

31 Time to Fly

The day had come and gone and now Whitte was seated at the same table as the night before, sharing dinner with Salvador Cordero and a tall, wiry Brit who had been introduced to him as Kumquat—*Sir Kumquat*, the man had corrected. Gone was any trace of Britannia Morgan, the other Brit he had spent time with on Genesis Cay, and while he was glad—he had felt immediate guilt when they had made love two days before and had continued to politely fight off her advances—he was concerned for her safety considering the way Cordero had treated her the night before. When he enquired about her, Cordero said she was indisposed. Whitte didn't push it.

He passed the day with further exploration of the island. After his morning with Inara Fabre, he had eaten breakfast and hiked to the other side of the island, exploring and memorizing the various paths and to where they led. He ended up on the beach of the small inlet that faced the only visible land from Genesis Cay, an unknown jungle-encased spit of land. He had brought his swim trunks on this trip and swam about fifty yards offshore, testing the currents and was once again intercepted by the speedboat with the same two Wunderkinds who had warned him off before. He swam back and fallen asleep on the sand until being woken by a horn blare from the boat offshore. It was late afternoon so he returned to his cabana and dressed in the same black suit he had been given for dinner attire.

Now he sat and ate with little comment as Cordero monopolized the conversation.

From time-to-time he glanced over at the disengaged Englishman who seemed to be sulking as he picked at his food, content with a liquid dinner of bourbon.

It was small talk, generally, with Cordero telling stories of different adventures he encountered while sailing around in the behemoth *La Araña* and the various conquests of women. He related a story about a girl he had made love to and when he woke the next morning found she had a tattoo on the lower part of her back.

“It’s called a tramp stamp,” interjected Whitte.

Cordero burst out in a boisterous cackle. “Tramp stamp? That nails it. Perfectly played, Jack.” He took a small bite of an apple tart with ice cream. “I do not understand this infatuation with tattoos. Disgusting. I have refused to hire anyone that has one visible.”

Whitte nodded in agreement. “I don’t really care if someone has one but if they come into contact with my customers, they can’t have it visible. But my management tells me it is becoming harder to find kids coming out of college without one. I guess I’m going to have to start covering tattoo removal as part of my insurance plan.”

Cordero sat up. “I would fire anyone who had one working for me.”

The waiter came by and Whitte politely declined the offered after-dinner brandy and lit a cigarette. Kumquat sputtered out what sounded like a poodle with a sneeze and Whitte refrained from blowing smoke into his face. “I want a professional atmosphere extended to who I do business with but I certainly don’t want to interfere with my employees lives.”

“You’re not hands on?”

“No. I surround myself with good people. If I’ve made my decisions properly then I don’t have to worry about what they do. I do, however, keep a pulse on my employees. I

want them to know they're working for the best and if they have any problems, I take care of it.”

“How benevolent of you,” Kumquat whined. “What about your computer technologies company? Do you keep a pulse on them?”

Whitte narrowed his eyes. “No, not really. I don't understand half the projects we have going so I leave it in the hands of a very capable man. I call him my Robert Oppenheimer.”

“After the man who oversaw the Manhattan Project during the Second World War?” Cordero asked.

Whitte nodded.

“You know they say hydrogen will be the next fuel source,” Kumquat blurted.

Whitte's eyes narrowed even more as he studied the inebriated Brit and then shot a glance back to Cordero.

Then Kumquat sighed, “And how about the financial side of your operations?”

Whitte remained quiet.

Cordero shot a dagger toward Kumquat and then tried to blunt his loose tongue. “I am a financial man,” Cordero said turning back to Whitte. “When I still operated my investment bank, I watched every peseta, back before the euro. I'm sorry, but I just don't have the trust you do in human nature.” He leaned forward, and in a conspiratorial manner, said “But then, you were in academia first, correct?”

Whitte crossed his leg and worked the crease in his trousers with his free hand. He glanced back to Cordero. They obviously had been playing him from the beginning and that

meant they probably knew every minute detail of his life, possibly even more than he did. Maybe the only way to keep this charade going—possibly extending his life, though he tried not to be so melodramatic in his mind—was to draw them into a philosophical discussion. He might learn more from them than they certainly would from him.

