

I'm left wondering - how is Travis Corcoran still a free man?

-- The Daily Kos

The Powers of the Earth

Chapter 16

2064: Benue River Restaurant, Aristillus, Lunar Nearside

Mike looked looked at the menu on the wallscreens over the stainless steel counter. He had no idea what to order. "Bao, you picked Nigerian - what's good?"

"I like the goat meat burrito with a side of dodo. Dodo - that's fried plantains."

"Burrito? Is this a Nigerian place or Mexican?"

"Chiwetel likes Tex Mex, so there are a few funky things on the menu. Trust me, though, you'll like it."

They reached the front of the line. A young smiling black face looked up at them from behind the register. The girl couldn't be more than thirteen, Mike guessed.

Mike ordered first. "Hey there - I'll have the goat burrito and - what was it? 'Dodo'?"

The girl nodded, then lilted his order back to him. "One goat burrito and one dodo, coming up. You probably want some obe soup with that too, I bet. Ground tomatoes, chicken, onions - spicy, and really good. It's my dad's specialty!"

Mike, amused, looked at her more closely. Above the clean uniform top (with a nametag that announced her as 'Ewoma'), there was a well scrubbed face, a wide smile, and hair that seemed intent on escaping - at least a little - the constraining bun.

"Nice pitch, kid, but I'm not in the mood for soup. Tell you what, though - I'll let you upsell me something to drink."

Ewoma nodded and recited cheerfully, "We've got ten kinds of beer on tap, eight local and two imports, and another twelve kinds of bottles. The menu's up there." She pointed to a wallscreen with a flourish. "All of them are ice cold. Just the thing to wash down a spicy burrito!"

Mike shook his head. "Have iced tea?"

Ewoma, now off script, dropped into a more natural, but still cheerful, tone. "We've got iced strawberry zobo - it's tea, with fruit juice and sugar. I like it."

"OK, great, give me a large zobo." Mike paused and looked at Ewoma more closely. "How old are you?"

Ewoma looked at Bao and got a quick nod. "I'm twelve."

"You're great at your job, but shouldn't you be in school now? It's not even 2pm."

She looked at Bao and again apparently saw whatever it was she was looking for. "I was in school in Nigeria during the Troubles, and then the school and half the town got burned down when the PKs came, so my mom and dad home-schooled me - and they still are."

Mike nodded in acknowledgement. Lots of people in Aristillus had similar stories. "You know, Meade Prep isn't that expensive; even if your folks -"

Ewoma lost her deference and crossed her arms. "My folks said I'd go to Saint Patrick's if I went anywhere, but even that's a waste of time. I can learn all the academic stuff online in the morning and then I can get to work before the lunch rush starts. And here I get to talk to customers, and order inventory - I even helped my dad fix the walk-in when it broke. I don't want to go to school."

Mike mimed rocking back on his heels and held up one hand, as if to ward off an attack, but he was grinning. "Well, holy crap - OK, you win." Mike reached for his wallet but stopped halfway there. "Make sure you come talk to me if you're ever interested in working for a bigger business."

Ewoma uncrossed her arms and smiled back. "I like working with my mom and

dad...and besides, profits here are up 12% since last quarter, and the revenue per square meter is 10% above average for this neighborhood, so why would I want to leave? But even if I do decide to leave some day I'd rather work for myself than any boss."

Mike blinked. "OK. I can respect that." He paused and thought for a moment. "...but take my card anyway." Mike tapped a button on his phone to send her the information.

Ewoma looked down at her phone and her eyes widened. "You're Mike Martin?"

Mike nodded. "Yeah."

"THE Mike Martin?"

Mike grimaced. "One and only."

"Oh, wow! I can't wait to tell my dad." Ewoma looked down at the register. "Let me clear this - lunch is on the house."

"I appreciate the offer, but I can't accept -"

"No, really, my mom and dad -"

Mike held up a finger. "I do appreciate it. Look, if you really want to give away food, give it to someone else in line. But I'm paying. I insist."

Ewoma narrowed her eyes and stared at him hard, then finally tilted her head in acknowledgement. "Let me shake your hand, though."

