corporate offices for the CXi

that are under construction. Behind those are two massive elevator banks, and past that is a five-story auditorium currently occupied by the GA of the FIS until their own building is finished.

The nine square-kilometer airfield east of the Spike, that was cleared out for an SA airdrome forever ago, was never developed so this flattened mesa has now been repurposed for the FIS. A massive stadium-sized building for the GA is going up first however, a 15,000 station capacity for a body of 631 voting members may be considered a tad excessive but the Annex tends to think ahead. Also thinking ahead the Annex made a point to keep the western most taxiway that runs from the Church Key Civil Spaceport to the Spike, and some say it may break the visual flow to the GA, sprouting up here along the coast of Bludger Bay, but the FIS is getting this for an annual lease of only one Au-note so critics were quietly told to stuff it. Anyway...

Behind the concierge is Trixie, Jacob's old ASF47 he retired through action, and because she is interactive you can actually walk up and talk to her! She's become so popular with everyone that they are seriously considering making Trixie a permanent fixture in the lobby by repurposing her as the concierge, and thinking the hanging-stowage mounts from the century old Swingline cruisers would do nicely!

Behind Trixie, in the wide gap between the elevator bays, are three rows of tables loaded with KCMoe's brisket, tri-tips, pork and chicken shred. With the members of the GA now back at their seats with huge platefuls of food, they only put a small dent in it all, but where meat goes a long way the trays loaded with both Mallorcan and the ever popular Mexi-mild vegetable bake are about half empty.

With Moe's robots hauling in stacks of serving trays loaded up with slices of their famous sweet potato and cream cheese layered pies, wheeling them directly up to the entrance of the GA, Cricket turns to her personal assistant and asks, "Let's move a table with assorted meats over by the pies and notify the building that I said it's open season on the tables here."

Cricket's PA, PFC6 Lavon Green, the only living PFC6 other than Artyom, a fellowship lawyer in International Affairs who is second in command of the Paper Cuts group—and a veteran geezer brigade retread with tearing and burn scars on his face and neck, who scares the living bagebas out of anyone who sees him for the first time, looks out over the full GA while standing next to Cricket and shakes his head in amazement, "S'hard to believe we is here."

Both are from south side Chicago, so Cricket glances at him with a smile, "Believe or leave, muda-fuck'a, 'cause we *is* here!"

He leans in, quietly saying, "Yeeea, ma-nigga pulled this off!"

Trying not to laugh at that, She looks up at Green and snorts, "Jag the fuck-off already! Ya got your orders."

He grins big and walks away, "Yessiree, boss-lady! I'm on it!"

"Asshat." Cricket grumbles to herself, then calls out to him, "Seventeen hundred hours, my place. You be there, Lavon!"

Green points to her as he slips into an open elevator.

Now surveying the layout of the GA, Cricket suddenly looks back at the elevator while pointing to the tables then deflates while she throws her hands up—because they didn't move a table yet.

Thinking someone will come along shortly, she starts juggling trays so one table has a full assortment of meats, and as she finishes, Jessica steps up just in time, "Hey, Crick!"

After a little hug, Cricket points to the entrance of the GA and asks, "Can ya help git this over there?"

Jessica hops on it and after they carry the table over by the pies, and setting it down, she asks, "Everybody show up?"

"Yep! I can't believe this is comin' together like we planned."

"Only Cricket Washington herself could pull a bait an' switch like this-here." And after saying what everyone in-the-know knows is obvious, Jessica then leans in to add, "Babe, you're an evil-maniacal bitch with a million dollar smile, and you have to admit Bill was right."

"About what?"

"Your hair!" Jessica nods towards Cricket's hair, hair that used to be ultra-short while with her father but is now in long-springy curls, "It looks great! It makes you appear friendly...for once."

Cricket grunts a laugh, "I'll take those as compliments."

"Trixie is a scream!" Josav steps up while thumbing behind, "So my grandad landed that thing? Seriously?"

