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# After the Coup

John Scalzi



*illustration by John Harris*

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“How well can you take a punch?” asked Deputy Ambassador Schmidt.

Lieutenant Harry Wilson blinked and set down his drink. “You know, there are number of places a conversation can go after a question like that,” he said. “None of them end well.”

“I don’t mean it like that,” Schmidt said. He drummed the glass of his own drink with his fingers. Harry noted the drumming, which was a favorite nervous tell of Hart Schmidt’s. It made poker games with him fun. “I have a very specific reason to ask you.”

“I would hope so,” Harry said. “Because as conversational ice breakers go, it’s not in the top ten.”

Schmidt looked around the *Clarke’s* officer lounge. “Maybe this isn’t the best place to talk about it,” he said.

Harry glanced around the lounge. It was singularly unappealing; a bunch of magnetized folding chairs and equally magnetized card tables, and single porthole from which the yellowish green limb of Korba-Aty was glowing, dully. The drinks they were having came from the rack of vending machines built into the wall. The only other person in the lounge was Lieutenant Grant, the *Clarke’s* quartermaster; she was looking at her PDA and wearing headphones.

“It’s fine, Hart,” Harry said. “Enough with the melodrama. Spit it out already.”

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“Fine,” Schmidt said, and then drummed on his drink some more. Harry waited. “Look, this mission isn’t going well,” he finally said.

“Really,” Harry said, dryly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Schmidt said.

“Don’t get defensive, Hart,” Harry said. “I’m not blaming you.”

“I just want to know how you came to that conclusion,” Schmidt said.

“You mean, how did I come to that conclusion despite the fact I’m this mission’s mushroom,” Harry said.

Schmidt frowned. “I don’t know what that means,” he said.

“It means that you keep me in the dark and feed me shit,” Harry said.

“Ah,” Schmidt said. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Harry said. “This is a Colonial Union diplomatic mission, and I’m Colonial Defense Forces, and you don’t want me seen by the Korba because you don’t want my presence to be interpreted as provocation. So while the rest of you head down to the planet, and get to breathe real air and see actual sunlight, I stay up here in this latrine of a spaceship, training your technicians to use the field generator and catching up on my reading. Which is going well, incidentally. I just finished *Anna Karenina*.”

“How was it?” Schmidt said.

“Not bad,” Harry said. “The moral is to stay away from trains. The point is, I know *why* I’m kept in the dark. Fine. Fair enough. But I’m not *stupid*, Hart. Even if none of you tell me anything about the mission, I can tell it’s not going well. All of you deputies and assistants come back to the *Clarke* looking like you’ve had the crap beat out of you all day long. It’s a subtle hint.” He picked up his drink and slugged some back.

“Hmm. Anyway, yes,” Schmidt said. “The mission isn’t going well. The Korba haven’t been nearly as receptive to our negotiations as we thought they might be. We want to try something new. A new direction. A new diplomatic tack.”

“A new tack that is somehow focused on me getting punched,” Harry said, setting his drink back down.

“Maybe,” Schmidt said.

“Once or repeatedly?” Harry asked.

“I think that would depend on your definition,” Schmidt said.

“Of ‘once’?” Harry asked.

“Of ‘punched,’ actually,” Schmidt said.

“I already have very deep reservations about this plan,” Harry said.

“Well, let me give you some context,” Schmidt said.

“Please *do*,” Harry said.

Schmidt produced his PDA and began to slide it over to Harry, then stopped mid-way through the motion. “You know that everything I’m about to tell you is classified.”

“Good lord, Hart,” Harry said. “I’m the only person on the *Clarke* who *doesn’t* know what’s going on.” Harry reached over and took the PDA. On its screen was the image of a battle cruiser of some sort, floating near a skyscraper. Or more accurately, what was left of a skyscraper; it had been substantially destroyed, likely by the battle cruiser. In the foreground of the picture, small, vaguely-humanoid blotches seemed to be running from the ruined skyscraper. “Nice picture,” Harry said.

“What do you think you’re seeing there?” Schmidt said.

“A strong case for not letting trainees drive a battle cruiser,” Harry said.

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“It’s an image taking during the recent Korban coup,” Schmidt said. “There was a disagreement between the head of the military and the Korban civilian leadership. That skyscraper is—well, was—the Korban administrative headquarters.”

“So the civilians lost that particular argument,” Harry said.

“Pretty much,” Schmidt said.

