

15

for the greater good

TIME: 02:35zulu (local 18:35pst)

The grill set up by the cool deck rivals that of the kitchen, and purists still use wood for barbeque over charcoal or gas any day. Hickory, apple, cherry, and maple may be way big in most barbeque circles, and mesquite may rule the taste of the southwest, but pecan wood has become the prestige in many a grill master's bag o' tricks.

Peter is an artist and a published one at that.

For this little group he has slow cooked chicken with a homemade apricot glaze, flash grilled K.C. Strip steaks marinated in balsamic vinegar, pepper, and yellow mustard, and he is now turning out kosher-dogs toasted with the juice of grated yellow onions, clarified butter, a dash of brown sugar and light on the salt. The latter being his culinary masterpiece.

Pete has said, "The trick here is to keep them turning, and slathered as you do!"

Humbled by watching his son work the grill, Jacob walks a huge platter of vegetables into the kitchen. He may be a carnivore at heart but this compilation of grilled tomatoes, zucchini, and yellow squash has him drooling. Of all the food prepared it's the asparagus that scares him most. Pan-fried with olive oil, sea salt, and seasoned pepper, he is amazed by how much of it has already been picked at by child and adult alike—and it's only a garnish for the steaks!

That shit should be covered in cheese! goes through Jacob's mind as he watches Maria sneak yet another spear into her mouth.

"Wha?" Maria mumbles noticing Jacob catching her in the act.

"Nothin' honey!" he smiles as he puts the platter down.

"Chow is up!" shouts Peter as drops a pyramid of dogs on the table. "Get it while it's hot!"

"Sure thing, Marine." says Jordan as she steps up to the table

to build a plate for her daughter, Connie.

Jacob does the same for Diego, and noticing the mass of vegetables and salad she is putting on the plate for Connie, Jacob comments to her, "Diego won't touch it if it's green."

"Connie will eat anything." Jordan smiles as they both bun a hotdog for their little ones.

"That so." Says Jacob as he offers ketchup to Connie.

Holding out the dog, Jordon continues, "One time a friend of ours served squingilli and Connie shouts, 'Hey!, there's it's eye' and pops it right in!"

"Suingilli?"

"Squid."

"Squid!" Jacob shivers and squirts ketchup on Jordon's hand, "Oh, I'm sorry."

"That's okay, Pop!" says Jordon as she wipes her hand off.

"Ya know, I go from having only a small son, to having a half-grown daughter, then another son, then another daughter, and yet another adult daughter and her twin brother—all within a year!"

"You mean I have another brother and sister?"

"He's a newborn and she's dead. Died in action working for us. That is, before I knew she was my daughter. It's a long story."

"Sounds confusing."

"You're confused?"

Taking the plate out for Connie, Jordan motions for Jacob to follow her, "I gotta hear this."

Following Jordan, Jacob bumps the table and knocks an olive to the ground. At the same time Maria is walking in from outside.

Maria snatches up the olive and holds it towards the sky, "*Todo para Dios!*" She then shakes it at the ground, "*Y nada para el Diablo!*" She shoves it in Jacob's mouth and motors on her way.

Jacob wonders what she said about God and the devil, but ops to put it behind him as he follows after Jordan.

Alone with Monique, both making themselves a plate, Maria smiles, "I want to thank you for having us here. This turned out a lot different than I thought it would."

"Same here." Monique agrees, then sighs, "Maria, tell me something about you two."

"I can tell ya, but then I'd have ta kill ya."

Monique chirps a little laugh, but adds, "How long have you two been separated?"

"Give that lady a cigar!"

"You know, you make a fabulous couple. You complement each other! When you're not cutting him down of course."

Maria gives her sinister grin, "You know, you're a nosy bitch but you don't play games! I respect that."

"I have earned the right to be direct, madam."

"I'm sure you have." Maria drops a steak on both their plates, "Look, seeing him probably makes you feel like you're young again, but try thirty or so years worrying over his ass. Shit, I feel like I'm an emotional geriatric about now."