“You’re background is finance,” Whitte began. “I got my undergrad in geology, at my father’s request but I really wanted to be a navel aviator. I had an accident that kept me from the military.”

Kumquat nudged him. “Oh, I’d love to hear about your accident.”

Whitte rolled his eyes and continued. “Dad wanted me to come work for him so I went back for an MBA but hated every minute of it. Too constraining. But I did like being in the academic setting so, I told Dad to go to hell and I got a Ph.D. in economics.”

“Oh, a doctor,” giggled Kumquat.

Whitte fought back the urge to bitch-slap the son of a bitch.

Cordero sighed. “Ignore him.” He took a sip of brandy. “I brought it up because I come from the belief that to be good, you must have a very narrow technical understanding of what you are doing in order to excel.”

“I don’t agree. Economics goes beyond just business. It gave me what my MBA didn’t. I believe a liberal arts education is key for an individual to see the big picture.”

“Do you see the big picture?” Kumquat asked, then giggled as he slurped the remainder of his drink.

“I’m beginning to,” Whitte said. Kumquat was a cruel drunk, Whitte could tell, and he wondered how long Cordero would allow him to remain. He wasn’t sure if they knew

that Inara spoke to him earlier, whether it had been a plot played by them or a true warning played by her.

They had eaten early and now the dinning room was filling up with more of the so-called conference attendees. He didn't like these people, most of them very well-known and so he decided to make a point of his disgust and see if Cordero would take the cue, so he crumpled his napkin and began to toss it on the table as he pushed back against his chair but Cordero interjected. "It *is* getting a bit too noisy in here, why don't we retire to the library?"

Whitte glanced toward him. Would this lead to the invitation? He had been waiting for the second shoe to drop during their dinner. He shrugged his shoulders. "Why not."

Kumquat's real name was Jonathon Brighton and Jack Whitte knew the name as soon as Cordero told him. Whitte sat in the corner of the library dug out of the mountainside, surrounded by books and the stuffy, musty smell that came with a formal library. Gone was the stage; replaced by another seating arrangement. Cordero and Sir Jonathon Brighton flanked him. All three were nursing Scotch.

Brighton was tall and soft—a softness born of the effeminate elitist class of Britain—but handsome. His lanky legs rode higher than the leather wingback chair's seat and he seemed awkward and—even in this curtly English club atmosphere—stubbornly out of place. His blond hair was cut much the same as Whitte's had been before his transformation—one length, just below his lobes and combed back and tucked behind the

ears—but was beginning to show the signs of age with streaking gray. He was a contemporary of Cordero’s—about ten years older than Whitte—but the similarities ended there. Where Cordero had a rich darkness to his skin, radiating a manufactured youthful exuberance, Brighton was pale. Cordero’s eyes were hawk-like: dark, focused, always searching for the next meal. Brighton’s were passive blue, floating irrelevantly behind a slender, rectangular pair of black-rimmed glasses.

“You know, Whitte, life is so violent,” Sir Jonathon Brighton began, drawing out the *vio* as if he were pronouncing *violin*. “You are born in such a dreadful way, causing your mother ungodly pain, and no doubt, you too feel pain going through the womb and into the canal like that, being pushed into an area that is truly too small for you to just pass through. You’re all covered in blood and white shit. Quite horrible indeed.” He took a long draw from his glass. “And then, just to live? We really got fucked over on that! My God, to live you must kill. You have to actually kill a bloody animal to feed yourself. How horrible! We have to learn to kill to live,” he said with a hushed reverence toward whatever devil he might be conjuring up with his twaddle. “That is the cruelest aspect of our entire existence.” He took another long swig of the Scotch and kindly licked the edge of the glass before it began to drip.

Whitte adjusted uncomfortably in his chair and glanced at Cordero who held his cigar in one hand and his drink in the other, seemingly amused by Brighton’s antics.

“Vegans!” he shouted out with a start, loud enough to turn heads of those few in the library. “Bollocks! You still have to eat what is live in order to live yourself. A fucking strand of wheat is alive before you pick it from the ground. You cannot exist on your own;

you are not a perpetual motion machine, after all,” motioning toward Whitte. “Fucking shits. If I’m going to hell, the vegans will precede me.”

