

François waited to shake the American's hand. He stood¹ patiently² on the veranda³ of the palais as the car approached. He watched⁴ as the car⁵ rounded the wide circular driveway, the sound of hundreds of clicking cameras⁶ drowning out the sound of gravel beneath its tires. Some cameras followed the car, but most stayed on François⁷.

¹ He stood straight and relaxed, his arms at his sides, a pleasant but certainly not eager expression on his face^a.

² His level of patience^b did not matter. His *appearance* of patience mattered^c. There had been over two hundred press passes granted, most of them for photographers as no questions would be taken.

³ The veranda was at the rear of the palais, its less formal entrance. The more famous front entrance was reserved for Presidents, Prime Ministers, kings and queens (though no aristocracy lower than monarchs), and certain, but not all, Ambassadors. The veranda stood roughly 1.5 meters, or just over five feet, above ground level. When photographed, visitors' heads were precisely at the level of François's feet.

⁴ Calm face, very calm^d. But optimistic^e.

⁵ François's staff had arranged for an enormous, slightly out-of-date Cadillac to bring the American from the airport to the palais, but somehow the American was arriving in the latest model Mercedes S-Class four-door, not even stretched; a very elegant jet black with tinted windows^f.

⁶ Not all cameras clicked and snapped. The press corps was about fifty percent video cameramen (and a few camerawomen, with a larger percentage of still photographers women). There were also a number of reporters (of both sexes) from fading newspapers which had fired their staff photographers and given their reporters smart phones with which to take their own photos. These images would inevitably be inferior. Smart phones clicked as well, but not from actual shutters opening and closing—they were just a feature to let both photographer and subject know the picture had been taken.

⁷ Certainly the domestic press^g. The foreign press^h was more likely to follow the American's car. His very elegant car.

^a Of course, the immediate problem was whether or not the girl had had her phone with her.

^b The boy, too.

^c Well, of course they'd had their phones. They were teenagers. But had their phones been *on*? That was the question. Some kind of, of...*app*, some recording device, either audio or God forbid video. He'd been scouring his memory every day but couldn't recall any beeps, any tones, any buzzes.

^d Well, no buzzes from a phone, that is*. But any phone that might have been there could have been set on 'silent'.

^e Surely he would have heard *something* by now, yes? Before today. A demand of some kind—money, or, more likely, suggestions for today's meeting. Behaviors; concessions.

^f But so far, nothing. Which was both calming and unsettling, waiting for the proverbial other shoe to drop, as the Americans say. It was the uncertainty that kept him up nights.

^g The hotel maid who had opened the door without knocking was made a State employee. She was now obliged to him, personally, although that could not be traced. Her income had dramatically increased from her chambermaid wages. It was pointed out to her that without proof, even *trying* to sell her story to the tabloids would be slander, and she would be sued back into the poverty from which she had just arisen. But she seemed more than happy with the arrangement. She had even joked about how the boy had asked her to join in.

^h It was the kids who were not so reliable. Especially considering...

*François suppressed a smile. There could be no genuine smiles during the car's approach.

The car drove past the spot where François was standing⁸, to the end of the wide stone stairs, to his left⁹. The American stepped out of the back seat of the car, not waiting for his driver to open his door. He waved at the cameras¹⁰. He then turned his back to them and climbed the steps toward François¹¹.

François smiled as the American climbed¹², and continued to smile as he approached¹³ him on the veranda. The American smiled back as he walked¹⁴.

⁸ The intended footage would be of François watching the car pass by at his feet, looking down upon it with patience and benevolence¹.

⁹ Out of view of the master shot of François and the massive palais wall, the American would exit the car and enter the frame from the lower corner.

¹⁰ No—at the cameramen. And women. A man of the people. Big magnanimous grin on his face. He was happy to see them, always happy to meet new people—and somehow grateful to *them*, not to François.