"My sources tell me he takes unusual risks."

"You don't know the half of it."

Monique puts asparagus on Maria's plate, "Just so you know, I've been keeping track of him."

"As his superior I'm proud of his work, but as his spouse... Well, I don't need any more holes in my stomach."

"Then I hate to bring this up but an old friend of ours, Pete Suiters, he died shortly ago. Your representatives at One Klick say he was trying to evade capture. My sources tell a different story."

Perplexed, Maria shakes her head, "Who are your sources?"

Monique smiles, "If I shared then I'd have to kill ya."

Between a rock and a hard place, Maria clearly grits her teeth, "Pete asked Jacob to do it. He was given options, but...Pete insisted."

"At least now I know where he is. I haven't told anybody but he was Jordan's father, Peter and Jordan's grandfather."

"Think I figured that out."

"They've meet him, but they don't know."

"One step ahead of ya!"

"Zoot, he never really went by Pete. Our relationship was impossible. My expectations didn't change when Jordan was born and he never forgave me when she died. Her death was an accident, but it was all so avoidable. If—"

"Gotta love that word, if."

"I really shouldn't blame myself, but who else is there to blame?" Monique notices Maria clutching at her stomach, "Maria, *pardon*, are you okay?"

Maria gives Monique a grim smile, "I wish I were kidding about the ulcers."

"Ulcers? Really?"

"In my job, at my level...yea, really."

Monique helps Maria to a chair, "Can I get you anything? A pill maybe? I can send my staff out for some meds."

Maria's hand is shaking, "Bread and milk, please."

"Whole milk okay?"

Maria nods yes with a look on her face like she's going to hurl. As Monique heads for the refrigerator Maria gets a tacnet channel alert for her and Jacob. She opens the channel and hears Angie's voice.

["I need to get out of this bitch can! I'm as much a free spirit as the next guy, but three months of grab ass with Bill's people is giving me the cramps!"]

Bill is also on channel, and he adds with his distinctive drawl, ["The troops are bored to tears boss-lady. Have we got a mission?"]

Angie kicks in, ["Scott ain't talking."]

Jacob has just stepped in to load up a plate for himself and nets back, <"The guy is busy! He's operating on amphetamines and wet-dreams. Let him be! You got the alert, right?">

Bill sighs, ["Ya, but we've got a tough nut to crack. We want a verbal confirmation that it's a go. That's all."]

Maria announces, <"Juliet Bravo is a go, Cowboy. You'll jump off as scheduled. That's eighteen-twenty zulu. You copy?">

["We copy, Ramirez. Third of the first, SA three-six, will jump off at eighteen-twenty zulu!"] Bill is obviously jazzed.

["See you guys at the party!"] Angie adds as they cut out.

<"Wouldn't miss it!"> Jacob looks at Maria from across the room, "How's your stomach?" And then, <"I'm worried about Peter.">

"Sucks." <"I'm doubled over and you're whining about the incredibly stupid obvious! We'll think of something!"> Then quietly to Monique as she sets the bowl of bread and milk in front of her and gives a warm touch to her shoulder, "Thank you, Monique."

When people are using the net to mentally transmit their conversations—without speaking that is—it takes a lot of practice not

to broadcast facial queues. Maria happens to be shouting over the net and Monique, adept at the art of deception and use of this technology, picks up that something is going on when she notices Maria's temples and cheeks flex repeatedly while clenching her teeth.

Dismissing herself, Monique pats Maria on the shoulder and asks, "Need anything else before I step out?"

"No, thanks, this'll do the trick." Maria smiles warmly.

Before Monique can slip away, Jessica blows through the door from the outside, <"Consider it all unfucked!"> Then to Monique, "Pete has called in a personal day for tomorrow and is gonna drive us all to San Diego while these two do their thing. Sound like fun?"

