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a momentary lapse in personality

TIME: 06:05zulu (local 22:05pst)

With Monique and Jordan walking away, Peter crouches down and taps knuckles with Jacob, "I'm gonna turn in too, Pop."

Jacob, sitting in the Jacuzzi, reaches for a smoke, "Pete, I really appreciate it. You and your sister taking the kids tomorrow."

"I want to get to know them."

"For your careers sake let's keep our relationship quiet for now, but if it ever becomes public knowledge I'll iron it out with your Corps Commander, Orozco. Can't say he and I are good-buddies but we're on friendly enough terms."

"I appreciate that. All I ever wanted to do was to zoom, but in a year or two I may be piloting a desk. I don't know if I can hack that. I just may take you up on the earlier offer."

Lighting a cigarette, Jacob scrunches his face, "Earlier offer?"

"Rutledge, was it? He offered me a job with you guys."

"Oh ya!" Jacob yanks the cigarette out of his mouth and points to Peter, "The offer is still good, but stay put for now."

"Sure thing." Peter stands to leave, "I know you guys are up to something. I can feel it. You and Maria are lucky. It's so boring here. Nothing ever happens on Home Base."

Jacob would love to say something to him like *Don't hold your breath*, or a snappy *Ya—right* to clue Peter in, but doing that may put him on alert so, to cut the conversation short, Jacob chuckles, "Look, we'll see each other sooner than you think. We'll spend some quality time together. Sound good?"

"Sounds like a plan. Goodnight, Dad." Peter walks off.

"I haven't earned that, yet." Jacob calls out.

Peter glances back, "You already have."

As Peter fades into the shadows, Jacob grows introspective thinking about Peter calling him "Pop" and "Dad" right out of the chute. Only today, did he hear it from Jessica for the first time. After over a year of butting heads she has let her guard down enough to show just a smidgen of affection. Miniscule as it is, at least it's something.

Jacob's peace is broken by Jessica slithering up to him and, beside his cheek, she mimics Peter, "Goodnight...Dad!"

Jacob feigns surprise, "Twice in one day! I think we may be chipping through that shitty façade of yours."

"Naw, fat chance. That's the most I can do for now, and maybe for quite awhile. And, whatever you do, don't make me say the "L" word 'cause that'll only serve to make me wanna hurl. The cloying sweetness will make me blow chunks for weeks! This'll just hav'ta do."

Jessica leans in to kiss him on the cheek and—resorts to a raspberry instead.

She pulls away and squeals, "That's so twelve of me!"

Jacob grunts, "I was under the impression you bypassed childhood altogether?"

Jessica hops up and laughs out loud, "Ya know, I'm having a momentary lapse in personality! It's only an episode. Don't worry, it'll be short lived."

"That's good to hear. I was getting worried."

She prods, "I thought you wanted me to act my age?"

Jacob thinks for a second, "I want you to be who you are."

"I thought you didn't like me for who I was."

"That was before I knew who you were." Jacob takes a pull off the cigarette and coughs from it, "Look at it from my perspective. I'm not dealing with some punk-ass kid here, but an equal. I have to adjust to that shit. You are my daughter, and I love you for who you are, but that doesn't translate into me liking you just yet. But, I'm getting there. Surprised?"

"A tad bit."

"Just give me some time, and give me a break for once. Okay? I'm new to this."

"Okay." Jessica says as she quietly slips into the shadows.

Entering the chateau, Jessica makes her way to her room, but before she enters, she stops to think. As much as today was both a

disaster and a blessing it's difficult for Jessica to accept the fact that everything is going *Jessica's way*. Tomorrow was supposed to be her crowning achievement but, now that everything has changed and she's dangerously exposed, she has in her possession a new vehicle to make good on a promise to herself. That is, to make a difference. Jessica so hates drawing attention to herself—but her feign did succeed in bringing her father and Maria around because now she's in a notably better position to make that difference. Jessica is amazed by how much she is just like her father, and it pains her to think that she is forced to do an end-run to protect him and the Annex from Fifty-Two and from what her mother may have become as the Omega.