“Where do we come in?” Harry asked, handing back the PDA. “Are we trying to restore the civilian government? Because, to be honest about it, that doesn’t really sound like something the CU would care about.”

“We don’t,” Schmidt said, taking back the PDA. “Before the coup, the Korba were barely on our radar at all. They had a non-expansionist policy. They had their few worlds and they’d stood pat on them for centuries. We had no conflict with them, so we didn’t care about them. After the coup, the Korba are very interested in expanding again.”

“This worries us,” Harry said.

“Not if we can point them toward expanding in the direction of some of our enemies,” Schmidt said. “There are some races in this area who are pushing in on us. If they had to worry about someone else, they’d have fewer resources to hit us with.”

“See, that’s the Colonial Union I know,” Harry said. “Always happy to stick a knife in someone else’s face. But none of this has anything to do with me getting *punched* in the face.”

“Actually, it does,” Schmidt said. “We made a tactical error. This mission is a diplomatic one, but the new leaders of Korba are military. They’re curious about our military, and they’re especially curious about our CDF soldiers, whom they’ve never encountered because our races have never fought. We’re civilians; we don’t have any of our military on hand, and very little in terms of military capability to show them. We brought them that field generator you’ve been training our technicians on, but that’s defensive technology. They’re much more interested in our offensive capabilities. And they’re especially

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interested in seeing our soldiers in action. Negotiations up to this point have been going poorly because we're not equipped to give them what they want. But then we let it slip that we have a CDF member on the *Clarke*."

"We let it slip," Harry said.

"Well, *I* let it slip, actually," Schmidt said. "Come on, Harry, don't look at me like that. This mission is failing. Some of us need this mission to succeed. My career's not exactly on fire, you know. If this mission goes into the crapper, I'm going to get reassigned to an archive basement."

"I'd be more sympathetic if saving your career didn't require blunt force trauma for me," Harry said.

Schmidt nodded, and then ducked his head a little, which Harry took as something akin to an apology. "When we told them about you, they got very excited, and we were asked by the Korban's new leader—a direct request from the head of state, Harry—if we would be willing to pit you against one of their soldiers in a contest of skills," Schmidt said. "It was strongly implied it would make a real difference in the tenor of the negotiations."

"So of course you said yes," Harry said.

"Let me remind you of the part where I said the mission was going into the crapper," Schmidt said.

"There is a small flaw in this plan," Harry said. "Besides the part where I get the crap kicked out me, I mean. Hart, I'm CDF, but I'm not a soldier. I'm a *technician*. I've spent the last several years working in the military science division of the Forces. That's why I'm here, for God's sake. I'm training your people to use technology we developed. I'm not training them to fight, I'm training them to twirl knobs."

"You've still got the CDF genetic engineering," Schmidt said, and pointed to Harry's sitting form. "Your body is still in top physical shape, whether you use it or not. Your reflexes are still fast as ever. You're still as strong as ever. Look at you, Harry. There's nothing flabby or squishy about you. You're in as good a shape as any soldier on the line."

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Harry said.

“Doesn’t it?” Schmidt said. “Tell me, Harry. Everyone else on this mission is an unmodified human. Is there any one of us that you couldn’t take in hand to hand combat?”

“Well, no. But you’re all *soft*,” Harry said.

“Thanks for that,” Schmidt said. He took a sip of his drink.

“My point is whether or not I’m engineered for combat, I haven’t been a soldier for a very long time,” Harry said. “Fighting isn’t like riding a bicycle, Hart. You can’t just pick it up without practice. If these guys are so hot to see CDF in action, send a skip drone back to Phoenix and request a squad. They could be here in a couple of days if you make it a priority request.”

“There’s no *time*, Harry,” Schmidt said. “The Korba want a combat exhibition tonight. Actually,—Schmidt checked the chronometer on his PDA—“in about four and a half hours.”

“Oh, come *on*,” Harry said.

“They made the request this morning, Harry,” Schmidt said. “It’s not like I’ve been keeping it from you. We told them about you, they made the request and ten minutes later I was being hustled off to the shuttle back to the *Clarke* to tell you. And here we are.”

“What is this ‘skill contest’ they want me to have?” Harry asked.

“It’s a ritualized combat thing,” Schmidt said. “It’s physical combat, but it’s done as a sport. Like karate or fencing or wrestling. There are three rounds. You get scored on points. There are judges. From what I understand it’s mostly harmless. You’re not going to be in any real danger.”

“Except for being punched,” Harry said.