"Why, yes it does!" Monique is rarely surprised.

"We all wanted to know if you were good to go with us tomorrow. Like they say, the more the merrier!"

"Why, yes, I would be delighted!" Monique nods as she steps out to the patio.

As Monique leaves, Jacob sits down across from Maria and Jessica plops down beside her—amused by their dumbfounded faces she laughs, "Wha?" <"This is what you wanted, right?">

Maria grimaces, "Why you meddling—"

Jessica shrugs, <"I'll change it back if you want.">

Maria and Jacob both shout quietly, "No!"

"Good." <"He's my brother. I sure as shit don't want to hear about him getting shot down by you guys. That would piss me off.">

Jacob clears his throat then asks, "If I may, what do you plan to do in San Diego?"

Jessica thinks about it, "I don't know. The bay? The Zoo?"

Maria chimes in, "Yes, the zoo!" <"The shadow team will have no problem keeping track of you there!">

Jacob smiles and nods, <"And we won't have to redirect troops to One-Klick if it's compromised!">

Jessica adds, <"It also means we won't have to sit around One-Klick but, fact is, we may not make it there.">

Jacob frowns, "Why not?"

"I didn't give a rats-ass about these people before today. They're family now, and I don't want them fucked with—which just may happen the second you guys start your shit. So, if the balloon goes up for them you're gonna pick us up before they do. Capiche?"

Shaking her head, Maria looks at Jacob, "I think it's fair to say that we've been outclassed."

"Not hardly!" Jessica smiles big, "I simply emulate the people who influenced my childhood. I may have mad-skills but, Maria Lynn Ramirez you'll always be top dog. Queen Bitch in my book."

Jessica stands, and as she walks over to make a plate for herself Jacob calls out to her, <"Have you given any thought about losing contact with the shadow team? Things may get out of hand.">

The mechanical arm of a PacMan drone taps Jacob on the shoulder. Jacob knew to expect it and doesn't flinch or look back.

<"Covered all your bases, I see."> Jacob smiles, "Can't say I'm proud of you, but...I don't know what else to say?"

Maria is pissed, "I do. Put it back!"

The drone vanishes and they watch its holographic ghost-trail slip out through the back door. Jessica has taken control over a PacMan drone without the help of the tacnet, and this really unnerves Jacob and Maria just a tad.

Between the corn chips and potato salad Jessica breaks the introspective silence, "For what it's worth, father, six months ago I presented these same circumstances to you while you were asleep."

Maria shakes her head, "This I gotta hear!"

Jacob shrugs, "Why not!"

Jessica continues, "In your dreams you came up with this exact same mission plan. Except for a few tweaks, what you guys are doing tomorrow is the product of your mind, father. I just set up the situation but you ran with it. I think you have a right to know. You get all the credit."

"I have no memory of this."

"I had to suppress it. I had to come up with something that would occupy your waking thoughts. Someday you'll have to tell me why you have a thing for Marie Antoinette." Jessica grins as she steps past them, "Food is gettin' cold!"

With plate in hand, Jessica slips out of the backdoor. Maria and Jacob just look at each other dumbfounded by Jessica's ingenuity.

Maria asks, "Marie Antoinette?"

Jacob deadpans, "Remember the dream I had about Maggie?"

"Ya, it gave me a whole new perspective on giving head. So, do we give her a pat on the back, or do we cap one off in her back? It's a tough call."

"You got that right."

"*Cariño*." Maria hands Jacob a metal tube with a cap on it, "I hate to ask, but I need this for the Alpha baseline."

"No, I'm not interested. Choose someone else."

"No, you don't understand, Jacob. It has all been decided. You're the Alpha."

"Then you got what you need. Why bother me with this shit?"

"Understanding meiosis is not an exact science. We need another sample for a comparison."

Jacob looks at the tube. Grudgingly he pops the cap, pulls out a cotton swab, and gives the inside of his cheek a good couple of swipes. Thrusting it back in the tube, he sets the cap on and pops it in. Suddenly, the outside of the tube gets frosty.