So, for the now she doesn't have to kill anybody.

Choices. That's what Jessica is faced with yet again. She looks down the wing towards Josav's room and debates whether if it's a good idea to pay him a visit or not. She feels him thinking of her and, to her dismay, she can't seem to put their kiss behind her. He is unaware that his thoughts are calling out to Jessica, compelling her to acquiesce, and drawing her towards him.

It's not that having sex is such a big deal, but it's the *who* that has always mattered to her. So much so that Jessica has ruled out any complications in her life for the time being and was perfectly content in whoring herself vicariously through others. She is so not casual about this sort of thing and it's obvious to her that if Josav were as cavalier as most people are then she would not consider him for her first encounter. Nephew or not.

What Jessica realizes, walking down the wing towards a new direction in her life, is that this is not a change in plans, nor is it a detour per se, but more like opting to take the scenic route.

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Grunting, impaled, her back arches as she cries out, "Joe!"

Incisors flash as she gnashes her teeth at a sliver of light radiating through the blinds. They slam into one another, yet again, and she howls like a wounded animal—as if she were dying, and mercifully so. Dropping onto his chest, gasping for air, they both roll over and pant heavily in the darkness.

She punches him playfully in the chest, "Ay, *pandejo, muevete a la chingada.*"

He slips out of bed and walks into the bathroom. The light goes on and from the bedroom she hears a mumbled exchange of words, followed by a sharp snick and a hollow thud.

She calls out, "Shapiro, take a piss for me while you're at it!"

Getting no response from the bathroom, she swings her legs out, stands, and whips open the blinds.

The New York skyline greets Rosie Alvarez. She hates her work, selling children to perverts like Joseph Shapiro but it's a living, and it affords her many luxuries like this condo on the top floor of a Manhattan high rise. Of the nine Barbie Doll clones she has sold him, they have always managed to close the deal in the sack. For his advanced years Shapiro is one good looking guy, an Adonis you might say, and women drip off of him wherever he goes. As difficult as it is for Rosie to admit she'd be right there with them. That is, if it wasn't for his taste in minors and hermaphrodites that creeps her out.

Rosie is the only adult female, without a dick, that he is interested in being intimate with, and if she knew what draws them together like this she would probably be more open to maybe disliking the guy—as she dislikes all her other customers. At least none of the product she has sold him has ever been snuffed, and the fact that he has been their benefactor as they became adults, striking out on their own, save for one, is at least a conciliation. The one that got away, the first one, has never been found but that was over thirty years ago. Still to this day, Rosie wonders whatever happened to the little redhead that Shapiro loved so dearly.

Curious as to why Joe is taking so long, Rosie turns and heads towards the bathroom, but as she steps through the door it's not the headless body that catches her attention, nor the blood, nor Joe's head sitting neatly before her feet, but the breathtaking image of Nicole standing there before her naked—with khukri knife in hand.

Nicole feigns a warm smile, "Hello, Rosie."

For some crazy reason Rosie knew exactly who this was, and before she could react, she felt as though she was spinning in the air. It took all of a second for her head to hit the ground but to Rosie it felt like an eternity. The sudden stop brings her around, and the image of Joe's face that fills her view fades to white as her pupils blow—and she loses her grip on this world.

A trooper in a cloaked fighting suit, steps out of the shower, "Face to face, Chief. That's unfucken' believable."

Nicole replies without satisfaction, "I've been practicing."

Cricket, also in a cloaked suit, steps into the doorway, "At least you gave us a hell of a show. That's a plus."

Nicole snarls, "If it wasn't that we had to be fucking quiet about this, I would have given you a better one!"

"We have our orders."

Stepping past Cricket and heading for the living room to mount her fighting suit, Nicole grunts, "Next time it will be chopping and screaming. To hell with orders."