Mike looked around and saw that people were staring. Jesus. He sighed, and then leaned over the counter and quickly shook hands before paying and collecting his food from the far end of the counter.

Bao and Mike settled down at a table, surrounded by a sea of dark faces. Bao smiled. "So what do you think of Ewoma?"

"I hope she never decides to go into the tunnel boring business - I've got enough competition."

Bao laughed. Mike took a bite of his burrito. "You were right about this place - not bad at all." He swallowed and then looked at Bao. "But let me get down to it. Two topics. The first - I've told you about that bullshit with Leroy and the tunnels, right?"

Bao nodded.

"Kevin at Mason Dixon said he'd talked to Aaronson's registry, but the negotiations are going nowhere. Aaronson and Leroy are dicks, and Kevin's a nice guy, so he's getting his ass handed to him. I think we might need a show of force to get Leroy and Aaronson to back down."

"A show of force?" Bao said.

"Yeah, I thought -"

"And more importantly, 'we'? 'We' who?"

"Trusted Security. Your -"

"Mike, Trusted Security is basically mall cops. LITERALLY mall cops on some of our contracts. Our work for you - guarding your equipment storage warehouses and breaking up an occasional bar brawl between your roughnecks - is about as deep in the shit as we get. We're not an army."

"Your guys ARE armed."

"Yeah, OK, technically, but in six years, my guys have NEVER shot anyone. Mike, my guys get promoted based on customer feedback, and they lose their weekly bonuses if they draw their weapons. What do you think that does for corporate culture? Think about the kind of people we hire - and who we fire." He turned up his palms. "If you think I've got a company of light infantry in my back pocket, you couldn't be more wrong. The biggest action we ever had was a Mexican standoff with a Chinese shake-down gang at an herbal medicine shop - and I had four guys quit because of that."

"A Mexican standoff with a Chinese shake-down gang? That should be the punchline to a joke."

"Listen to me. You want us to do a show of force against Aaronson's Cartesian

Registry Service? Aaronson is backed by Fournier, and Fournier uses Abacha for security. Abacha. You know their reputation. So we're going to start playing tough guy, and go up against Abacha? Screw that. No way I want to borrow that trouble."

Mike scowled. "If you won't intimidate Fournier and Aaronson, then who will? I've talked to most of the other security firms -"

"Not my problem."

Mike sat back in his chair, frustrated. "OK, look - I know it's not your current business model, but you could open a new division. With the way the tunnels are expanding, and the rate at which refugees are arriving here from Earth, you know that your firm is going to be twice the size by next year."

"I hope so - but that doesn't change the fact that there's no market demand for an infantry company."

Mike pressed his lips together and then played his final trump card. "The Earth governments are going to be up here in a few years - you know that they're not going to let us go without a fight. So we're going to need infantry to fight them off -"

Bao shook his head. "With the economic collapse they're in, they're not going to come up here - they're too busy fighting over the scraps. If you ask me, Aristillus is a service to them: we're an escape valve for the disaffected. They WANT us here, to drain away the partisans from Texas, Alaska, Nigeria -." He paused. "Besides, they don't have the AG drive."

"So you're refusing to staff up a heavy weapons group?"

"Mike, if you want a private army at your beck and call, you're going to have to build it yourself."

Mike stared at him for a long moment. "Maybe I will."

* * *

Mike and Bao bussed their plates and then stepped out of the restaurant and into

the tunnel. Out on the sidewalk Mike looked up at the tidy buildings. "I was in HKL recently."

"HKL? They used to call that Old Office Park, right?"

"Yeah, that's the one." Mike pursed his lips. "Place is a mess now - disorganized and sloppy."

Bao looked around at the tidy storefronts and the clean apartments and shrugged. "Remember what this place looked like four, five years ago? It took some time, but Little Nigeria is nice now - people have been setting up restaurants, learning enough English to fit in, accumulating capital. The Chinese influx only picked up steam with Chairman Peng's Second Heavenly Campaign - that's six months. Give them time. They'll fit in soon enough."