He tosses it back at Maria with a snarl, "Just keep me out of the loop, okay! I mean it."

"That's the deal."

"Pick an Omega yet?"

"I thought you wanted nothing to do with this?"

"Just curious."

"The jury is still out."

"Someone I know?"

"Yes."

"Someone I like?"

"It ain't me if that's what you're wondering."

Jacob shrugs, so Maria asks, "You look disappointed."

"I don't like this thing."

"Which is why you are perfect—on so many levels. Look, our numbers are high, but recruitment is dropping off. With a projected life expectancy approaching one-fifty, like you said, nobody wants to risk their ass anymore. Even for a good cause!"

"Why me, God damn it?"

"You are above the curve on all counts. You like the job—as a job and that's rare. Honestly, without you, the program would have been scrapped, or seriously modified."

"Honestly, I think you're wrong. You should find someone who wants the honor."

"Can't. Gotta have someone who doesn't want the job, and that's why you get the nod. Buck up fucktard."

"Try to keep me out of the loop."

"I'll do the best I can." Maria pats his hand, "Hon, I'll be right out. I need a moment to collect myself."

Jacob picks up his now cold plate and steps out. Jessica slips in after he's gone and plops into the seat in front of Maria.

Without missing a beat she chirps, "Jacob *is* perfect for this gig, no? A natural born killer with the Wisdom of Solomon and a benevolent nature that rivals even Jesus himself. And when you look at it, in spite of popular opinion, those qualities are not as diametrically opposed as you would think. He's also got a big-personality but it's kind of on the dry side..."

Maria scowls, "Arid dry."

"Ya, but, he is a funny guy, and still a hottie at fifty-eight!" Jessica then subtly taps her fingers on the table between them as one would to a dealer on Blackjack, and this gesture was recognized by Maria because they play against each other, and Maria looses to her, regularly, "The double-down here is that people on the outside are scared shitless of him, and that's for good reason. Couldn't pick a better Alpha I'd say."

Maria sighs, "Okay, I'll bite."

Jessica leans back, "But, your choice for the Omega is no longer a viable one. She is now compromised."

"How so?" Maria then gets pissed at the intrusion, "What the fuck do you know!"

"Come on. Like you said, the jury is still out."

Maria spits, "Stop listening in to our conversations!"

"Look, Antie Mar, Fifty-Two is like sand in your gears. My mother has already changed and the risk of her switching allegiances is too great. She may have been the best candidate but not now."

Maria again has to bring herself to the fact that this is no ditzzy teenager, but a smart-tough hombre in a twelve year old body, "Okay, shit head, how much do you know? I'm dying to know!"

"Ah...everything?" With Maria nodding yes, Jessica's façade drops and the maturity in her voice is chilling, "I know everything about my mother. Her thoughts, her past, and I possess her skills. All her skills." Jessica wiggles her fingers in the air for just a second, "Mad skills! And I know about the Annex, and all that all of you people know about it, ad nauseam. Culture, missions, plans, pass-codes, you

name it..." Jessica taps her head, "I got it all up here! My dear sweet Maria, I know all about you and I've known about what makes you tick ever since I was an itty-bitty baby. And, you should know, I love the way you breath before you orgasm, and the way you scream when you do. Lord knows how many times I was in the other room when you and my mom were at it...endlessly."

"You heard us?"

"I lived it? It was fun."

"You've got to be kidding!"

"My first kick in the shorts was at six-months. Doesn't that kind of creep your shit out?"

"You could say that."

Jessica shows her hand with Maria's "thang", her personalized neuronet sex fantasy. Most everybody has one, or dozens even, but Maria's is unique. Not something she has ever shared with anybody but it's a fantasy world she has built, and dives into, whenever she feels lonely, frustrated, and remorseful.

