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bigger balls than standard issue

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The Glendale Freeway, running north of Los Angeles, is not nearly as busy as it used to be back in the day when it first opened. Traffic today is moderate to light but steady even though the freeway itself has pretty much vanished from sight. Like most paved roadways throughout the world, after two hundred years of neglect, the lanes have crumbled away to dust and gravel. Only small patches of concrete and rebar remain—peeking through the grass that now marks the pathway between Los Angeles and La Cañada.

For all intents and purposes the Earth has become a garden planet. Less than two billion inhabit the globe, and property values have dropped so steeply that the few homes that dot the hillsides along California-2 have at least an acre or three surrounding them.

In a ground car, floating along the Northbound right-of-way, Jessica watches the terrain pass by as Jacob, Maria and Diego watch a transmission of Maria at a press conference earlier that morning. On a video screen, in the dashboard, Maria is fielding questions from reporters from behind a podium in a very small auditorium adjacent to the One-Klick lobby.

On the screen, Maria has just pointed to a reporter named, Brenda Ashley who stands, "That's a serious accusation you're making, Marshall. You're telling us that the Deputation routinely covers up violations?"

Maria ponders her response, "All I'm saying is that on the two occasions we did advise the Security Council, forty-eight hours later we uncovered a big zero but, this time, surprise allowed us to collect over sixty of the Cobalt Bluer retrofits with yields ranging from one to twenty gigatons. Draw your own conclusions."

The reporters raise their hands, but Ashley talks over them. "So, if I may, if it's not a cover up then what do you call it? My viewers and I would call it a cover up. You call it what?"

"Cleaning house?" Maria shrugs humorously. "Ms. Ashley, look, if the police came up to you and said that in two days they were going to raid your home for, I don't know, for a torpedo lab, okay. What are you going to do? Wait for them to kick down your door and throw your ass in jail, or would you rather pass the white glove test? I cannot wrong the Deputation for taking advantage of a situation that can save them from some embarrassment. I'd do the same thing in their shoes but we're not going to give it to 'em anymore. It's now a level playing field. Mr. Ortega."

Maria points to male reporter named Ortega who stands, "Our sources at the United Nations are again pointing a finger at the Co-op but, like the members of the Security Council, the Co-op continues to remain silent on this issue. Can you tell us if they've made any attempt to contact the S.A. about settling your differences?"

Maria grins, "Settle our differences? Well, I was under the impression we did that a decade ago! Staging cobalts can save them weeks, even months if we got into another pissing contest but it proves nothing. Even though they have regularly violated the truce, we have no stipulated provision to remedy these situations except through intervention by way of inspections. I tell you what, next time we have an operation like this we'll have you people tag along. Sound like a plan?"

We hear rumblings of approval from the reporters, and as Maria points to another but Ortega jumps in with another question, "Do you expect a response?"

"No, no I don't...and what are they going to say? We caught 'em with their pants down. The best thing for them to do is to clam up and let this thing blow over. It *a/ways* does."

The hands go up all over and Maria points to a reporter in the back, "Ya, you."

That reporter stands and asks, "Two weeks ago Marshal Jackson, in a press release, said that he wasn't concerned about this situation. He goes on to say that cobalt weapons have more tactical than strategic value."

Maria expands on that, "I'd say he's is correct. The Co-op has yet to find our bases or manufacturing facilities and I doubt they ever will, so what's the point? But hey, the Co-op is not lead by military minds, but politicians. They want to swing the biggest and baddest balls they can—so do terrorists which is why the United Nations has

declared all independent retrofit programs as crimes against humanity. What frosts my hide is that there is no way to track these things in governmental control except through surprise inspections which have failed to be a surprise. That is, until now. We can only confiscate them if we find them in prohibited areas, but with the way things are we cannot stop their proliferation.”

The reporter chimes in, “But you have them, don’t you?”

“Well d’uh.” Maria drolls. “The Pleiades is a floating rock quarry. What do you think? We pop one, on average, every five months or so to vaporize an asteroid or two. We use them for what they were designed for, which is saving planets and saving lives. We don’t consider them weapons.”

Another reporter chimes in out of order, “But, you *can* use them as weapons.”

