

A Space Shuttle and its crew is stranded in space. Two Ground Flight Controllers are responsible. One is the stranded Astronaut's unfaithful wife; the other, her lover and the Flight Director responsible for returning the Shuttle safely back to earth.

The Shuttle Conspiracy

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CHAPTER 1

White-faced and nervous, she peeked from behind the sliding rice-paper panel. Toying with her obi, she watched them step from their helicopters, glance at the mountain peak, then hurry into the Inn of the Sun, an ancient hot-spring inn. Recalling her brother's plea for help in identifying these deplaning executives, Merita Watanabi compared their faces to the newspaper clippings he'd sent.

"An elite group," Minuro had warned on the phone, "including the Prime Minister and a number of Japan's biggest industrialist."

"But why would such men choose the Inn of the Sun?" Merita had asked her younger brother, a fledgling reporter on the *Shoichi Shimibun*.

"Its remoteness. They come I believe, to set up a Japanese space program. If that is so, it makes sense they shun publicity. But I'm not asking you to take their pictures, just strum your samisen and listen to what they are saying."

"A geisha is not a spy, Minuro. A geisha entertains nothing else. Why have you never understood my profession?"

"All I'm asking is that you listen and note what they Say when they are deep in their saki. If I am right about what they are planning, I could be promoted."

"I am supposed to entertain," she pleaded.

"Don't worry, your name won't be mentioned."

Later in the day, she watched the helicopters leave Sapporo. They hovered over the inn before darting due south, blowing snow from the branches of the persimmon trees into the carp-ponds below. Just so, she thought. Her day was just beginning.

Shunning her blue silk kimono for the more elaborate red one she used for special occasions, Merita also chose a smaller brocaded obi, one that would not rub against the fullness of her forty-year old breasts. Staring at her image in the mirror, she stroked the area around her eyes into pools of the deepest black, shaped her tiny lips into the traditional red tulip petals and piled her jet-black hair into a beehive. Shuffling toward the hot baths, samisen in hand, she made ready to entertain the bathing executives.

Pausing as she neared the front door, she bowed to the small man who had just entered, and went down on her knees, preparing to line up the shoes that the executives had left there.

"I am pleased to see geishas at a place like this." the small man noted, gold front tooth gleaming in the late afternoon sun. "Do you speak English?"

"A little," she replied, wishing she had studied more. "But I prefer Japanese."

He shrugged. "I was educated in the United States and I speak that better than my native Japanese after all these years. Is my boss here

yet?"

"And who would he be?"

"Hiroshi Hirabayashi, head of this keiretsu, CEO of Mitsumi Computer?"

"I am sorry," she bowed her head in apology, "but I do not know Hirabayashi-san."

Eyes glittering in the half-light from the setting sun, he greedily eyed her figure and patted her head. "My name's Takei. What kind of geisha party is this?"

Merita kept her eyes down cast as befitted a woman of her station, trembling just a little at his familiarity. "I do not understand, Takei-san. There is only one type of geisha party that I know of."

"Two kinds," he amended, his voice suddenly hard. "The first kind when the girls work to please a man, the second kind when a geisha forgets to put out."

She had learned through the years and the fruitless discussions with her brother, that the younger men from the city often expected more from a geisha but she had also learned not to argue with a man. "I am sorry Takei-san." She raised her eyes. "But it is my music that must find favor with you tonight." She gestured at the samisen on the floor beside her. "I have also heard though that some of the younger mountain geishas may be more to your liking."

His eyes narrowed. "Meaning you will or you won't put out, little geisha?"

Her eyes returned to the ground, wondering how best to handle such a man. Many times she had been forced to say no, but never to a man of such obvious importance. Perhaps a change of subject. Looking

up, she inclined her head toward an adjacent door housing the hot sulphur bath. "If you wish to find Hirabayashi-san, perhaps he is in there." Satisfied she had done all within her power to keep him happy, she returned to the task of sorting the shoes.

"I like that red kimono. Maybe you look kind of sexy, little geisha. How'd you know red turned me on?"

"I am honored that I have chosen your favorite color, Takei-san." On her haunches by then, still sorting the shoes, she continued to avoid his eyes. "Look at me!"

She stopped her work, eyes downcast.

"Got on any underwear under that robe?" He ran a hand down her back, checking for a bra strap.

"You hard of hearing?" he asked next, grabbing a handful of hair, jerking her upright. Hair still held tightly in one hand, he used his other hand to raise her chin until her eyes their eyes met. "What's your name, little geisha?"

"Merita," she mumbled through tightly clenched teeth. "If I have offended you Takei-san," again her eyes broke contact, "please forgive."