Whitte again looked toward Cordero who was still smiling. He returned Whitte’s gaze and Whitte almost interrupted but instead he returned his bemused eyes to the madman. Brighton’s eyes were glassy; he seemed to lose steam and began the trip back into la-la land.

“But man. Yes, man!” He suddenly sat up; reminding those few who continued to listen to his drunken ramblings that he was, indeed, still among those of the living. “We are truly evil for we found a way to cheat what He had planned for us. Now, we have someone else kill for us. We go to a fine restaurant, and yes, some,” he continued with a wave of his limp hand in the direction of some imagined gentry hanging on each of his words, “go to the market, and buy the meat in order to live. It’s blood money. Those poor people go to work, and they are paid and then they pay a murderer for their food. How do they sleep at night? That, my friend,” he slurred to no one in particular, “is what is so terribly wrong with mankind.”

“Original sin be damned!” He pounded his fist to the side table and mouthed out the word *ouch* and then gave an exaggerated grimace as he shook off the pain through the numbness. “We were given everything we could possibly want and some stupid, silly man took something that bloody well wasn’t his to have. A fucking apple! It is that silly man that disobeyed God and so He threw the bastard out of the garden. *And take your fucking whore with you!*” he shouted, mimicking the voice of God; pointing into an ethereal world only of his imagination, “*and go kill for yourself you impertinent little shit,*” He smiled at

that. “You see, that was payment for our sin—kill or be killed—and we cheated. We became civilized and now our most holy of men are not our priests or our popes but rather the bloody butcher.” Then he became giddy. “Bloody butcher? A double entendre if I ever heard one,” He laughed. He turned to Whitte and smiled, “Now that is quite *witty*,” he pronounced, mocking the pronunciation of Jack’s last name, “if I say so myself.” He then suddenly turned to Whitte. “And I’m dying for you to meet my wife!”

Cordero motioned for the waiter. “Please escort Sir Johnny to his suite, will you? Make sure he is all tucked in.”

“Where’s Ian?” Brighton asked of Cordero. Cordero shrugged and Brighton allowed himself to be lead away without acknowledging Whitte as he left.

“He’s got a lot of guilt,” Whitte said. “What’s his crime?”

“Being born, I suppose,” Cordero responded as he relit his cigar. “He’s an arrogant prick in reality.”

Sir Jonathon Brighton *was* an arrogant prick that used his purchased title to move among the elite of the Group. He benefited from his father, an intelligence operative during World War II, who worked behind German lines, operating a resistance group out of Belgium.

Brighton’s father’s service to God and Country bought him favorable status among some of the elite in Parliament, Cordero explained to Whitte. Brighton the elder used his newfound status as an introduction to the world of banking and when he was given seed money, he had grown into a multinational conglomerate by the 1980’s when he began to withdraw, hoping his son would continue in his place. Sir Johnny, he was mockingly

called, had never taken to business so it was hoped he would take to politics but again, no. In fact he never took to anything but fucking and playing.

“He was married off to a daughter of an Egyptian banker—ten years younger than he—in hopes that it would ground him more in reality,” Cordero said, intently watching Whitte with his preying eyes.

As Cordero spun the tale, Whitte immediately drew the connection. When he first arrived in Nassau, he met with Ali Al-Fa’sad, the Egyptian banker Cordero was referencing, who queried him whether he knew of a man named Brighton. Al-Fa’sad went further by telling Whitte that Dick Spencer had worked with Brighton in Belgium during the Second World War. That must have been how Spencer became involved with this so-called Group and, the link that pulled Robert Whitte into the same mess. And he also realized that Sir Johnny, as Cordero called him, was married to Al-Fa’sad’s daughter. But why would he want him to meet his wife?

“You mean it was arranged?” Whitte asked.

“Yes, it’s very common among their culture, you know.”

“Feudalistic.”

Cordero chuckled. “In many ways our group is very much like an agreement between kingdoms.”

With the conglomerate sold, Sir Johnny was given much of the proceeds that he then used for various useless foundations that mimicked the Prince of Wales, which in turn landed him a knighthood, bestowed by the Queen, and his own one-way ticket into the Group.

“It’s white guilt,” Whitte interjected.

“Pardon?”