“Well, double d’uh! What do you think? But then, we know how to take a simple missile, a half-tonne in weight, crank it up to hyperphoto velocities and get the same results on the cheap! Who needs a trillion-dollar cobalt bomb when you have that capability? That is all for today.”

The reporters start shouting as Maria waves and steps away from the podium, and over the noise one reporter shouts, “What are you going to do with the bombs you captured?”

Maria returns to the podium and puts out a hand to quiet the room, “I have to answer that question. Did you hear it? ‘What are you going to do with the bombs you captured?’ I’ll tell ya, at this very moment, they are being dismantled and we are making tens of thousands of small, useful bombs out of the reactive material. I just want to thank the Cooperative for their gracious contribution to our peace-time arsenal.”

Another reporter shouts from the back, “Shouldn’t you get rid of it instead?”

“That would be such a waste, but I would consider giving it back! And, under the right circumstances, you can count on it.”

The image of Maria stepping away from the podium is split with an anchorman who adds, “Marshall Ramirez has been vacationing on the west coast and is accompanied by her husband, Field Marshall Jacob Graves. Shown here last fall on—”

The image is cut off as Jacob pulls his hand away from the dash, all the while his son, Diego, now five years old, like any kid seeing their parent on television, starts clapping his hands while laughing, “Yeaah Mommy! w00t!”

Jessica just shakes her head and looks out the window.

Noticing her, Jacob asks, "You okay?"

Jessica sighs, "Do we have to meet these people?"

Maria huffs, "What's your problem?"

"I don't have a problem."

"A little less enthusiasm if you don't mind." Jacob snips.

"I'm almost a teenager. I'm supposed to be moody, aloof and uncommunicative. It's in my job description."

Jacob shakes his head, "Something else is bugging you, sweetheart. I can feel it."

"Father, for the short year you have known me you've probably wondered why I'm such a cynical bitch."

"It's crossed my mind."

"I always know when you're up to something."

Maria asks, "What makes you think that?"

"For beginners, you two aren't fighting."

Jacob and Maria look at each other and suddenly start flailing their hands at each other, like two little kids in a mock slap fight.

"Right..." Jessica rolls her eyes. "Let me clarify, it's the constant tacnet and goofy looks between you two. Don't forget, I've been chipped. Just because I can't tie in doesn't mean I don't see that something big is up." Jessica turns to Maria and smiles, "And, Aunt Maria, that press conference you gave was exceptional. Whatever mischief you two are up to I'm sure that they'll be caught with their pants down. Without a cigarette, or a reach-around."

Jacob looks at Maria and she laughs at him via the tacnet, <"It's your kid. You deal with this.">

<"You can handle her better than I can.">

Noticing their behavior, Jessica pipes up, "I'm curious to know who's on the shadow team? I count three."

Maria is truly dumbfounded by her statement, <"How the hell did she figure that out?">

"I think it's obvious." Jessica adds.

Jacob turns to her, "How's that?"

"Their shadows, each one has their own moves. One of them looks pretty confident. I figure he's a new guy. Anyone I know?"

Maria and Jacob respond in unison, "Nelson."

"Zach? He's a cutie pie! My mom had better hurry up and throw down on him 'cause in a couple of years I'll be ready to compete on her terms."

Jacob looks at her with a frown, "How about we play a game. You tell me what we're up to and I'll confirm or deny."

"You mean deny or evade. Okay, I'll play, Father. Only to watch you squirm."

Maria shrugs, "She's your kid!"

Jacob takes a long and hard look at Jessica. He sits back and, suddenly, it's like a light bulb lights up over his head.

He asks her, "Does your mother know?"

"Know what?"

Jacob gives a sardonic grin, "I think it's obvious."

Jessica is taken aback but for just a second. She has spent her entire life hiding her capabilities, and for the first time she let it slip. Her father is smarter than she has given him credit for but now is not the time for admiration. Now is the time for self-preservation.

Composing herself, she smiles, "Veery good."

"You got careless. So, does she know?"

"Are you kidding? I'd appreciate it if you kept it to yourself. I don't fit into their little mind-melding clique."

Maria suddenly realizes what's going on, and with wide-eyed amazement she tacnets to Jacob, <"She's one of them!">

Jessica butts in without the benefit of the tacnet, <"No, not one of them. I'm different.">

Maria and Jacob sound off together, "Different?"