"No, that wasn't a culture rant - I was talking about the infrastructure. Messy plumbing. They've got extension cords stretched over the road bed. They've got catwalks made out of old scaffolding, for God's sake, and - "

As he mentioned the catwalks, his eyes drifted: up the tunnel wall, above the storefronts, past the second story apartments, at the point where the wall curved back overhead.

Bao said something and Mike nodded absent-mindedly.

The maintenance catwalks up there that gave access to the overhead lights and other infrastructure were the old style - extruded steel decking imported from Earth.

"Mike?"

The new type he was using in the lower tunnels was better - locally produced, for one thing, which made the turnaround time quicker than importing them. Better than the local sourcing was that AriAlu Extrusion catwalks had a nice design tweak to the installation keys. A small tweak, but it cut his labor cost, which meant -

"Mike!"

"Huh? Oh! Sorry." He'd done it again - drifted off into a reverie about

infrastructure. Like most other children, he'd been been infatuated with big earth-moving equipment - bulldozers, dump trucks, back hoes. Unlike most kids, he'd never grown out of it. One of the few things more fun than thinking about big iron, he'd learned, was operating it. And the only thing better than that was standing behind the scenes, running the show. And to do that - to make a dozen backhoes dance at your command - you needed to line up a strip mall project, find financing, find prospective tenants. Take that, fast forward twenty years, add one political prosecution, one distant friend-of-a-friend physicist, and a few dozen tunnel boring machines -

Suddenly he realized he was doing it again. Back to the present. "Yeah, Bao, you were saying?"

"Over lunch you said that you wanted to talk about two things. You told me about the problem with Leroy. What's the second thing?"

Mike told him about the college kid who'd killed himself mountain climbing, and how Morlock had insured Trang for liability.

"Ouch. That sucks, but what makes it a huge problem?"

"The fact that the dead kid's best friend has pull in DC."

"A KID has pull?"

"His mom's a senator. Linda Haig."

"The one with the speeches about getting serious about the 'tax cheaters' who leave the country?"

"The same," Mike said sourly. "She's in the internationalist faction."

Bao shrugged. "They don't have as much pull as -"

"That used to be true. After the California quake and the rollout of her New Economic Recovery Plan, though? She's been stealing influence from the populists."

"So she's got pull?" Bao said. "Are you worried that this could escalate?"

Mike nodded. "Exactly. That's why I need your advice on how to -"

Bao's phone squealed and Bao held up one finger. "Hang on, I'm getting an emergency call." He looked at the screen.

"Mike... it says here all Gamma's sats have gone dead."

Chapter 17

2064: Moscow Sea, Lunar Farside

Blue sat on his cushion near one wall of the tent and tapped at his slate, trying to figure out what the problem with the satellites was. He'd made a mental bet with himself: Rex had been screwing around, "improving" some part of the protocol stack, and had fubared things. He shook his head. He still remembered the time they'd lost all of their video logs after Rex had installed some optimized database query engine. Although he had to admit that once they'd nailed down the problem, Rex was also been the one who'd fixed it. Blue paged down, checking the commit logs. Still nothing. Maybe the antenna effector controllers? He opened new files.

A meter away from Blue, Rex was sprawled on his back on an aerogel cushion, holding his slate over his head with one paw and poking it with the other. The younger Dog suddenly rolled over. "John, check this out." Blue raised one eyebrow and watched as John put down his slate and walked over.

"Have you found the software problem?"

"No. I'm checking something different." Rex flicked the window off the edge of his slate. It popped up on the wall screen. He narrated as he tapped the controls. "I'm calling up a map of satellite overflights. Now I'm opening the protocol setup. OK, look at com laser settings."

John furrowed his eyebrows. "OK, I'm looking at azimuth and declination settings, and -"

"We know exactly when Gamma's satellites are popping over the horizon...and that shows that we're pointing the laser straight at them."