¹¹ There were ten very short steps to be climbed, which usually forced the visitor to make tiny, almost hobbled steps to get to the top, very unnatural. But the American took the steps at an oblique angle, starting off at the side and heading directly for François—almost. He put one hand in his pocket, and looked down at the steps, as though lost in thought. He stroked his chin, just once with his free hand, amplifying the effect. Very professorial, very thoughtful-looking. He took his time climbing, making François stand there pleasantly and expectantly, longer than looked authoritative for François. The American was now forcing François to wait on him, and François had to maintain the pleasant expression while he did so.

¹² God damn it.

¹³ The American kept one hand in his pocket as he crossed the remainder of the veranda, smiling and waving to the press like he was a guest on a talk show, approaching the host's desk for an amusing interview. He removed the pocketed hand just before it would have appeared disrespectful or slovenly. For the briefest of moments, during this transition, there was a flash of unconfident, almost uneducated, *overcompensation*. Had anyone else seen it? Did the cameras capture it? A forced strut, a stiff swagger; too practiced. Trying too hard to project toughness, arms stiff, shoulders forcibly squared.

¹⁴ François's smile had to be genuine, and he relaxed his forced posture^j. He could not appear to be too eager or fawning: welcoming, not glad to be welcomed. François turned to face the American and look him directly in the eye. It was important not to turn his entire body toward him too soon, but to stay facing the crowd. He turned his head roughly three-quarters toward the American, twisted his torso less than half way, and kept his feet planted. The American, maintaining this smile, met his gaze. The American was no longer worried about facing the crowd, after his wave. He clearly intended to first meet François face to face, and only then turn to the cameras for the post-handshake photos.

¹ What had he been thinking, that day? *Both* of them? Yet in more ways than not, they had less to gain by going public than the maid would have. Which was his worry.

^j Considering that this nation not only tolerated infidelity more than most but almost encouraged it, they could be a fickle and even hypocritical lot. But it was not so much that they were teenagers, and female *and* male, not to mention the selection of toys** that they should not have possessed let alone had any knowledge about at their age—no, it was the attempt at keeping it *secret* that could potentially ruin everything. Making a State employee of the maid. The meetings by his aides with the kids themselves.

** Two whips, one flogger, three riding crops of various lengths. Four wrist cuffs, four ankle cuffs. Three dildos, two vibrators of various lengths and diameters; lube. Two studded leather collars. Some kind of electric stimulation device. Anal plugs. Nipple clamps, too many to count.

François extended his right arm toward the American to shake his hand¹⁵. But the American walked past François¹⁶, in front of him¹⁷, patted him on the shoulder¹⁸ as he did so, and stood to François's right¹⁹. He turned to face the cameras, and raised his hand to shake François's²⁰. They shook hands, smiling, posing for the cameras²¹.

¹⁵ This moment was the crux, the crucible, the *croisée* of François's entire day, entire year^k: to stand at the American's right, arm extended across his own body in handshake, palm down. This would force the American to shake hands with his right arm down at the shoulder but with his elbow bent upward, and, most importantly, palm up—literally, “getting the upper hand”. This is where the term comes from. The recipient of the upper hand, in this case the American, cannot help but look slightly awkward, diminished: manageable^l. The next step is to reach behind the recipient and pat them on the back with the left hand, gently, not forcefully. A forceful pat looks bullying, a gentle one looks fatherly.

¹⁶ Looking François in the eye, no less! Same self-satisfied smile^m. *Quel désastre*.

¹⁷ By maintaining eye contact, in *front* of François, between François and the cameras, the American forced François to either break eye contact and look away, thus looking inherently weak, or to maintain eye contact, and watch him as he passed by, directly usurping François's authority. It did not help at *all* that the American was slightly taller than François, forcing him to look up at him as wellⁿ, eyes visible just over the American's shoulders as he passed.

¹⁸ God damn fucking bastard.

¹⁹ François now had no choice but to stay in place^o. What else could he do? Circle around the American, the taller American, to restore his place on the right? Would you have him walk behind, or in front of, the American?