Maria leans in with, "How so?"

"I have a personality." Jessica quips.

Jacob and Maria laugh as their car passes through Foothill Blvd and starts to race up Hill Drive.

Maria sits back and asks, "How much do you know?"

Before Jessica can formulate an answer Jacob interjects with, "Considering the invasive capability of Fifty-Two, I suspect she knows quite a lot." Jacob looks at Jessica and, "Let's hear it."

Jessica grimaces, "Every excruciating detail."

Jacob thinks for a moment, "Now that I think about it you're responsible for all this. Tell me I'm wrong."

Jessica opens her mouth to comment but holds back, and after a few seconds she turns to ice like her father, "My options were limited. I was going to let the little bitches rot but the baby failed to pacify mother. Isn't it nauseating how she clings?"

Jacob was not phased by that news, but Maria is clearly pissed, "The baby! Seth was your doing! Why you little—"

"I'm trying to keep my mother's codependent ass alive!" Jessica almost shouts. She reels it in and clarifies, "For the first time in her life Nicole is stable. No thanks to the two of you! Take issue on my methods all you want but my motives are honest. Something else you should know. They can't combine their powers—yet. So, for the now, they don't pose much of a threat, but that won't stop them from becoming a pain in the ass."

Jacob is not at all amused, "What makes you think I wouldn't perceive you as a pain in the ass?"

"Me? A threat!" Jessica huffs, "I know my place."

Maria laughs but Jessica and Jacob just stare at each other.

As Maria's laughter subsides, Jessica smiles at her father, "You're a lot smarter than you look. How 'bout you don't trust me." Then via telepathy, <"You'll know when I'm fucking with ya."> She then continues verbally, "The little bitches have a hidden agenda and they will fuck with you. Watch your six, father."

"They're an anomaly, but they will be controlled."

"They're an abomination!" Jessica hisses then, "I can't tell if they're simply naive or showing early warning signs of megalomania. Either way, controlling them may require killing them."

The two look into each other's eyes, and Jessica smiles, "Yes, father, just like you think you may have to kill me someday if I step out of line. Promising I won't give you that reason to is not enough. You'll just have to trust me."

Jessica then sits back and shrugs, "Which is something you cannot afford to do now that you know what I am."

Jacob ponders his daughter and the natural telepathic and manipulative power she wields. Jessica, at twelve, held in check a collective force liken to herself with the threat of exposure. Then, when she could not give her mother purpose with a new child, she set out to cut a deal with these clones—all to give her mother a sense of belonging. Towards that goal she hacked, manipulated, baited and

switched the SA into action. The whole thing at Theta-2-Taurus was a set up, and he admires Jessica for her clandestine ingenuity. Though it is a noble cause it was wrong of her to do it, but Jacob finds it hard to fault her for the end result. It is what everybody in the Annex wanted so there was no point of making an issue out of it. What dawns on Jacob is that his daughter may be pre-teen on the outside, but inside she is something else entirely.

Jacob smiles at her, "I'm beginning to like you."

"I won't let that go to my head."

"You are so much like your mother."

Jessica corrects him, "I may look like my mom, I may sound like my mom, but inside I'm all you, Pop. My only other flaw is that delightful little freckle on my butt you gave me. Two, in fact!"

"Well, you can never say I didn't give you anything."

Jessica rolls her eyes, and as the car tops Hill Drive Jessica looks out the window and asks, "Father, do we really have to meet these people?"

"I haven't seen this lady in over thirty years." Jacob says.

"That's the point. It could wait a day or two."

Maria points out, "We're jumping off tomorrow."

"I know and I don't want to piss away our time here. I know this Madame Ribot means a lot to you, but she means nothing to me. It's not like family, ya know."

Jacob feigns surprise, "You care! I'm touched."

Jessica deadpans, "Don't let that go to your head."

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The chateau is as striking as it is huge. It's comprised of grey stone with a deep-blue trim, and leaded windows. The micro-turret surveillance cameras are still there, everywhere, but Jacob wonders where the laser sentries are now posted? Maybe these cameras are the "see and slash" units with the lasers built inside. They already hit the doorbell and after almost a minute all of them are still standing there in four distinct human pieces—whole and unharmed.