Jessica hits home, "How about this...I don't know what it is about being stretched out over a stone pillar, and having your heart ripped out that would turn your crank but, I guess it's the shabby way all those well-hung, muscle-bound Mayan priests violate your corpse afterwards that expresses your need for loss of control and submission. This is not your normal gang rape fantasy mind you. In the real world you could kick all their asses if you wanted too! If you ask me it smacks of both penance and pleasure all in the same breath. Now, Aunt Maria, don't feel bad 'cause it ain't as fucked up as most peoples. Fact is, it's pretty tame...if ya ask me."

"If you know so fucking much, what's Jacob's thang?"

"That's a trick question, right?" Jessica grins, "He don't have one! He lives his dreams. Very simple tastes. After what I've seen in my short life, I can appreciate that." She nods big, "No, really, I can!"

Maria throws her hands out, "Okay, I'm convinced, okay! It's obvious you got something on your mind so..." She snarls, "Spit it out before I beat it out of you."

Jessica huffs, "Nicole is not going to work out as the Omega."

"We realize that, now."

"Your other top choices were Cricket and Angie."

"How did you know that?"

"She has to be compatible with the Alpha, duh!"

Maria nods, "Okay, let's hear it."

"Cricket scored way high, and her part-time role as *Sergeant Washington, the voice and face for the Annex* gives her incredible visibility, and as tough and capable as she is in a fight with a man in her life...she's a door-mat. Plain and simple."

"Jacob respects her."

"Right..." The sarcasm in Jessica's voice did not sneak past Maria, "The second you wiggle your ass at him, like you will be in a couple of hours, he'll leave her in the dust and she'll be okay with it! Sorry, but taking a back seat does not make for a good leader."

"Maybe leadership skills are not necessary for the Omega? So, how about Angie?"

"Come on, get real, she's just this side of crazy! Jacob would not relish the idea of yanking on her chain for millennia. You have to get someone he'd be really compatible with."

"Okay, I take it you have a solution?"

Jessica gestures to herself.

Maria just stares at Jessica and doesn't know whether to laugh or scream, but then—her curiosity gets the better of her and she says flatly, "I'm listening."

"I am sooo much like my mom, but I think like my dad. He and I, we're both altruistic to a fault and we both believe in the Annex but, what you don't know about him is that he thinks the Alpha/Omega program you're cooking up just may work. He was hoping that it wasn't going to be him that got picked for it."

Maria ponders, "So, he knew he was Alpha all along?"

"Ya, and that's why he protested so loudly."

"Nobody told him until I did just now, and he still knew?"

"He has my...abilities, but they're untapped. Why do you think he's always ahead of the game? Call it what you want. Situational awareness, prescience, or call it spidey-sense for what it's worth. It's freaky shit."

"What do you call it?"

Jessica never really thought about it, and it shows, "I dunno. Can't say for sure. It's like a hunch, or a gut-feeling. It's like a guardian angel whispering in your ear but you just don't know it. Whatever it is he's got it, and he's got it in spades."

"I've wondered that myself."

"Still think he should be Alpha?"

"More now than ever."

"Look, in this situation you get your Omega, but one that will match your Alpha—ass and elbows. Then there's the question of us being father and daughter. Well, we are but *they* won't be, and by the time our issue becomes aware of this trivial of details they'll be in their teens and will have already established a relationship of sorts. And, since I have no uterus to speak of, the question of bastard children and inbreeding is moot. Then again, it won't really matter because nobody will know but you, me and the selection committee—which is you! And, there is something else to think about..."

Jessica then leans in, "As for Fifty-Two, if you continue with my mom I find it necessary to warn you that I will never let those fucking abominations reach their next birthday. Think of Caesar, Stalin, and Tamerlane all rolled into one and maybe—just maybe you will come close to what those little shits are capable of. The word megalomaniacal doesn't even scratch the surface!"

"Why should I listen to you?"