²⁰ All François could do was face the crowd, accept the hand, the upper hand, and smile^p. Smile as if he were happy to see the American, they were old friends, don't you know. How could he not enjoy shaking hands with his old friend?

²¹ Yep.

^k The even more severe problem was the stockholders, the whole overlapping, incestuous, international tangle of them. They would be far less forgiving than either the press or the voters.

^l SolarCo had such a brilliant, simple plan. To build thousands of hectares of solar panels in the Former Colonies, out in the cloudless desert, and they would send the resulting electricity north. Initially by power lines; eventually, it was hoped, by laser beam via satellites. Such a beautiful plan—jobs both here and for the former colonials, bribes for the local fat cats, leases for landowners, and cheap energy for Europe, freedom from the manipulative threats of withheld natural gas from Russia's Gazprom. What was not to like?

^m And what kind of Texas oil man would the American be if he did not oppose cheap energy as well? The American was not only on the board of more than one multinational oil concern, but his family had long been good friends with several Gulf States royal families, families who had more than once been greeted at the *front* entrance of the palais.

ⁿ An added complication was that the Former Colonies were heavily supported by the largesse of various Gulf States. The solar farm would not only be in competition with their own energy, but it would help free them from this Gulf State dependency and influence. We like to look after the interests of our Former Colonies, yes?

^o There were those within the Former Colonies who saw this plan as a form of re-colonization.

^p But there was yet *another* complication: Genequest, America's*** largest genetic research company, which had recently gone public with an amazingly successful IPO based on certain patents for techniques of genomic manipulation, was now wanting to set up a large research facility in one of the other Former Colonies, farther to the south.

***Now based in Aruba.

When the chattering of camera shutters had quieted, François gestured²² toward the doors²³ of the palais behind them, huge, high, ancient wooden doors²⁴. The American stepped toward the doors²⁵, but turned to smile and wave at the cameras one last time²⁶.

²² Again, starting over, in a very paternal, compassionate^q, welcoming way.

²³ Shepherding, guiding^r.

²⁴ Given to the King of François's country, centuries, ago, by Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia.

²⁵ François was making an *offering* of the doors^s, of shelter^t and friendship^u, privacy from the press of Press, and a congenial^v atmosphere to mutually roll up their sleeves^w and foster cooperation on their joint project^x.

²⁶ The American had to show, one more time of course, that he was a man of the people, a friend of the press^y. A real *mensch*, as they say in certain Blue States that the American does not much care for, so it is said.

^q Genequest boasted that with the new facilities, they would be able to develop new types of cures for the most virulent diseases that periodically strike Africa—Ebola, Marburg, AIDS, SARS. But their approach would be through genetically altering the *human* genome, not those of the deadly viruses themselves. They would engineer immunity.

^r François feared this approach on the advice of many leading scientists, and opposed its development in the Former Colonies. There were already rampant conspiracy rumors raging through that Former Colony and most of West Africa that the epidemics were actually caused or brought in by the western powers, even François's own country. A huge compound—and it was going to be huge—that ran medical experiments on the locals, even if they did pay their test subjects well, relative to their existing incomes, sounded so...Mengelean. It reeked of eugenics, Tuskegee. It would undoubtedly lead to local violent protests, perhaps even here at home.

^s To top it all off, the American was on the board of Genequest, as well. Would he have to give up all these seats if elected to higher office? Of course. But he certainly would not give up his stock in those companies. And even if he did, there are ways to hide it—hidden accounts and front companies in the Caribbean, the Maldives, or even here in François's own country.

^t François did not own stock in Genequest; he was required by law to divest himself of all corporate stock. And yet.

^u So: the American was here ostensibly to promote trade, which was indeed true. These were trade talks between actual elected officials, not lower-level functionaries. He was here to promote his American-led initiative to bolster economic development in Africa, particularly in the Former Colonies. It was a wonderful, almost humanitarian project, bringing income to poor countries that had relied purely on the extraction of minerals and natural resources.