Jessica bumps up against him, "Yup! I'll let you path the file before I give you that dollar ride."

Josav looks at Cricket and goes, "She has a Seventy-Four!" With Bill coming out of the elevator banks carrying their baby in his arms we also have Eight, Copper, Cap and Peanuts stepping through the lobby, Cricket nods yes so Josav shakes his head, "Fucken' hell."

Cricket says to him, "She's gotta get around somehow?"

"But that?"

Jessica adds as she turns to Bill to take Jade, "Where I'll be going over the next couple of years, yea! Kinda-sorta need it."

Before Bill could reach her, the four clones block his path and say in unison, "Give me Jade or I'll hurt you."

"Come on!" Jessica protests as Bill hands her over to them.

With Jade in Copper's arms, all four of them look at Jessica and hiss at her like a clutch of vampires huddling around the baby.

"Bitches!" Jessica laughs at them, and then turns to Cricket, "You're gonna hav'ta have another because these shitheads are hoggin' up all the huggy time!"

Josav looks Cricket over, up and down at her thin and cut figure in a clingy knit dress, points towards the baby, "You, had this?"

Before Cricket could respond, Jessica throws out, "Yea, not even a stretch mark! Everyone is hatin' on her for it."

Cricket slithers between them towards the baby while saying, "One is enough." Then smiles at the four clones, "Momma gits a kiss."

Jessica says to Copper, "Thanks for taking care of Esma."

Copper smiles, "No prob. Peanuts is coming with me."

They laugh as Jessica worries, "Oh crap, maybe I should go?"

Peanuts playfully wiggles her fingers at Jessica, "We got this!"

Shaking her head, "I'm gonna regret this, I know it."

Copper laughs, "No worries, I'll have her on a choker chain."

Bill says to Jessica, "Red Love, Rat-One had a very successful weekend. They splat the last of the five on the C-List an hour ago."

Jessica nods, "Minura has been keeping me apprised."

Cricket asks them, "How was it working with Minura?"

Bill goes, "McElroy said she made it too easy for 'em."

"That's real good to hear."

Jessica asks Bill, "You wanna tell them?"

Bracing himself, Bill turns to inform the clones, "Colonel Ribot, Marshal Ramirez and myself all agree, 'levenses and cherubs only. Nobody that can even remotely be mistaken for Jessica, or you three, so Gail, Florence, Neon and Ruby will be assigned to a Ratel Team but I can't give one to Nitro, Cobi or Rhoades." He looks down at the now blossoming Peanuts, and asks, "You wanna join a team, kiddo? They got seven more slots!"

Peanuts shakes her head, "Uh-uh, not now. I enjoy annoying the shit outta everyone here too much."

"Okay, can you let 'em know then?"

Eight speaks up, "They already know now."

Cricket asks, "If Cobi is free I'd love to have her back."

Copper says, "Cobi would love too. Tomorrow good for you?"

"Fantastic! I love working with her."

Bill suggests, "Scott and I got a war to plan for, so if Nitro and Rhoades are looking for somethin' to fill thar day?"

Cap informs Bill, "Nitro and Rhoades will be here tomorrow."

Bill points to Cricket, "Ditto on what she said!"

Peanuts looks up to Bill, "We've got nine candidates for ya but we gotta draw straws to see who gets those slots."

Bill shakes his head, "Nope, I tell ya what, Peanuts, I already know the Honey Badgers want to double up on a couple of their teams. We'll take 'em all."

All four of the clones nod with approval, so Peanuts smiles at Bill saying, "If everyone is pulling short straws it's a deal!"

Josav, having just learned the full extent of Jessica's powers, thinks in his mind, <"What do these teams do?">

As Lavon Green comes back out of the elevator banks, with a Colonel Sanders of the PADF in tow, Jessica responds, <"deCap.">

Josav nods with wide-eyed approval, <"Oh, okay!">

With Green and Sanders stepping up to Cricket, she turns to the Colonel and asks, "So, Colonel Sanders, your people ready?"