“You’ll heal,” Schmidt said. “And anyway, you can punch back.”

“I don’t suppose I can pass,” Harry said.

“Sure, you can pass,” Schmidt said. “And then when the mission fails and everyone on the mission is demoted into shit jobs and the Korba ally themselves with our enemies and start looking at human colonies they can pick off, you can bask in the knowledge that at least you came out of this all *unbruised*.”

Harry sighed and drained his drink. “You *owe* me, Hart,” he said. “Not the Colonial Union. You.”

“I can live with that,” Schmidt said.

“Fine,” Harry said. “So the plan is to go down there, fight with one their guys, get beat up a little, and everyone walks away happy.”

“Mostly,” Schmidt said.

“*Mostly*,” Harry said.

“I have two requests for you from Ambassador Abumwe,” Schmidt said. “And she said for me to say to that by ‘request,’ she means that if you don’t do them both she will find a way to make the rest of your natural existence one of unceasing woe and misery.”

“Really,” Harry said.

“She was very precise about her word use,” Schmidt said.

“Lovely,” Harry said. “What are the requests?”

“The first is that you keep the contest close,” Schmidt said. “We need to show the Korba from the start that the reputation the CDF has is not undeserved.”

“Not knowing what the rules of the contest are, how it’s played or whether I’m even physically capable of keeping up with it, sure, why not, I’ll keep it close,” Harry said. “What’s the other request.”

“That you lose,” Schmidt said.

\* \* \*

“The rules are simple,” Schmidt said, translating for the Korban who stood in front of them. Normally Harry would use his BrainPal—the computer in his head—to do a translation, but he didn’t have access to the *Clarke’s* network to access the language. “There are three rounds: One round with Bongka—those are like quarterstaffs, Harry—one round of hand-to-hand combat and one round of water combat. There are no set times for any round; they continue until all three judges have selected a victor, or until one of the combatants is knocked unconscious. The chief judge here wants to make sure you understand this.”

“I understand,” said Harry, staring at the Korban, who came up, roughly, to his waist. The Korba were squat, bilaterally symmetrical, apparently muscular, and covered by what appeared to be an infinite amount of overlapping plates and scales. What little information Harry could uncover about the Korban physiology suggested that they were of some sort of amphibious stock, and that they lived some of their lives in water. This would at least explain the “water combat” round. The gathering hall they were in held no obvious water sources; however. Harry wondered if something might not have been lost in translation.

The Korban began speaking again, and as he spoke and breathed, the plates around his neck and chest moved in a motion that was indefinably strange and unsettling; it was almost like they didn’t quite go back in the same place they started off at. Harry found them unintentionally hypnotic.

“Harry,” Schmidt said.

“Yes?” Harry said.

“You’re all right with the nudity?” Schmidt asked.

“Yes,” Harry said. “Wait. What?”

Schmidt sighed. “Pay attention, Harry,” he said. “The contest is performed in the nude so that it’s purely a test of skill, no tricks. You’re okay with that?”

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Harry glanced around the gymnasium-like room they were in, filling up with Korban spectators, human diplomats and *Clarke* crew members on shore leave. In the crowd of humans he located Ambassador Abumwe, who gave him a look that reinforced her earlier threat of unending misery. “So everyone gets to see my bits,” Harry said.

“Afraid so,” Schmidt said. “All right, then?”

“Do I have a choice?” Harry asked.

“Not really,” Schmidt said.

“Then I guess I’m all right with it,” Harry said. “See if you can get them to crank up the thermostat.”

“I’ll look into it.” Schmidt said something to the Korban, who replied at length. Harry doubted they were actually speaking about the thermostat. The Korban turned and uttered a surprisingly loud blast, his neck and chest plates spiking out as he did so. Harry was suddenly reminded of a horny toad back on Earth.

From across the room another Korban approached, holding a staff just under two meters in length, with the ends coated in what appeared to be red paint. The Korban presented it to Harry, who took it. “Thanks,” he said. The Korban ran off.

The judge started speaking. “He says that they apologize that they are unable to give you a more attractive Bongka,” Schmidt translated, “but that your height meant they had to craft one for you specially, and they did not have time to hand it over to an artisan. He wants you to know, however, that it is fully functional and you should not be at any disadvantage. He says you may strike your opponent at will with the bongka, and on any part of the body, but only with the tips; using the unmarked part of the bongka to strike your opponent will result in lost points. You can block with the unmarked part, however.”