"I'll forgive you, little geisha, if you promise to personally serve my dinner tonight, wearing that fancy red robe and no underwear this time. For drinks, plenty of saki. One way or another we're going to crack through all that composure. After that, crab soup and eels. Clear?" He released her chin and patted the top of her head. "I will arrange this special service with the owner."

Serve him alone? Her blood pounded so hard she was sure he could hear it. Such things could never be. "No, Takei-

san. I cannot.”

”Remember no underwear.” Takei warned, opened the door to the hot bath and disappeared therein. Merita, still on her knee began to cry, vowing that she would never yield to such a man. The old ways of the geisha could well be changing, just as all nature changed in the winter, but not so with her resolve to her remain chaste. She wondered next if the owner of the inn would side against her and decided that was likely. Thus with no backup, she had no alternative but to leave, although it meant a dangerous night climb down the mountain. What must be must be.

She dutifully shuffled back to her room, samisen still in hand, gathered up her pitifully few possessions and rolled up her futon. Kneeling at a low table, her only piece of furniture, she wrote a hurried letter to her brother, detailed what little she had heard from the men, apologized for her lack of success, and left the letter in a box near the front door. Merita returned to her room to await darkness, praying that the God of the Mountain would take pity and spare her the shame of not performing her duties at the inn.

Bent on watching through the small window for the first hint of night, she failed to hear her door slide open.

CHAPTER 2

Dick Lynch, a slight man with wide set eyes, closed the door of his townhouse and threw the Flight Rules book on the dining room table. Home early from a trouble plagued simulation and leery of awakening his wife, Terry, he tiptoed into the kitchen for some coffee, shoving the usual sink full of dirty dishes aside as he filled the coffeepot. “Probably had breakfast before going to bed,” he guessed. A Flight Controller working the same forty-eight hour sim that had just ended, her shift had finished when his had started five hours before.

Tiptoeing back to the living room, cup in hand, Dick heard voices from the master bedroom. Wandering over to the bedroom door, coffee cup in hand, he quietly it. “Jesus H. Christ,” he whispered, hand on the doorknob. There on the bed, his naked wife was wildly fucking their Silver team Flight Director, Brad Harrington. High on her haunches, wild as a cowgirl on parade as she carefully straddled her bucking bronco, she was riding hell bent for the orgasm only he had expected to invoke. “Son of a bitch!” he muttered, this time loud enough to be heard. Years before, just before their honeymoon,

something like this had happened at UCLA, but she had assured him that what he had seen wasn't. And like any man with a yen, hell maybe it was love, he'd been fool enough to take her at her word. "Why?" The cry was barely audible. "Why?"

Terry's laughter stopped and the brisk cantor she had obviously been enjoining slowed to a walk as she looked back to see what was happening. Brushing tendrils of damp blonde hair from still passion-soaked eyes, she shook her head. "You? I thought the sim ended this afternoon."

"Get the hell off, I'm not your damn saddle," Brad yelled, a massive man with a pencil thin mustache, warily watching Dick's movements.

"Just tell me why?" Dick pleaded again, clenching his fists until a thin stream of blood curled from his palms. "Answer that one question, Terry."

"Later," Terry shrugged, still out of breath, "Now get out and close the door."

"I said off," Brad shouted, bucking his rider side to side to unseat her. "The guy might go unstable on us."

Still frozen at the door, Dick watched Terry as she reluctantly dismounted, creating the softest of plops in the stillness. Back on her haunches, she turned back to stare down her husband. With no other option but to get up then, she shuffled over to a chair, nipples still taut, where she tugged on her panties, anxious to recover the blonde thatch Dick was still staring at. "It would seem," her breathing had slowed, "that you caught Brad and I at a somewhat injudicious moment."

Finally freed from the inaction of the shock, fist still clenched,

Dick fought down the vomit and watched Terry as she returned to the bed, dropping off Brad's jeans as he struggled to sit up. "Calm," she advised, patting him on the head. "I can control him."

"Calm your ass," Brad muttered, pulling up his jeans as he cast a wary eye at Dick and pulled on his underwear and shirt. At the door, he slowed. "Nothing foolish," he reminded Dick, arms out thrust. "We both have a lot to lose, including the mission." He held up his hands as if to display no weapons. "First time we ever got together, honest. Swear to God."

Dick took a step forward and laughed aloud. "Would that just happen to be the same God that warned against adultery, Brad?"

"C'mon," Brad pleaded, stuffing his socks in a pocket. "You know how it goes on a sim. Both of us were a little uptight and somehow it just happened." He bent down to grab his shoes thereby missing the start of a kick that wound up breaking his nose with a sickening crunch. Nearly to the bedroom door when the kick hit, he was catapulted back across the room to the bed. Flat on his back then, he tried to dodge Dick's follow-up flurry of punches, some of which he caught on his hands. Blood was everywhere by then, sheets, clothes and floor.