John nodded and raised a finger as he caught up. A minute passed before he spoke. "OK, yeah, the laser is pointed correctly. We assumed that. So -"

"Now look at the TCP packet logs." He opened another window. "We're sending, but the satellites aren't responding when we ping them. See?" Rex extended one paw to point at a window on the wall screen. A small animated logo of a shark swam back and forth relentlessly on the drag bar, but below that a few lines of inscrutable numbers and text had been highlighted. "There: right IP, right MAC address, right port. Timeouts are correct. Everything's good - except the satellite isn't responding. It's not a software problem. At least, not at our end."

Blue leaned forward. He often found Rex insufferable, but the Dog was in his element now, and worth paying attention to. All of the Dogs were decent coders, but Rex could jump into any system and master it effortlessly. Blue had no idea if this was the first time that Rex had dug into the tent's communication logs, or if he spent his late nights reading obscure code stacks when everyone else was playing games or listening to music.

Neither would have surprised him.

John tilted his head back for a moment, as if he could look through the tent ceiling and the solar shield at the satellites swinging by 90 km overhead, and then turned back to Rex. "We're talking to the satellites - so why aren't they responding?"

Rex shrugged wordlessly.

John thought for a moment, and then raised his voice, including Max, Duncan, and Blue in the conversation. "I need some ideas here."

Blue closed the commit log window on his slate and looked around the tent. Max had his head tilted and his red eyebrows furrowed as he thought about the question. Rex was typing again, and Duncan...Duncan was absorbed in some RPG he was playing on his slate. The sound effects of swords slashing against shields were clear. Blue felt his upper lip rising in a sneer, then shouted at him. "Duncan!"

Duncan swiped a paw across his pad to silence it, then looked up. "What?"

Blue closed his eyes for just a moment.

John repeated his question. Duncan shrugged. "Uh...what's the big deal? Rex was complaining just the other day that Gamma's not giving us good data, so who cares if we don't talk to Gamma for a while?"

John was patient - more patient than Blue would be. "Duncan, all of our communications, including our requests for supply drops, are scheduled via this uplink. Without it we have no way to talk to Aristillus."

Duncan looked at him quizzically, apparently still half lost in his game.

John closed his eyes for a moment. "We've got eleven days of air left, Duncan, and we don't know if we're going to get any more. After that runs out we die."

Duncan's eyebrows went up. "Oh. Oh. Oh...man!"

"Yeah," John said drily.

Rex had been ignoring the conversation as he typed but turned back to it now. "Eleven days of air... we can't hike anywhere useful with that, can we?"

Blue's ears perked up. "Goldwater had an exploratory mine about 700 km away that they abandoned a few years ago."

John shook his head. "I thought of that. We're lucky if we cover 30 km per day. We'd never get there in time."

Rex nodded. "Besides, we don't even know if we there are any air scrubbers there, or if we could break in to get them."

Duncan, his attention belatedly engaged, said, "We could talk to Aristillus by radio instead of laser -"

Blue shook his head. "No ionosphere, no propagation."

Duncan looked crestfallen for a moment, and then rallied. "Wait. It's possible that someone else is out on the surface on Farside with us. If there IS someone around, we might only have to hike to the nearest hill and broadcast."

"Good brainstorming," John said, "but there's rarely anyone out here...and besides, the tallest local point is back the way we came. We'd waste three days

getting there, and then when we find that there's no one around, we'd spend another three days getting back here."

Blue finished his sentence. "- and that uses up 6 of our 11 days of air, to no effect."

The tent fell silent for several long moments.

Blue thought, and then spoke again. "This is classic game theory. There was something in World War II: the allies having to decide which bombers to give escorts to -"

Where Duncan spent his time on RPGs and Rex spent his reading source code, Max used all of his free time reading books, almost all of it military history. He interrupted: "No, it was about which path to send destroyers between islands."

"A paper by Oskar Morgenstern?" Blue asked.

Max shook his head. "No, maybe von Neumann -"

Max was another first generation Dog, and Blue's pack mate for just over twenty years. The two fell into their normal clipped debating mode.

"You remember the paper?"

"The gist of it. Can't decide for sure, but play the odds -"

"We split up?"