“Got it,” Harry said. “I can hit anywhere? Aren’t they worried about someone losing an eye?”

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Schmidt asked. “He says that if you manage to take an eye, then it counts. Every hit or attack with a tip is fair.” Schmidt was quiet for a moment as the judge spoke at length. “Apparently the Korba can regenerate lost limbs and some organs, eventually. They don’t see losing one as a huge problem.”

“I thought you said there were rules, Hart,” Harry said.

“My mistake,” Schmidt said.

“You and I are going to have a talk after all of this is done,” Harry said.

Schmidt didn’t answer this because the judge had started speaking again. “The judge wants to know if you have a second. If you don’t have one he will be happy to provide you one.”

“Do I have a second?” Harry said.

“I didn’t know you needed one,” Schmidt said.

“Hart, please make an effort to be useful to me,” Harry asked.

“Well, I’m translating,” Schmidt said.

“I only have your word for that,” Harry said. “Tell the judge that you’re my second.”

“What? Harry, I can’t,” Schmidt said. “I’m supposed to be sitting with the Ambassador.”

“And I’m supposed to be in a bunk on the *Clarke* reading the first part of *Brothers Karamazov*,” Harry said. “Clearly this is a disappointing day for both of us. Suck it up, Hart. Tell him.”

Schmidt told him; the judge started speaking at length to Schmidt, chest and neck plates shifting as he did so. Harry glanced back over to the seating area provided the Colonial Union diplomats and *Clarke* crew, who shifted in their rows. The stands were half-sized for humans; they sat with their knees

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bunched into their chests like parents at a pre-school open house. They didn't look in the least bit comfortable.

*Good*, thought Harry.

The judge stopped speaking, turned toward Harry, and did something with his scales that caused a wave-like ripple to go around his head. Harry shuddered involuntarily; the judge seemed to take that as a response. He left.

"We're going to start in just a minute," Schmidt said. "Now might be a good time for you to strip."

Harry set down his bongka and took off his jacket. "I don't suppose *you're* going to strip," he said. "Being my second and all."

"The judge didn't say anything about it in the job description," Schmidt said. He took the jacket from Harry.

"What *is* your job description?" Harry asked.

"I'm supposed to research your opponent and give you tips on how to beat him," Schmidt said.

"What do you know about my opponent?" Harry asked. He was out of his shirt and was slipping off his trousers.

"My guess is that he will be short," Schmidt said.

"How do I beat him?" Harry said. He slipped off his shoes and let his toes test the spongy flooring.

"You're not supposed to beat him," Schmidt said. "You're supposed to tie and then take a fall."

Harry grunted and handed Schmidt his pants, socks and shoes. "Am I correct in assuming that there are several species of legume that would do a better job being my second than you, Hart?"

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“Sorry, Harry,” Schmidt said. “I’m flying by the seat of my pants here.”

“And my pants,” Harry said.

“I guess that’s true,” Schmidt said. He looked at the nude Harry and counted the number of apparel he was holding. “Where’s your underwear?” he asked.

“Today was laundry day,” Harry said.

“You went *commando* to a diplomatic function?” Schmidt asked. The horror in his voice was unmistakable.

“Yes, Hart, I went commando to a diplomatic function,” Harry said, and then motioned to his body. “And now, as you can see, I’m going *Spartan* so a midget can whack me with a stick.” He bent and picked up his Bongka. “Honestly, Hart. Help me out here. Focus a little.”

“All right,” Hart said, and glanced at the pile of clothes he was holding. “Let me just put these somewhere.” He started off toward the human seating area.

As Hart did this, three Korba approached Harry. One was the judge from earlier. Another Korban was carrying his own bongka, proportional to his own height; Harry’s opponent. The third was a step behind Harry’s opponent; Harry guessed it was the other second.

The three Korba stopped directly in front of Harry. The one holding the bongka handed it to his second, looked up at Harry, and then thrust out his hands, palms forward, making a grunting noise as he did so. Harry hadn’t the slightest idea what to do with this. So he handed his bongka to Schmidt, who had just come running up, thrust his own hands forward, and returned the motion. “Jazz hands,” Harry said.

The Korban seemed satisfied, took back his bongka, and headed toward the other side of the gym. The judge spoke, and held up something in his hand. “He says that they’re ready to begin,” Schmidt said. “He will signal the start of the round with his horn, and will use it again at the end of the round. When the round ends, there will be a few minutes while they set up for the next round.

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You can use that time to rest and to confer with your second. Do you understand?”