"Brad, Dick, stop," Terry pleaded, alongside Brad on the bed, trying to help him back up. "However pissed you two are right at this moment, remember it'll cool and we all have a job to do."

Blood still freely streaming, Brad finally managed to sit up and gingerly probe his nose. "Son-of-a-bitch, He screamed when he felt the dame, "you broke it." On his feet spitting blood everywhere, he fell in behind Terry as she tried to keep herself between them. In the living

room at long last, Brad, still behind Terry, made it to the front door. Still facing a raging Dick, he reached behind his back and undid the door latch. "Keep him right here when I leave," he advised Terry. "I don't want to have to kill him."

Terry shook her head. "I can only try, Brad. I can't go outside half-naked like this. But once you get out the door, keep going." She kept a wary eye on Dick who was doing his best to get around her. "I'll talk with you later." Bare-breasted, white-thonged and bloody, she fought hard to stay between them.

"I'm gone," Brad finally shouted as he managed to open the door. And he was. Terry breathed a sigh of relief, backed away from Dick and forced a smile. "I know this looks bad, and I'm sorry, but think about the good years, all ten. Think."

"How long have you two been---"

"Fucking?"

"That'll do for starters."

Her laugh was cold. "Awhile. A year, maybe more. But always with a purpose since Brad can pull me up the ladder. Once upon a time, you used to be able to do things like that."

"So a big hello to the next rung above you?"

Terry shrugged. "One way to put it, I suppose, although I'd prefer saying I'm just a little more ambitious than the next person. Open to anyone who can help."

"Suggesting that was the reason you married me?"

"Look, Dick, don't make more of this than you have to. The three of us, Brad you and I, have too much to lose should this go public. You're no worse and no better than me. You fight tooth and nail

to hold your spot in the rotation. I do the same with the controllers who'd push me aside if they could. It's a dog eat dog world in Mission Control. When it's your turn to grab the brass ring, you grab or you're gone."

"You think Brad's as big a sucker as I was?"

"I know Brad's not the marrying kind, but he'll take me when him when he succeeds Ferrante and runs JSC. Which he will, given your mission succeeds. And with Brad in power, I'll be next in line to move up to his post as Flight Director. NASA's first female Flight Director, Dick. Me. Think about that."

Dick's growing realization of how easily she'd maneuvered him turned his mind to mush. Why, for God's sake, hadn't he been able to see her for what she was when they met at UCLA?

Mistaking his woebegone look for surrender, Terry came close enough to touch his arm. "You know I deserve Brad's job. Who has a better background as a Guidance, Navigation and Control Officer? I may not have a Doctorate like Brad, but what I bring to the table isn't dog meat."

"You've been doing nothing more than servicing an aging astronaut whose time has now expired?"

"You still don't get it, do you? And as to the servicing part, relax. I'll still be available whenever you're horny." She waited for a reaction, and finding none, shrugged. "Fine, have it your way. But I warn you, Dick. You either find a way to disengage your ego, or I'll find it for you."

"It's not my ego," Dick snapped. "It's the picture of the cowgirl riding her bull until the whistle blew. You got a kick out of me standing

there watching, didn't you? You weren't even going to get off until Brad yelled. Reminds me of that time out at UCLA when you did the same thing for your professor. Had to get that C changed to an A, didn't you? Wouldn't want to ruin your grade point average."

Terry laughed aloud. "You knew and never told me old man? You were hard up, weren't you?"

"Old man?" His face turned an ashen gray.

"Old," she re-affirmed. "But let's rather dwell on today. We need each other to succeed. I need Brad, Brad needs you, we all need each other for the next rung. You go on after the mission, to Washington. John Glen did it, you can too. Just don't make a stink!" She patted his arm. "All for one, the Three Musketeers." Her face softened. "I'm flattered you fought for me against a man as big as Brad. I mean he's huge," she whispered. "And you took him on for me. Forget Brad. We don't have to say nasty things to each other after all these years." She was close enough by then to hug him, drilling her still bloodied breasts hard against his chest.

Until he pushed her away and laughed. "A bloody Mary Magdalene, how appealing. But there ought to be against the law against being as naive as I've been."

"Isn't there something I--"

"Nope." There was a note of finality in his voice and Terry backed off, found a cushion and covered her bare breasts.

"Have it your way, Brad. But I predict that you'll miss using me as your security blanket against aging."

"I probably will," he agreed, "when the time is right."

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