"No; figure the odds and stochastically -"

"If it were iterated, maybe, but if it's just once -"

The back and forth sped up until the two were half-grunting, half-barking at each other, then both fell silent.

John looked around blankly. "Uh... and?"

Blue turned to him. "We keep hiking. The supply drops might already be there. Or maybe we have a good uplink and it's just a downlink problem. No matter what, hiking on is the most predictable move on our part, and we have to depend

on Aristillus predicting our predictions of their predictions, and so on." He paused. "So we act predictably."

John scratched his three-day growth of beard thoughtfully, then nodded. "I'd been thinking the same thing - but with more intuition and less math." He looked around. "Everyone agreed?" They were. "OK, we hike on."

Duncan scratched his flank with one rear leg. "I wish there was some way to look at the satellites."

John shook his head. "They're ninety kilometers up. If we had a telescope -"

Rex interrupted him. "We do."

John swiveled his head. "No we don't. I know what's packed on the mule, and -"

Rex didn't bother hiding the look of scorn for John's merely above-average intelligence. Blue knew that look and didn't like it. Rex should have more respect.

Rex said, "We make one. We spread out several suit cameras on the ground, write some code to do a long exposure, then write some more code to process it as if it's a very large-aperture lens."

John looked almost sucker-punched. "So what you're saying is -"

"Give me an hour and I'll get you high-resolution pictures of the satellites."

Duncan looked up, having finally heard some aspect of the crisis that sounded like as much fun as his video game. "My game is running in offline mode anyway, so there's no time pressure."

Blue looked at him. "And the relevance is?"

"I volunteer to spread out the cameras!"

Blue nodded. "I'll help you."

Someone needed to supervise him.

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Blue sat in the lunar dust and used his gloved forepaws to wiggle the camera, seating it in the loose gravel. He stepped back and verified that it was pointing close to vertical. One down, and one to go.

How far to the next placement? He looked left, at the small blue dome of the tent and the golden tarp over it. The mule was hunched down ten meters away, its solar panels spread wide. If the two of them were aligned north/south, that meant that the next camera placement point was... there. He turned and walked across the featureless gray landscape.

Halfway to the next drop point Blue gave in to temptation and issued the suit command to eavesdrop on Max and Duncan.

Max was saying "- thing your generation doesn't get about the humans is how violent and vicious they are. Your particular problem is that you really don't understand violence. You spend all of your time in video games, and when you kill an NPC it just vanishes, and if you kill another player he just respawns. You need to read more history. Humans are bloody-minded. Just look at the number of wars they've fought - it's insane. Even outside their formal wars, they pick out the weak and they go after them. They're vicious." He paused. "Animals."

"Yeah, sure, but the violence has been going down for centuries. Blue was talking about it the other night, that guy - Pinkman?"

"Pinker."

Blue's ears pricked. He'd had no idea that he'd made any impact on Duncan.

Duncan continued. "Anyway, it's not like it was hundreds of years ago. Now humans settle things by laws and courts, and you know, nonviolent resolutions are better than -"

Max interrupted him. "There's no such thing as a nonviolent resolution. There's explicit violence and there's veiled violence. Humans using courts isn't less violent. If anything, it's just evidence that they've learned how to use violence efficiently."

"Huh?"

Blue reached his second location, put the camera down, and adjusted its angle while he kept listening.

Max said, "The humans learned that they can make an example of one person and the rest fall in line. If in one century people kill ten percent of the population, but in the next century the government jails - enslaves - ten percent of the population to keep the rest in line, are you telling me that's any better?"

Duncan paused for a moment then said, "Well...isn't it always better if there's less violence?"

"But there's NOT less violence. At least the first system is honest. You know where you stand. The government is trying to kill you. But the second system? It's full of lies. When a government says you're going to get a fair trial - well, look at Mike Martin. At least he was smart enough to see that it was a trap and bribed his way out...but most of those stupid bastards they rounded up believed the promises. Look at them now."

"So what's your point?"

"My point is that you need to realize that the humans are violent - deeply, systematically violent. Their 'peaceful' system is rigged. That's the truth, no matter what Blue says."

Blue felt his canines clack together in anger.