“Yes, fine,” Harry said. “Let’s get to it, already.” Schmidt responded; the judge walked off. Harry began working with the bongka, testing its balance and warp. It felt like it was made of a hard wood of some sort; he wondered if it would splinter or break.

“Harry,” Schmidt said, and pointed to where the judge stood, horn raised high. “We’re starting.”

Harry held his bongka in both hands, chest high, horizontal to the ground. “Any last pieces of advice?” he asked.

“Aim low,” Schmidt said, and backed off the floor.

“Great,” Harry said. The judge blasted his horn and moved to the side of the gym. Harry stepped forward with his bongka, keeping his eye on his opponent.

His opponent raised his bongka, expanded his chest and neck by an alarming amount, emitted a deafening noise somewhere between a belch and a roar, and launched himself at Harry as fast as his little feet could carry him. The Korba in the stands, ringing the gym save for the small section for the humans, cheered mightily in a similar chest-inflating, burping fashion.

Three seconds later Harry was confronted by the fact that he had absolutely no clue what he was doing. The Korban had set on him with a slashing, dizzying array of bongka maneuvers; Harry blocked about a third of them and avoided the rest by stumbling backward as the Korban pressed his advantage. The Korban was whirling his bongka like a rotor blade. Harry realized that having the longer bongka was not an advantage here; it took longer to swing, block and attack. The little Korban had the upper hand, as it were.

The Korban lunged at Harry and appeared to overextend; Harry swung his bongka overhead to try to tap him on the backside. As he did the Korban twisted inside the arc of Harry’s attack; Harry realized he’d been played just as the Korban viciously whacked both of his ankles. Harry went down; the Korban jumped back just far enough to begin enthusiastically tenderizing

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Harry's midsection as he fell. Harry rolled and blindly thrust his bongka at the Korban; somewhat improbably, it connected, poking the Korban in its snout. The poke fazed the Korban into stopping its attack and taking a step back. Harry poked it back a couple more steps and then stood up, testing his ankles. They complained but held.

"Keep poking him!" Schmidt yelled. Harry glanced over to snap something back, giving the Korban an opening. He took it, whacked Harry hard upside the head, then reapplied himself to Harry's ankles. Harry stumbled but kept upright, wheeling in a drunken fashion toward the center of the gym. The Korban followed, swinging merrily at Harry's already bruised ankle bones. Harry got the distinct feeling he was being toyed with.

*Screw this*, Harry thought, and stopped, planted his bongka firmly into the gym mat and hurled himself up the staff. A second later he was doing a handstand at the top of it, balanced by dint of his finely calibrated if disused motor control, courtesy of the Colonial Defense Forces genetic engineering.

The Korban, clearly not expecting this tactic, stopped and openly gawked.

"That's right," Harry said. "Come whack on my ankles *now*, you little prick."

Harry continued to feel smug about his plan right until the moment the Korban crouched and launched itself into the air with a push of its powerful legs. The Korban didn't make it as high as Harry's ankles. He did, however, get right on level with Harry's face.

*Oh, crap*, Harry thought, before the blinding crack of a bongka smashed across the bridge of his nose and robbed him of any further capacity for reaction, commentary or thought. All those things came back to him with blinding pain as Harry's spinal column compressed into the gym mat as he fell. After that there were a few moments of curiously distant sensation as the Korban's bongka dug into various parts of his body, followed by an even more distant blast of a horn. The first round was over. The Korba strutted off to the sound of belching applause; Harry propped himself up on his bongka and staggered over to Schmidt, who had found him a water bottle.

"Are you okay?" Schmidt said.

“Are you dumb?” Harry said. He took the water bottle and squirted some of the water on his face.

“I’m kind of wondering what the thinking was on that handstand,” Schmidt said.

“The thinking was that if I didn’t do something my ankle bones would be a fine powder,” Harry said.

“What were you going to do then?” Schmidt asked.

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “I was in a rush, Hart. I was making it up as I went along.”

“I don’t think it worked the way you wanted it to,” Schmidt said.

“Well, maybe if I had a second who told me these little bastards could high jump two meters straight up from a squat, I would have tried something else,” Harry said.

“Fair point,” Schmidt said.

“Anyway, you want me to lose, remember?” Harry said.

“Yes, but we want you to lose by just a little,” Schmidt said. “You need to keep it closer than this. Ambassador Abumwe is glaring a hole through the back of your head right now. No, don’t *look*.”