Sanders nods to Cricket, "Madame, Secretary General. My agents and troopers are in the hanger bay and can deploy inside a minute. Our PADF coach is out front and ready to load. It looks like a standard mail run sitting on the deck so nobody knows what's up."

Green hands Sanders a file with the 132 arrest warrants, "Colonel, here are the warrants."

Cricket points to the file, "I'll announce the names in that order and your people are to arrest the accused at their workstations in plain view of everyone and the press. I know you were going to egress through the south exit but, for the viewing public, I now want the perp-walk to go right through the lobby here. I want it all on camera, and all the way up to your ship."

Sanders nods, "Not a problem. It'll take an hour to get to Second Hand, and we'll be taking them to Tower Nine, correct?"

"The PADF takes possession of it the second you land."

"Then we're ready to roll, Mum!"

"Let's give 'em all a few more minutes to enjoy their meal. Seal the GA when Moe's start serving the pies."

Sanders nods respectfully, "Yes, Mum."

As Sanders steps over to wait by the pies, Green slithers up to Cricket and quietly mocks the colonel by saying, "Hey-ho, Mum!"

Cricket shakes her head, "Shut up!"

Green is about to crack up as he says, "Just so you know, I got the final tally. With the truncated quorum we already know they won't have the supermajority but, word is, everybody who was going to vote yes with them are now going to abstain which is..."

Cricket lights up with excitement while saying along with him, "The same as a no vote!"

She high-fives Green as she steps past him and over to the catering manager from Moe's, and after talking to him she returns and says to everyone, "Ten minutes."

Bill takes Jade and kisses Cricket, "Kick ass, honey-bun!"

With Bill and Jade heading back to the elevators, Cricket turns to Jessica and the clones, "Okay, the idea is I want them all calm. All ya'll know how to broadcast those eerie-calming vibes, but for you..." She points to Jessica, "I want you to mess up three for me."

Jessica shrugs, "Anything is possible?"

"Good! With the new representative from the House of Anzac. I want that arrogant fuck in tears. You know, sniveling and shit."

Jessica nods, yes, "Yea, no prob there! The others?"

"From Yhi, I want that lothesome fuckwit shouting and shit like, *you can't do this*, and *I got rights*. You know, make loud stupid shit come out of that turds mouth." Jessica gives a thumbs up, so Cricket finishes with, "As for our enchanting Mr. Jones from Ngāti Whā, I want that cuck-wad kickin' and screamin' all the way out the door. Let's humiliate that fucker. Can you do that?"

"Can do!" Jessica then asks, "Biting and spitting?"

"Uuuuugh, I gotta say no to the biting."

"You want them dragging 'im?"

Cricket points to the lobby floor, "Along here would be nice." She then turns to Josav and huffs a laugh, "As for you, hunk of Sugar, grab yourself a plate and a pie and come watch the fun!"

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To the cheers of the representatives in the GA, Moe's robots wheel in the stacks of pie, and as they start distributing them the PADF troops quietly pour out of the hanger outside, enter the lobby of the Spike and seal off the auditorium inside a minute. Cricket is not only surprised that the GA was clueless to all this, but she was amazed that none of them noticed that the troops guarding the entryways have tripled in number and are now blocking their exit.

Cricket opens an incoming tacnet voice queue, <"Hey, Bob!">

Now that he's dead, Bob's voice from the Garden is friendly and has a soothing effect on her, <"Need me to hang with ya?">

She shakes her head, <"Naw, I'm good.">

<"Well, it goes without saying, break a leg.">

<"Bob, baby, ya just said it?">

Bob chuckles, <"You know me. I'm an obvious kinda guy.">

Cricket huffs, <"An' that's why you selected me for your job. I'm here because I'm not so obvious.">

<"You're about to up-fuck their world and they're clueless.">

<"That I am."> Cricket sighs while she steps into the GA, returning waves to friendly faces with a smile as she heads down the long isle towards the podium, <"I wanna thank you, Bob.">