^v And of course, one of those projects, one claiming a seemingly inordinate amount of concern for the American, was the Genequest installation.

^w There were already rumors, in that Former Colony, of mutated babies, babies with two heads, four arms, no skin on their tiny bodies. And they hadn't even *built* it yet.

^x It was a simple exchange, that François knew the American was coming for: promote, through his government's and personal influences, the allowance of the Genequest facility in the southern Former Colony, and the American would "advise" the corporate boards of oil companies on which he served to "allow" the solar farms to be built in the northern Former Colonies.

^y François stifled a shiver at the consequences of that day in the hotel suite. There could be no worse time to be seen shivering. Then he stifled a deep breath at the memory—her fit yet supple body; her perfect, youthful breasts. Her proficiency with the whip—she was well practiced. How could a girl so young have been so skilled? That poor boyfriend of hers—he was a wreck, by the end of it. Yet his erection had admirably never faltered, his obedience to the girl's stern will every bit as strong as hers had been to François's.

The American followed François to the doors rather than walk beside him²⁷. A younger man in a black suit and sunglasses²⁸, who had been waiting by the doors, opened the left door for the two men²⁹. François turned to face the American, to welcome him in, but the American had already opened the other door, to the right³⁰.

²⁷ François was surprised that the American did not visit with him, with their backs to the cameras, as they walked to the doors. Always an important image: two old friends^z, catching up on family^{aa} and mutual friends^{bb}; health. Looks of concern, but joviality between them.

²⁸ François's nephew Roland.

²⁹ This was the second-most important act of today's theatre: François was to stand to the left of the American, stage right to the audience, as his guest—very important term, guest—entered the doors of the palais. The assistant, Roland^{cc}, was to be nearly invisible, although he was doing the actual work of hold the massive door^{dd} open. François would be in front of Roland, gesturing into the palais with his left hand for the American to enter. As the American passed by him, accepting his offer and entering into the shelter of the palais, both dwelling^{ee} and symbol of government, of decisions, François would place his right hand on the American's back, in companionship, *ushering* him into the building; *shepherding* him.

³⁰ God *damn* him.

^z By “allowing” the solar farms to be built, the American meant that he would use his position in the American government as well as his friendships with the Gulf States royal families, to end both financial and material support for certain underground, freedom-loving, anti-government groups in the Former Colonies, groups who would likely see the solar farms as a re-colonization. Terrorists. He was making an offer that François couldn't refuse, to refer to certain American “gangster” movies. Union troubles, a horse's head in the bed. Mortar shells in the solar panels.

^{aa} It was in Monaco, during a particularly joyous after-party following a film screening at the Cannes Festival, that François had met the girl and her boyfriend. Americans, they were, and very, very open-minded. Nothing happened that night, no—well nothing worth noting. But phone numbers were exchanged.

^{bb} And at that same party, in Monaco, an international arms dealer François knew from past dealings warned him that certain Gulf interests had hinted that he should perhaps be prepared to make certain deliveries to certain Former Colonies but to wait for confirmation. Why had he confessed this to François? Because he was a lush, a drug addict, a degenerate, a man in decline—no morals regarding his personal conduct whatsoever. Oh, and have you met young Emily and Bradley?

^{cc} Roland. *Mon Dieu*. Where to start. The little bastard's**** depravity knew no bounds. Had it not been for the leather bondage hood he was wearing in every one of those pictures from last year's New Year's Eve party in New York, the whole family would be doomed already. Thank God he had no identifying tattoos. However, it was Roland who had provided interesting news.

^{dd} Oh, yes, the Russians. No one had more to lose than Gazprom, the Russian national gas company, nor the entire Russian ruling oligarchy and the Russian government itself. The loss of European demand caused by the solar farms would cost them billions. *Hundreds* of billions. They too hinted at “insurrection” within the Former Colonies, which was a blatant threat as there were certainly no pro-Russian groups there, no Marxist rebels as in the old days. They combined these threats with bribes, both in his government and in the Former Colony; even François himself. And they mentioned not only to François but to the rulers of all the neighboring nations, all of Europe, in fact, that the next few winters before the solar farm's completion might be very, very cold indeed.