“Hart, if I could have made it closer I would have,” Harry said. He drank some water and then stretched, trying to find a place on his body that didn’t hurt. His left instep seemed the most likely candidate. Harry glanced down and was glad the Korban had not seemed aware that human testicles were especially painful when struck; his had managed to escape injury.

“Looks like they’re ready for the second round,” Schmidt said, and pointed at the judge, who was standing with his horn. On the other end of the gym the Korban was hopping from foot to foot, loosening himself up for the hand-to-hand combat.

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“Swell,” Harry said, and handed the water bottle back to Schmidt. “Words of wisdom for this round?”

“Mind your ankles,” Schmidt said.

“You’re a big help,” Harry said. The horn blew and he stepped back onto the gym floor.

The Korban wasted no time fronting an offensive, charging Harry almost as soon as he was on the floor. A few meters out the Korban kicked and launched himself into the air, claws out; he was aiming for Harry’s head.

*Not this time, you son of a bitch*, Harry thought, and pushed himself back and toward the gym floor. The Korban slid just over Harry’s head, slashing as he did so; Harry responded by bringing up a leg and delivering to the Korban’s posterior a truly excellent bicycle kick. The Korban suddenly accelerated head first into the stands, colliding violently into several other Korba, whose refreshments went flying. Harry arched his head from a lying position to see the carnage, then glanced over to Schmidt, who gave him an enthusiastic thumbs up. Harry grinned and picked himself off the floor.

The Korban burst out of the stands, enraged and refreshment-coated, and launched himself once more and incautiously at Harry. Being suddenly and humiliatingly launched into the stands had apparently simplified the Korban’s attack strategy down to *tear the human a new one*. Harry didn’t mind.

The Korban approached and wheeled back to deliver a mighty blow, either to Harry’s midsection or genital region, whichever was closer. Harry responded by holding steady until the last second and then shot out his arm. The Korban’s forward motion smacked to standstill as Harry’s left palm met the little alien’s forehead. It was like stopping a particularly aggressive eight year old. Harry smirked.

The Korban was not amused at what it registered as a condescending defense maneuver on Harry’s part; it burp-snarled its rage and prepared to shred Harry’s forearm. Harry reared back his right arm to slug the Korban, distracting it, and then quickly retracted his left palm, made a loose fist, and

popped the Korban in the face. The Korban snorted in alarm; Harry took that moment to bring his right hook square into the Korban's snout.

The scales and plates of the Korban's face puffed out as if the alien's head was a flower traumatized into blossom; they settled back as the Korban collapsed onto the ground. Harry kept him on the ground by kicking it viciously every time it so much as puffed a plate. Eventually the judges got bored with this and blew their horn. Harry walked off the floor; the Korban's second came and dragged him off.

"I think you might have overdone the kicking," Schmidt said, handing Harry his refilled water bottle.

"You're not the one whose kidneys were mashed into pâté in the first round," Harry said. "I was just giving him what he gave me. He was still breathing at the end of the round. He's fine. And now the contest is closer, which is what you wanted." He drank.

A door opened on the side of the gymnasium and a forklift-like contraption drove in, carrying what appeared to be a large kiddie pool full of water. The pool was set down near Harry; the forklift then retreated, to reappear a minute later with another pool, which it set down near Harry's Korban competitor.

Harry looked over at Schmidt, who shrugged. "For the water combat round?" He ventured.

"What are we going to do, splash each other?" Harry asked.

"Look," Schmidt said, and pointed. The Korban competitor, now somewhat recovered, had stepped into his pool. The judge, standing again in the middle of the gym, motioned at Harry to step into his pool. Harry looked at Schmidt, who shrugged again. "Don't ask me," he said.

Harry sighed and stepped into his own pool; the water, very warm, came up to his mid-thigh. Harry fought back the temptation to sit down in it and have a nice soak. He looked over again to Schmidt. "Now what do I do?" he asked.

Schmidt didn't respond. Harry waved his hand in front of Schmidt. "Hart. Hello?" he said.

Schmidt looked over to Harry. "You're going to want to turn around, Harry," he said.

Harry turned around, and looked at his Korban competitor, who was suddenly about a foot taller than he had been, and growing.