<"Thank me for what?">

<"Being here for me.">

<"Cricket, hon, you *are* in your element."> Now half way to the podium, Bob laughs, <"Ya know, I am kinda jealous.">

<"Of what?">

<"You're about to wrap-up a Machiavellian power play that people only fantasize about, and this makes it your second tic mark!">

Cricket stops below the stage, at the stairs leading up to the podium, and wonders, <"What would Vasily say about all this?">

With her now climbing the stairs, Bob answers, <"Well, Vasily says that you, being outwardly maternal, lead people to believe you're malleable. He says your warmth gives them the false impression that you work from a position of weakness when you, to repeat what he says verbatim, are actually a claymore mine filled with glass shard flechettes wrapped in a baby's blue blankie.">

Cricket starts to openly laugh as she reaches the top of the podium, <"As only Vasily can put it!">

Bob laughs, <"Always remember, front towards the enemy!">

Cricket looks out over the GA below and mutters to herself, "And mine eye hath seen his desire upon mine enemies."

Bob notes, <"Hartcourt's favorite quote.">

Cricket smiles as she steps up to the lectern, <"Okay, Bob, get the fuck outta my hair and let me get to work.">

Bob closes out with a happy *ciao* as Cricket opens the mic, "How was lunch, everybody?"

With the GA giving her a robust round of applause, Cricket nods big with, "Only the best for you all!"

As the noise dies down, she continues, "We pretty much talked out all the pros and cons on the residency resolution this morning, so I want to thank ya for allowing us to move the vote up to thirteen-thirty hours. That's gonna be in a half an hour so, right now, I want to get a few housekeeping items out of the way."

Lavon Green has been approaching the podium and hands Cricket the final list but, instead of walking away he takes a step back to her four-o'clock, comes to attention and snaps into parade rest position. Everyone who knows Green knows he's a friendly sort of guy but at this very moment something is amiss. His cheerfully pleasant aura has suddenly vanished—and the piercing eyes and smile turned upside down now synchs up with his otherwise brutal exterior.

Cricket looks at the list, nods with approval and puts it on the lectern while speaking up, "I will be brief. First off, I want to thank everyone for their generous contributions to the Wilkinson Family fund. His wife wanted me to tell you it is very much appreciated." To the applause from the GA, Cricket goes, "Next up, our little league baseball team has a brand new logo and name and a new coach! They are now the Blue Foxes, which is as good as anything else on this planet since we have no indigenous fauna! I want to thank my PA, Lavon Green, here, for agreeing to take the reigns as their new coach. The team did well this year, taking third place on the Taurus Circuit is not half bad, so I would like to give Mr. Green a hand for stepping up!"

Because of the applause, Green gives a snappy wave.

Cricket glances down to the sheet and adds, "One last little annoyance, and I want to apologize for bringing this to the floor now." She looks up and, "We were contacted by the Registry Office over some silly little issues on the registrations for the new-replacement reps from member states now occupied by the Cooperative. We did

consider sweeping these pesky little technicalities under the carpet but, once we reminded ourselves that we have a responsibility to hold all or none to standard, the remedy became self-evident. This will affect all one-hundred and thirty-two of these new members who have recently taken their oath of office and, again, I want to apologize for the short notice today because the indictments given to us, to serve on you, will make a mess of your Christmas and holiday plans. We have a laundry list of charges for each and every one, but what applies to all is the submission of falsified documents, under oath, and perjury..."

The GA stirs, all the new members looking at each other with confusion and panic on their faces, but they are suddenly calmed by the soothing thoughts radiating from Eight, Copper, Cap and Peanuts.

Cricket continues with, "Aaaand, since each and every one of you is considered a flight risk, instead of a catch and release, which would be normal protocol, Colonel Sanders of the PADF will have his people come take you into custody now, and transfer you to Second Hand for arraignment. Please note that bail will not be issued."