"If you don't, and *this* gets out of hand, I may have to kill my own mother as well. I don't want that. Do you?"

Maria thinks about it—Jessica is dead nuts on about how her mother is changing, and quite possibly for the worse. She's also right about no one else being a viable Omega as it relates to Jacob—and without him the program is going to be scrapped for sure. If it's not Nicole then who could they turn too?

Maria asks, "Do you really wanna do this?"

"Honestly...fuck no, but what choice do we have?"

Maria hands her a tube, "We? You're not messing around in my head, are you? Because if you are—"

Jessica takes the tube and pops it open, "I may be a lot of things but stupid is not one of them."

"If I find out otherwise—"

Jessica has already swabbed the inside of her cheek and puts it back into the tube, "Don't worry. I've poked around here and there but I have not manipulated anybody in the Annex against their will, and I promise I won't. That is, unless it's absolutely necessary."

"Necessary...for the greater good, right?"

"I'll let you be the judge of that."

"Confer with me first."

Jessica hands her the tube, "By all means."

"First, being the operative word."

"It's a deal."

Maria shakes her head, "I don't know why I trust you, but I guess the alternative is far more unattractive. You know I have to trust you explicitly."

"I guarantee I'll earn that trust."

Maria points to the door, "Go. I'll be right out in a minute. I need a moment to internalize the fit I'm about to throw."

Jessica stands, and leans forward to kiss Maria on top of the head, "Love you, Aunt Maria." And before Jessica steps out the door she turns back, "I like the word, subterfuge. Don't you?"

Maria perks up, "In what context?"

"What you don't know, and fear, but I know for a fact is that Fifty-Two is betting on the come. She's banking on Nicole becoming the Omega clone."

"And, you were going to clue me in when?"

"You had to make your choice about me on the merits. To tell you that before now would have come across as manipulative."

After a thought or two, Maria agrees, "Yea, you're right."

Jessica nods her head, "I think maybe we should continue to let her think that for the time being. Don't you?"

Maria ponders this for a second, "I'll follow your lead."

"Then put it out of your mind, and believe that Nicole is the chosen one. What we did here and now never happened."

With Jessica gone, Maria has much to reflect on. She truly believes Jessica's intentions are noble, and believing her is so not Maria's style but, even though Jessica and her mother are not blood relations she and Nicole are the only family she's got outside her son and her ex-husband, Jacob. All these years Jessica has sported herself as the loner or as the moody teen, and all the sarcasm she puked out with such skill, just this side of insolent, was clearly a deception.

A subterfuge to conceal her true nature.

Looking back, Maria always knew that Jessica was more than she was letting on and it pains Maria that she never challenged her on it before. Maria realizes that Jessica is beyond her control and an intellect to be reckoned with, but she's also comforted by the fact that Jessica is family, with a bond stronger than blood, and an ally.

"Feeling any better, love?" Monique asks as she quietly slides into the seat across from her.

Maria didn't even see Monique come into the kitchen, and can kick herself for half-stepping it like that, "Great. Seriously!"

"I was worried about you."

"Bread and milk—magical stuff."

Monique slips a small bag into Maria's hand. Glancing down at it she notices a capsule with a P40 sharks tooth grin on one end, and on the other a clover shape looking like a small propeller.

Confused, Maria asks, "What's this for?"

"It's to get your life back in order."

"Seriously, mine is pretty damned tame compared to the wake of collateral damage in Jacob's. At least I don't have children popping up all over the place."

"Straight males *are* the preferred breeding stock. Why do you think Jordan threw herself at him?"

"I didn't mean anything by it."

"No offence taken. It's the reality of our culture."

"It's funny..." Maria smiles, "Up till a year ago he thought he had only one child. Now he has six, and grandkids even."

"I wouldn't trade them for the world."

"Neither would I."

Monique shrugs, "Don't be surprised if more pop up."

Thinking of Sophie, his daughter that died at Theta-2-Taurus, Maria nods, "I won't be."

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