Cricket chuckles as she calls out on the radio to C3, "Charlie Three, this is Tag Team, Xray-Whiskey-Bravo, One-Niner."

Command, Control, and Communications has been waiting for the call, ["Go ahead Xray."]

"Secondary targets one-two-eight and seven-six-niner have both been neutralized. You copy?"

["We copy. Terminate wet work. Orders are to escort Red to evac, then proceed to Urchin Gnome."]

"Roger that. X-ray Whiskey Bravo is on the move."

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It's a clear night and Jacob drinks in the twinkling stars of Orion, the Hyades, and the Pleiades stitched across the sky. Suddenly, the thought comes to mind, *when this all plays out then what next?*

Jacob closes his eyes to ponder the inevitable.

Undoubtedly a war will fire up between them and the Co-op but maybe not just yet and, more likely than not, the rules of engagement on this go-round will mimic the gentleman's agreement from the last one. The *Marquess of Queensberry* rules may work for a while, and the Annex may get a rabbit-punch or two in, but if one side or the other hits below the belt—the gloves may come off. Then they'll be fighting under the *Marquis de Sade* rules and what follows from that would not be for the faint of heart.

The various options of Plan-B, as cooked up by Marshal Maria Ramirez, would make Sherman's march through Georgia look like a Sunday drive through the country. What would have been a delightful little war of attrition that could have spanned ten or more years will suddenly be over with in just a month or two—and a billion or more could die because of it.

That is, if it all got out of hand.

Trying to think of a way to contain the fallout from that contingency was cut short by faint footsteps approaching him.

With a plate of snacks in one hand, and a bottle of Chianti and glasses in the other, Maria approaches the Jacuzzi and announces with a deep sigh, "Well, it's started."

Jacob opens one eye, "That's what I've heard."

She sets the treats at the edge by Jacob and walks around to the other side, "I was worrying if snatching up all those reporters is going to be considered kidnapping or not."

Jacob opens the other eye, "But, if they go into the shit they will have signed on voluntarily, right? We should be getting off the hook for this one."

"You got that right." Maria's robe drops off her shoulders and she sits her tantalizingly athletic body on the edge across from Jacob, "Nicole served Alvarez and Shapiro."

"That's what I've heard."

"Cricket said that it was anti-climatic for her."

Jacob sighs big, "That's too bad."

Maria wets the torpedo capsule in her mouth, "I tried to tell her but would she listen?"

Jacob watches her as she lifts one leg up on the edge of the Jacuzzi, and as she reaches down to insert the capsule he asks the obvious question, "Torp?"

Maria smiles, "Uh hu!"

"Most people swallow it."

"It's more intense this way."

"Damn the torpedo. I don't think we need it."

"See, that's the problem. You keep trying to think. I want to kick big, and if I come to my senses I won't make it."

Maria slips quietly into the water and slithers across towards Jacob. She reaches up to the plate, selects a jalapeño and crunches into it with impunity.

While she munches away, Jacob asks, "What's that?"

"A chili. Want one?"

"Sure."

Jacob didn't think much about it, for the first second or two, but the intensity of the chili makes him almost choke, "What the hell are those things!"

Maria laughs, "Want another one?"

Jacob shakes his head as he pours some wine to douse the fire in his mouth, "Cripes! I knew it! You're trying to fuckin' kill me!"

As Jacob downs his glass, Maria chomps into another one and grins, "Graves, you're like a jalapeño. Innocent looking on the outside, but full of fire."

Jacob coughs, "Oh, really!"

Maria drapes her arms around Jacob's neck and gives him a quick kiss, "Ya, definitely, but then you give me heart burn."

"Oh, really."

Maria starts biting his neck with purpose, "And then you become a pain in my ass."

Instantly affected by her ministrations, something he has wanted for quite some time, Jacob whispers, "Oh...really."

"Uh hu, but..." Maria then pulls back and laughs in his face, "Like an idiot, I keep coming back for more!"

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