"And what does realizing that accomplish?"

Max growled. "It lets you know that when governments come to kill you, you should fight back and kill some of the apes first. Better to die on your feet than -"

"Max, you're sounding crazy. People can't 'fight back' against their governments. They-"

"I'm not talking about just people."

"So, what? We Dogs should fight? What if we'd done that in the labs? Instead of escaping to the moon, we'd all be dead."

Max grunted. "At least some of them would be dead too."

The two lapsed into silence.

Blue realized that his shoulders were hunched and his ears flat. He willed himself to relax, but the knot was still there. Max scared him sometimes. It wasn't that he was angry - it was that he was consumed by it. Yes, the anger was warranted - but what use was it? At least the Dogs had managed to escape BuSuR and make it to the moon. Why dwell on the past?

Blue's suit beeped. He'd reached his third and final point in the camera grid. He sat and placed his last camera the same way as the other two as he continued to listen.

It seemed Duncan agreed with Blue. "What's the point of getting all upset and angry about something you can't change?"

Max said, "You have to understand your enemy. And humans are the enemies of Dog kind."

"Says who?"

"Do you pay any attention to how humans treat regular dogs in China? Or Africa? And what about our litter-mates and cousins who were killed in Palo Alto and Cambridge?"

Duncan whined a bit and Max reprimanded him. "Don't whine. You've got to face facts. You'd rather sit around and play games than think about the truth. The truth is that humans - and human governments - signed a death warrant for every one of us. Genocide."

"Sure, not everyone made it out -"

"Cut the euphemisms. What does 'made it out' mean? Most of us were killed. Killed. By individual humans, working for the human governments. Don't forget that." Max paused. "OK, that's the last of my cameras. Are your - Duncan, where the hell are you?"

"Huh? I'm right here!"

Blue looked around. Where WAS Duncan anyway? He'd lost sight of him. There he was - back near his first camera location. Blue yelled out. "Duncan! What are

you doing back there? Have you placed your cameras?"

"Oh - oh, crap! Sorry, no, just the first one. I got distracted by this cool chunk of basalt with this neat streaking on it - "

Blue growled. "Damn it, Duncan! Do I have to do it for you?"

"No, no, I'll do it!"

Blue shook his head, then lifted one leg over a rock and urinated. The waste went into the suit collection bag and would be recycled later by the tent. The spraying-water sound effect Rex had added was a nice touch. He could acknowledge that now, but the first time he'd peed after Rex's upgrade he'd panicked, thinking his suit had a leak. He shook his head. He had to admit the truth: his entire species was a band of misfits - Max always ranting about genocide and fighting back, Duncan playing RPGs when he should be paying attention, and Rex was hacking anything and everything from cameras to - well - piss bags.