Whitte laughed. “It’s what plagues my country: Our national original sin. White men built our country on the backs of the down trodden, on the backs of slaves, and women, and other minorities and so we must now pay our indulgences.”

“And you think you’re exempt from that?”

Whitte sipped at his Scotch. “The past is just that. You’re given what you’re born with and you have to make the rest.”

“Rather barbaric outlook, wouldn’t you agree?” Cordero said with a smirk.

“No, not at all. Despite the welfare with which we try to addict the less fortunate, all people still have the ability to build their lives as they see fit. We all still have choices.”

“I find this conversation becoming a microcosm of the world. Maybe we should be talking about Western civilization guilt.”

“Ah, you’re one of those.”

Cordero smiled. “What would you say to the fact that about twelve percent of the population controls sixty percent of the consumption.”

“I would say that the other eighty-eight percent should have the same opportunities that the twelve percent has.”

Cordero frowned. “What about the third of the population that live in Africa and the Middle East? They only consume four percent of the resources. Don’t you think that is unfair?”

“No. I don’t.”

“You think it fair that petroleum is scarce and we burn it, spouting carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, making our planet uninhabitable to where we will kill off that population that is not responsible?”

“If the rest of the world adopted free markets that wouldn’t be a problem. There’s plenty of oil. We’re discovering more every day and with technology, we’ll find even more. In the U.S. alone, we now have proved reserves that are greater than what the Saudis have. We just lack the political will to go after it.” Whitte paused. “And I don’t buy for one second that you’re concerned with the have-nots of the world and I know you don’t buy into the global warming nonsense. Resources aren’t scarce, Cordero, only common sense.”

“No, Jack. I do believe that nonsense, as you say. Mankind is at the brink and we have to fulfill our obligations to the planet to save it from abuse. If mankind isn’t shepherd then it will kill itself.”

“I’m starting to believe that you really are buying into your own salvation crap.”

“What about the starving?”

Whitte shook his head. This bastard didn’t give a shit about any starving. Maybe somewhere in the periphery of his conscious was a belief that he cared. But it was just that, a belief with no true substance of sympathy in his pathetic heart.

“Food is renewable, Cordero. There is absolutely no reason for anyone to starve in this world. Where there is starvation you will see a political agenda. Managed mankind gives way to starvation.” Cordero seemed unmoved. “Have you ever heard of spontaneous order?”

Cordero puffed on his cigar, motioning for Whitte to continue.

“Through chaos comes order. It’s hardwired into our very souls. All we want is to survive. The theory of spontaneous order dates back to ancient China but brought current by Proudhon, Hayek, von Mises, and Friedman among many others. Basically that once business transactions take the place of governmental actions, people work to preserve their own self-interests and not in contradiction to others. We create order in the market place so that we can all prosper.”

“Laissez-fair dribble,” scoffed Cordero.

“No, *laissez-nous fair*. Leave us alone. Your Mr. Apple spoke about what God wants. God wants faith and faith is to let go and be free. If one little thing falls out of place then our tendency is to play God and step in to fix it. Unfortunately most of our fixes lend to the need for more fixes. People want success. So long as the playing field is level—and a very minimal government is needed for such—then order will prevail. Why does North America have more trees than when Christopher Columbus discovered the New World? Because we have allowed private ownership; you have to plant more trees to sell more trees.”

“The Tragedy of the Commons,” he whined. “Again, more capitalistic drool.”

Whitte shook his head. This was going nowhere. “You seemed to have done okay with capitalism.”

“Only because of destiny.”

“So, we’re back to feudalism. There’s a reason America has prospered while Europe has dwindled down to irrelevance. We rejected destiny to write our own. It’s freewill.”

Cordero glanced at his Patek Philippe. “I’m afraid that our evening must come to an end.” He stood. “I am having to play New York cabbie tomorrow, ferrying many of our guests to the airport but I’ll be back tomorrow evening. Could I interest you in a late dinner?”

Whitte shrugged his shoulders and Cordero turned to leave and then stopped. “You know Jack, you have impressed me. Much more learned than I first gave you credit.”

“It does me no good to self-promote.”

Cordero smiled, “I look forward to continuing our conversation.”

Whitte returned the smile. *Sorry, Cordero, I’m checking out.*