There is more shock and panic in the GA that is, yet again, quashed by the clones while Cricket finishes with, "So, when I call your name, please remain seated and Colonel Sander's people will come to you, serve the warrants, and escort you to your transport! After we wrap this up we'll take the vote on the resolution on the amendment to cut the residency requirement at thirteen-thirty..."

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In the lobby of the Spike, through the windows at the entrance, we have the clones, Jessica and Josav watching the PADF's HWG-99 coach, taxi past the construction site of the new GA.

Josav asks, "Why don't they take off from here?"

Jessica points out, "If anybody takes off from here they'll be identified as SA—and may be shot at once they leave the system."

"They're PADF, not the Annex."

"Doesn't matter. Them's the ROEs."

"That's pretty damned stupid if you ask me."

Jessica and the clones all nod in agreement as Jessica says, "You got that right."

With people pouring out of the GA behind them, Cricket and the Xhemal representative, Paris, step up between Jessica and Eight.

Josav asks, "How did the vote go?"

Cricket just shakes her head in disbelief, "Four-hundred and ninety-nine no votes. Not...one...abstention."

Jessica looks at her, "Oh, my God, great job!"

"Goosebumps." Says Cricket, glancing at her arms, then to Jessica she says, "I really didn't see that coming...but?"

Jessica quietly nods, "The alter did. I couldn't say anything."

Cricket leans in, "What else are you not telling me?"

Jessica breaths in deep and, "Nice weather we're having."

Cricket nods then turns to Paris and, "Hey, gorgeous, want a glass or two of Shiraz to go with that tray of brisket?"

Paris smiles, "You bet! I want to thank you for setting one aside for me. I'm still a little bit hungry."

"I figured that. Now that this vote is out of the way I got somethin' I want to run by ya."

Paris' plumage ruffles slightly as she asks, "Sure, but I was wondering, how much time are they gonna get on sentencing?"

Jessica volunteers, "They'll get ten whole years. The courts here do not kid around with perjury. Eventually we'll cut it in half but, considering Tower Nine, it'll be more of a vacation for them."

Cricket laughs, "But without turn down service."

Paris says, "After the war I hear they're going to open it as a hotel and, without a doubt, it's the prettiest building on the delta yet."

"I haven't seen the inside of Nine but I can only imagine." Cricket then looks to Jessica and the clones, "Thank you for your help, ladies. Today was a huge success thanks to you."

Eight smiles at her, "For a repeat performance, I have to say that today you were in the groove. At the United Nations you were fun to watch but this time, running through that roll call the way you did, here you had me laughing my ass off."

Cap adds, "We all were."

Cricket thinks about it, "I don't know where that came from but, yea, this time it was fun." Turning to Paris she asks, "Ready to go up?" And with Paris nodding yes, she says to Jessica and the clones, "Thanks again, everybody!"

Jessica bumps her hip against Josav's and asks, "Would you mind taking the tray up for Paris?"

With them walking away, Jessica turns to the four clones and demands, "Okay, which one of you was it?"

With Eight and Copper looking down at Peanuts, she rolls her eyes and laughs, "Ya narcs!" She then thumbs back at Cap and says, "But the bad hair day comment to the rep from Yhi was her doin'."

Jessica huffs, "Yea, and that was the best line!"

Copper points out, "The way it was going the reps in the GA would be *en garde* around Cricket, but now they are all scared shitless of her. Going forward is this not what you wanted?"

Peanuts adds, "No abstentions! Snarky made the difference."

"Admittedly, yes, this is a better outcome." Jessica deflates, "Okay, thanks a lot, you guys. Ya'll can get the fuck outta here except for you!" Jessica is now pointing at Eight, "You're comin' with me."

Eight blinks, confused, "I am?"

"I know you ain't got a thing to do over the next couple of days so I'm taking you with us!"

"I thought you and Josav were going somewhere with your brother, Pete, and his fiancé?"

"We are, and so are you! Go pack a bag."

"Where, may I ask?"

"Ever hear of the Country Club Plaza?"

"No?"

Jessica smiles big, "Neither have I, so we'll both be surprised! Go pack yur shit."

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