He was interrupted by a beep and an error message in the shared-virtual-overlay in his helmet screen.

```
0x13 runtime: geotag.xr unable to mark piss location
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Blue blinked, then shook his head. Of course. They'd lost contact with the satellites. And Rex had added another another feature to the urine collection code module.

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Blue was climbing out of his suit - he was the last one there except Duncan, who was still cycling in - when Rex yipped excitedly. "I've got images!"

Blue looked at John and the other Dogs clustered around the wall screen.

Rex continued. "I don't have all the libraries I'd like - I had to depend on what was cached in my suit, and I didn't know ahead of time that we'd need good post-processing -"

John nodded. "We get it. Show us."

Rex clicked and typed and images appeared on the wallscreen. They were grainy and parts of the satellites were in shadow.. but there was no missing the key detail.

Each of the satellites was blackened and scarred, solar panels and antennae burned off.

Rex was the first to speak. "It's not a software problem in the birds. That's physical damage. The Earth governments burned the satellites."

Blue nodded. "And we're really cut off from Aristillus."

Duncan whimpered a bit. "Will the cargo dropoff with the air scrubbers still happen?"

Max raised his chin. "Who knows? For that matter, who knows if Aristillus still even exists? For all we know, they nuked it too."

Duncan began panting anxiously. No one spoke.

John broke the long silence. "Well, guys, we're living in interesting times."

Chapter 18

2064: White House, Washington DC, Earth

President Johnson leaned back in her chair and listened to General Bonner's presentation. Parts of it didn't make sense - it seemed that he was saying something about satellites around the MOON, which clearly wasn't right - but she decided to let the mistake go.

Bonner pointed at the wallscreen, causing it to advance to the next slide. "In answer to the question, no, the BuSuR cap on laser power density doesn't apply to DoD. And even if it did, this program is classified Plato-three, so all reporting requirements except sexual harassment and environmental impact statements are waived. Next question?"

Catherine raised one finger. "Do we have confirmation that the lasers hit the lunar satellites?" Bonner nodded. "We do."

He gestured at the wallscreen and a video started playing: a grainy image of a satellite, gull-winged with solar panels and sprouting dishes and comm lasers, snapped into focus. A moment later the sat grew stunningly bright. Smaller pieces flared before disappearing. Larger sections buckled and blackened. The brightness dimmed. Bonner raised his chin. "We've got video of all fourteen of their satellites burning. Next?"

After a pause Senator Linda Haig spoke. "General, nicely done." She turned her head. "Madam President, I think you've really sent a message to the expats. Thank you."

President Johnson smiled. Linda was gracious - she gave people credit when it was deserved, and Johnson liked that. That was a lesson that a lot of people in Washington could learn.

The American people were great: in the studio audience, out on the street, in the airport, on the campaign trail - they rushed to introduce themselves to her, and their love and their energy were infectious.

This city was a different story. People here thought she was a joke because she hadn't gone to the right fancy boarding school, because she didn't have an Ivy League degree, because she'd made her name in entertainment instead of in internships, think tanks, and NGOs. They were all so smugly superior. Sure, they respected the office, but they didn't respect HER. The difference was subtle, but it was there. They even thought that because she didn't have their education she wouldn't notice their veiled contempt. What they didn't understand that her skill - her true skill - wasn't entertainment. It was understanding people. And she understood these uptight blue-blood assholes as well as she understood the American public.

She knew what they thought of her: not only wasn't she from the right schools and families, but she hadn't even been the right kind of entertainer. Not a movie star, not a musician, not a even a credentialed journalist on an A-list webchannel. Just a talk show host watched by divorced women and unemployed men.

She knew their thoughts, and she knew the result: their envy coupled with their contempt made them bitter and vindictive. And that, in turn, lead them to try to sabotage everything she did. She hated this city.

Linda Haig, though? Despite being in the opposing sub-party, the senator was

OK. Better than OK, really, given her stuck up WASPy nature, her pedigree, her family money. She wasn't a true fan, but she was respectful. The working relationship the two of them were building was further proof that her detractors just didn't understand her, didn't know how to work with her.

She looked at Linda Haig. The Senator understood her. No snide looks, no condescension. The Senator realized that all she had to do was give a little respect, a little deference and she could have a friend.

And Themba was more than capable of keeping track of who was her friend and who wasn't. She looked around the Situation Room. Most of these people weren't her friends. Bonner, for example. He at least took the effort to pretend. And if the respect was skin deep? He could get a job done, so she tolerated him - and even let him think that he had her approval.

Bonner called up the final frame of his presentation. "And that's where we are - one hundred percent degradation of enemy assets." Bonner turned and looked at her. As did the rest of the room.

All eyes were on her.