^{ee} In the Heideggerian sense.

**** Literally.

The American gestured for François to enter first as he held the door³¹. As François stepped in³², the American patted François on the back³³, nodded thanks to the assistant who held the opposite door³⁴, and disappeared into the darkness of the palais's interior³⁵. The heavy doors shut behind them³⁶.

³¹ Worse yet: François hesitated, just for the briefest of moments but probably noticeable nonetheless, as he considered holding his ground and making an insistent “no, *you*” gesture to the American. But that would possibly lead to a ridiculous, childish^{ff} contest^{gg}, complete with slide whistle sound-effects as the footage continued, both men exaggerating their arm-waving as their expressions grew more and more clown-like. The American could afford to ham it up until he would make a grand, embellished bow for the cameras^{hh}, and slink into the palais like a chastised boy, shoulders slumped, once François refused one more time. Which would make François, not the American, look the idiot, the humorless schoolmarm. The problem was, all of this occurred to François *as* he stood facing the American across the two open doors.

³² He really had no choiceⁱⁱ.

³³ In comradeship and camaraderie. In fatherly guidance^{jj}.

³⁴ In egalitarian respect, courtesy, and international friendliness.

³⁵ Fade to black.

³⁶ Lower the curtain.

^{ff} François had once found himself waking up in a large houseboat on the Caspian Sea, at the invitation of friends of Roland. There was luscious food and drink; he knew the hosts from the international party circuit, and felt quite safe. His bodyguards were there. The evening's entertainment, he was told, would be a recreation of the Battle of Balaclava from the Crimean War, reenacted by naked young girls and boys. *Very* young. François was horrified, although, he had to admit, the production values were remarkable, the nubile young bodies beautiful.

^{gg} If it *was* an elaborate bribe, that is—they must surely have been joking, despite the sincere offers after the show. Had they heard about the girl and boy in the hotel? Had they questioned the maid? François was *no* pedophile. That was simply not his kink. It was the sense of *order* that had thrilled François—everything, or everyone, rather, in their place. The hierarchy; their desire to fulfill such a hierarchy. Their craving for it.

^{hh} François had worried mostly about the event being caught on video, with him in it. He'd kept thinking he saw cameras hidden in the flowers; tiny, shiny black spots in the wall that could have been lenses. It was clearly a way to let him know his decisions would be carefully watched.

ⁱⁱ So now he was in the most unlikely situation of meeting with an American Christian conservative from the heartland, running for higher office on family values, strong defense, and energy independence. And this American was allied in his cause, here at the palais, with, of all people and nations, the Russians and the Arabs—“Ay-rabs”, as his constituents would say, the most reviled two groups that those constituents could name, short of homosexuals****, of course. (They were unforgivable.) And he was here to prevent a project that would eliminate nearly all greenhouse gas production from all of European energy, weaken those Ay-rabs and Rooskies—and he was here to promote and ensure, of all things unholy, the genetic manipulation of the human genome, to experimental effect, to play God with the DNA of innocent people.

^{jj} It was a shame that these affairs couldn't be settled by men, as men, over cigars and a nice port, anymore. Dancing girls to start the meeting; long dining tables. Huge, gilt-framed 19th-Century paintings of nude nymphs and satyrs on the walls above their heads. Hierarchies observed.

****It was Roland who, at the New Queers' Eve party at the extremely exclusive apartment on the Upper West Side, had recognized the American's famous flag tattoo across his chest—the naked American in what could safely be called a compromising position (with another, much younger man), wearing nothing but his own black leather bondage hood. He had taken pictures. ♦

- ◆ It was also Roland, that damned pervert, who in Monaco had recognized his former lover Bradley, who in turn introduced Roland to his new girlfriend Emily, the American's teenage daughter.