*What the hell?* Harry thought. And then he saw it. The level of the water in the Korban's pool was almost slowly falling; as it did, the scales and plates on the Korban were shifting, sliding against each other and separating out. Harry watched as the scales on the Korban's mid-section appeared to stretch apart and the join, as the plates that used to be underneath locked into place with the plates that used to be above, expanded by the water flooding into the Korban's body from the pool. Harry eyes shifted from the Korban's midsection to its hands, where its digits were expanding by rotating the overlapping scales, locking them together into a previously unknown dance of Fibonacci sequences.

Harry's mind thought of several things at once.

First, he marveled at the absolutely stunning physiology of the Korbans on display here; the scales and plates covering their bodies were not simply integumentary but had to be structural as well, holding the shape of the Korban body in both states; Harry doubted there was an internal skeleton, at least as it was understood in a human body, and the earlier puffing and expanding suggested that the Korbans' structural system used both air and water to do certain and specific things; this species was clearly the anatomical find of the decade.

Second, he shuddered at the thought of whatever evolutionary pressure had caused the Korban—or its distant amphiboid ancestors—to develop such a dramatic defense mechanism. Whatever was out there in the early seas of this planet, it had to have been pretty damn terrifying.

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Third, as the Korban forced water into its body, growing to a size now a square of the size and some terrifying cube of the mass of Harry's own dimensions, he realized he was about to get his ass well and truly kicked.

Harry wheeled on Schmidt. "You can't tell me you didn't know about this," he said.

"I swear to you, Harry," Schmidt said. "This is new to me."

"How can you *miss* something like this?" Harry said. "What the hell do you people *do* all day?"

"We're diplomats, Harry, not xenobiologists," Schmidt said. "Don't you think I would have told you?"

The judge's horn sounded. The towering Korban stepped out of his pool with a hammering thud.

"Oh, shit," Harry said. He splashed as he tried to get out of his own pool.

"I have no advice for you," Schmidt said.

"No kidding," Harry said.

"Oh, God, here he comes," Schmidt said, and then stumbled off the floor. Harry looked up just in time to see an immense fist of flesh, water and fluid dynamics pummel into his midsection and send him flying across the room. Some part of Harry's brain remarked on the mass and acceleration required to lift him like that, even as another part of Harry's brain remarked that at least a couple of ribs had just gone with that punch.

The crowd roared its approval.

Harry groggily took stock of his surroundings just as the Korban stomped up, lifted up its immense foot, and brought it down square on Harry's chest, giving him the sensation of involuntary defibrillation. Harry watched as the foot lifted up again and noted two large hexagonal depressions in them. The part of his brain that had earlier marveled at the physiology of the Korba recognized these

as the places where the body would take in water; they would have to be at least that large to grow the body as quickly as it did.

The rest of Harry's brain told that part to shut the hell up and move, because that foot was coming down again. Harry groaned and rolled, and bounced a little as the impact of the foot on the floor where Harry had just been caused everything to vibrate. Harry crawled away and then scrambled to his feet, narrowly missing a kick that would have sent him into a wall.

The Korban lumbered after Harry, swinging at him as the crowd cheered. The alien was quick because its size allowed it to cover distance quickly, but as it swung at Harry, he realized that its attacks were slower than they were before. There was too much inertia going on here for the Korban to turn on a dime or make quick strikes. Harry suspected that when two Korba fought in this round, they basically stood in the middle of the gym and beat the hell out of each other until one of them collapsed. That strategy wouldn't work here. Harry thought back on the first round, where the smaller Korba's size was an advantage—size and the fact it knew its way around a bongka. Now the situations were reversed; Harry's smaller size could work to his advantage, and the Korban, in this size, wouldn't know how to fight something smaller.

*Let's test that*, Harry thought, and suddenly ran at the Korba. The Korba took a mighty swing at Harry; Harry ducked it, got in close, and jammed an elbow into the Korban's midsection. Whereupon he discovered to his dismay that thanks to their engorgement, hitting the Korban's plates was just like punching concrete.

*Oops*, Harry thought, and then screamed as the Korban grabbed him by his hair and lifted him. Harry caught hold of the arm lifting him so his scalp wouldn't tear off. The Korban commenced punching him in the ribs, cracking a few more. Through the pain, Harry levered himself on the Korban's arm and kicked upward, jamming his big toe into the Korban's snout; clearly it was the one body part of the Korban's that Harry was having luck with today. The Korban howled and dropped Harry; he flopped down and thudded to the floor on his back. Before he could roll away the Korban stamped on his chest like a piston, once, twice, three times.

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Harry felt a sickening stab. He was reasonably sure he had a punctured lung. The Korban stamped again, forcing fluid out of Harry's mouth. *Definitely a punctured lung*, he thought.