Perfect.

She scanned them, basking in the attention, and then inclined her head a touch toward Bonner and spoke. "General, thank you. I'm sure we'll all rest easier now that those expat satellites orbiting over our heads have been shot down."

* * *

Bonner smiled at the president's compliment and didn't allow even the smallest trace of the contempt he felt touch his face. Hadn't he explained to her just four minutes ago that they were com-sats and not spy-sats, that they were orbiting the Moon and not the Earth, and that they'd been burned and not shot down? But he kept his mouth shut. The president was an idiot, but she was a powerful idiot. His career had stalled at brigadier years ago, but then President Johnson - fresh from her talk show springboard into the Senate - had been elected. He'd read her autobiography, like everyone else in Washington, but he did more - he watched videos of her old show and read rumor rags from Hollywood. And he'd learned. He'd learned that Themba didn't want to be contradicted. He'd learned his lessons

well, and he'd found his career reinvigorated. Speak when the time was right and shut up when it wasn't. Themba loved an audience, and if you could make her look good in front of one, she was your best friend.

General Restivo, two seats to his left, spoke up. "With all due respect for the job that the Air Force did -"

"Aerospace Force," Bonner corrected him.

"Right, sorry - with all due respect, Madam President, I have to ask - how did this push us closer to our goals?"

The president turned to Restivo, her smile colder and carrying a note of warning. "What?"

Restivo cleared his throat. "What are we trying to accomplish with this?"

Bonner stifled the urge to shake his head. Jesus. Asking the president an embarrassing question like that? If Restivo was one of his HIS direct reports, he'd take the two-star behind the woodshed and thrash him.

The President's smile disappeared. "I think I've already made that clear. The expats have been stealing from our economy for a decade now - looting our factories, our workers. They haven't been paying their taxes! The country is in trouble, and we need that money."

"Yes, but -"

"I'm not done, general! These people need to pay their taxes. And that's not a new law, either - Simons tells me that expats have had to pay income taxes for over a century. These people think they can take advantage of the schools and roads and everything that our society provides, then just leave without paying their fair share? THAT, general, is the point of all of this."

* * *

General Restivo knew he wasn't good at politics, but even he could tell that this wasn't the time to offer his opinion on the value of the government schools, or say that expats trading hard gold for factory equipment idled by the Long

Depression wasn't a real problem.

No. He'd limit himself to his core point.

"I entirely agree, ma'am. These folks are unquestionably acting contrary to national policy." He checked her expression. Had that worked? Yes, the president looked mollified. At least a bit. He hoped.

"My question is whether there's an articulable goal for our actions, and if so, how our use of force advances that goal?"

If the president's attitude had been softened by his first two sentences, the effect didn't last long. After the final sentence she looked like she'd just bitten into a lemon.

"I don't have time for this." She turned to Bonner. "General, explain this to the Colonel."

Colonel, eh? The President could see the two stars on his uniform as clearly as she could see the four on Bonner's. Scuttlebutt around the Pentagon and the National Coordination Center said that she'd been doing her trick of intentionally misstating ranks since she'd been a senator.

Restivo pretended not to notice. He'd already put his foot in it; no need to quibble over a minor insult.

Bonner started the inevitable lecture: "General Restivo, the President has spoken with me at great length, and in great clarity. Her 'clearly articulable goal', as you put it, is that the expats need to be punished, with an eye toward keeping our options open for further policy developments."

Restivo noted that the president liked Bonner's "great clarity" line; her smile was back. He nodded - he'd really hoped that his question could have an impact on this idiocy, but it hadn't worked, and he was smart enough to know when he was beaten. Yes, it'd be satisfying to explain that things like "deterrence" or "disrupting war fighting capability" were actual goals and "punishment" was both vague and unmeasurable. It'd also be satisfying to tell Bonner that his phrase "keeping our options open for further policy developments" was FDA grade-A bullshit.

Satisfaction, though, wasn't something you could take to the bank. Satisfaction didn't come with a pension plan.

No, he'd tried to push the policy debate in a useful direction with a pointed question, and he'd failed. Now came his penance for failure: eating crow. A big nasty bowl of it. He nodded to Bonner. "Thank you, General - I understand now." He tipped his head toward Themba. "Madam President, I apologize for my confusion earlier."

The president's face drifted back toward neutral. Well. Better than nothing.

"A follow-up question, ma'am: I've briefed you on our building EVA infantry capabilities, so that we can carry the fight to the moon if we need to. Our staffing and training is going well, but I haven't heard anything more about our capabilities of getting troops deployed to that theater of operations."

"General, that's well in hand. OK, people, I think that concludes this meeting. General Bonner, please stay - I've got a few more questions."

General Restivo got to his feet, took his slate and left the room.

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