The Korban raised his foot again and this time aimed for Harry's head, taking a moment to perfect his aim.

Harry reached up and grabbed the top of the Korban's foot with his left hand; with his right he formed his fingers into a point and jammed them into one of the hexagonal depressions as hard as he could. As he did, Harry could feel something tear: the fleshy valve that closed to keep the water inside the Korban. It tore, and a spray of warm water pushed out of the Korban's foot and splashed over Harry.

The Korban offered an unspeakably horrible scream as the unexpected pain obliterated any other focus and tried to shake Harry off. Harry hung on, jamming his fingers further into the valve. He wrapped his left arm around the Korban's lower leg and squeezed, juicing the Korban. Water sprayed on the floor. The Korban hopped, frantically attempting to dislodge Harry, and slipped on the disgorged liquid. It fell backward, causing the entire floor to quake. Harry switched positions and now started pushing on the leg from the bottom, forcing even more water out of it; he could actually see the leg deflating. The Korban howled and writhed; he clearly wasn't going anywhere. Harry figured that if the judges had any brains at all, they would have to call the round any second now.

Harry looked over to Schmidt. Schmidt looked at him with something akin to raw terror on his face. It took Harry a minute to figure out why.

*Oh, right*, Harry thought to himself. *I'm supposed to lose.*

Harry sighed and stopped juicing the Korban, letting the leg go. The Korban, still in pain, eventually sat up and looked at Harry, with a look that Harry could only imagine was complete confusion. Harry walked over and knelt down into the Korban's face.

"You have no idea how much it *kills* me to do this," Harry said, reached out to the Korban's face and made a grabbing motion. Then he stuck his thumb out

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from between his index and middle fingers and showed it to the Korban. The Korban stared at him, non-comprehending.

“Look,” Harry said. “I got your *nose*.”

The Korban swung a haymaker straight into Harry’s temple, and the lights went out.

\* \* \*

“That’s really not the way we expected you to do that,” Schmidt said.

From his bunk, Harry tried very hard not to grimace. Facial expressions hurt. “You asked me to keep it close, and you asked me to lose,” he said, moving his jaw as little as humanly possible.

“Yes,” Schmidt said. “But we didn’t think you’d make it so *obvious*.”

“Surprise,” Harry said.

“The good news is, it actually worked for us,” Schmidt said. “The Korban leader—who, incidentally, you caused to get drenched in fruit juice when you kicked your competitor into the stands—wanted to know why you let your competition win. We had to admit we told you to lose. He was delighted to hear it.”

“He had money on the other guy,” Harry said.

“No,” Schmidt said. “Well, probably, but that’s not the point. The point was he said that your willingness to follow orders even when winning was in your grasp showed that you could make a short-term sacrifices for long-term goals. He saw you almost winning as making a point about CDF strength, and then losing as making a point about the value of discipline. And since he seemed quite impressed with both, we said those were indeed exactly the points we had wanted to make.”

“So you have brains after all,” Harry said.

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“We rolled with the changes,” Schmidt said. “And it looks like we’ll come out of this with an agreement after all. You saved the negotiations, Harry. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Harry said. “And I’ll bill you.”

“I have a message for you from Ambassador Abumwe,” Schmidt said.

“I can’t wait,” Harry said.

“She thanks you for your service and wants you to know she’s recommended you for commendation. She also says that never wants to see you again. Your stunt worked this time but it could just as easily have backfired. All things considered, you’re not worth the trouble.”

“She’s welcome,” Harry said.

“It’s nothing personal,” Schmidt said.

“Of course not,” Harry said. “But I like the idea that I had choreographed having the crap kicked out of me down to that level of detail. Makes me feel like a genius, it does.”

“How do you feel?” Schmidt said. “Are you okay?”

“You keep asking that same very dumb question,” Harry said. “Please, stop asking it.”

“Sorry,” Schmidt said. He turned to go, and then stopped. “It does occur to me that we know the answer to another question, though.”

“What’s that?” Harry said.

“How well you can take a punch,” Schmidt said.

Harry smiled, and then grimaced. “God, Hart, don’t make me smile,” he said.

“Sorry,” Schmidt said again.

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“How well do *you* take a punch, Hart?” Harry asked.

“If this is what it takes to find out, Harry,” Schmidt said, “I don’t want to know.”

“See,” Harry said. “I told you you were soft.”

Schmidt grinned and left.

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