If Monique Ribot still carried a grudge, and meant to kill him, it would be easy enough too surgically slice him up with a little flicker of light and invite the rest in for tea but, as it is, Jacob breathes a sigh of relief when the front door opens—but not too much relief.

"Jordon?" Jacob asks.

Ever since Jacob talked to Monique the day before he's been desperately trying to remember her daughter's name, but she didn't offer so he didn't ask. She did say that her daughter had died in childbirth and that he could meet the twins that next day, but that didn't help him until he saw Monique's granddaughter standing there.

"Junior. Everyone says I look like my mother." Says Jordon.

"Wow, you do."

Jordon gestures them to come inside, "Come on in. Everyone is out back and waiting for you."

Jordon is eight months pregnant, and has a slight waddle as she leads them through the opulence of the chateau towards the back yard. She addresses her grandmother by her first name. Not all that uncommon for adult children and parents nowadays, but not so for generations that skip.

"Monique has told us all about you. It's a privilege to finally get to meet you, Mr. Graves."

"It's Jacob, and I don't know if that's good or bad."

"It's all good the way I hear it."

"Monique going legit. Now, that is something I thought I'd never see. I guess you and your brother had a lot to do with that."

"Not directly but, yes, a lot. You might say she's still the Grand Dame, even though she's been retired for as long as I can remember. At least we only have a handful of muscle on the payroll, but they're more for her entertainment than protection anymore."

"She likes the attention."

Jordon has opened the sliding door to the pool and smiles to Jacob as he steps past her, "You know grandmother well."

As Jacob steps out on the cool deck he is witness to Monique lifting herself off her recliner, and in the few seconds it took her to politely don her robe, dressed guests require a dressed host, Jacob was awestruck by how much she has not changed over the last thirty-some years. A tall and sinewy French-African with a figure that rivals that of Nicole's—she looks nothing like her eighty-nine years of age. Even by today's standards, like Nicole, she is beyond knockout.

Stepping up to Jacob, with a runway model's catwalk, she takes Jacob by the hand and gives him a quick kiss, "It's been too long, Jacob."

"Yes, it has."

"First thing, I would like to apologize for my ugly behavior. Looking back, you have to admit, it was such a trivial matter."

"No, it's I who should apologize."

"Absolutely not! I wronged both you and my daughter. I did not have the opportunity to make it up to her, but I can with you."

"Just to see you after all these years is enough."

"I think we will be able to do better than that. You've met my granddaughter, Jordan. This is Peter, her twin brother."

Jacob was already sizing up Peter as he steps up with two children in tow. Peter stands eye to eye with Jacob and they shake hands. Peter's grip was firm, but personable, and this is a good sign that he is someone Jacob automatically likes.

Monique then gestures to the fourteen year old next to Peter, and his four-year-old sister who cuts between them for Diego, "And these are Jordan's children, Josav and Connie."

Jacob pats Diego on the back, "Go play with Connie, but stay where we can see you."

"Kay!" Diego shouts over his shoulder as he and Connie run off towards the pool.

Jessica and Josav acknowledge each other with a simple nod. The type of signal that indicates tentative approval.

Monique puts her hand out to Jessica, "And, my dear, your name, Jessie?"

Jessica takes her hand, "Madam Ribot."

"Monique, please. We must talk later, you an' I. Until then, Josav, please show Jessie around. We'll watch the little ones."

Josav motions for Jessie to follow him, and as they wonder off, Monique turns to Maria, "You must be Maria. I have been dying to meet you after talking to Jacob yesterday! Nobody gets married anymore except Jordon. At least she and her husband are still on speaking terms."

Jordon cuts in, "Actually, we get along just fine."

Peter interjects, "Monique doesn't understand monogamy."

Monique laughs, "I shouldn't be so critical. Fact is, I'm jealous of my granddaughter. Carlos worships the ground she walks on. Your little boy, Diego? He's a gem!"

Maria smiles, "Yes, well, now he is. For the longest time he was a holy terror."

"I saw him on the com-link with Jacob. He's an adorable child. Looks a lot like you, but Jessica?"

"She's a carbon copy of her mother."

Monique nods, "Jessie is going to be a heart breaker."

Maria grunts, "More of a ball-breaker if you ask me."

"Appearances can be deceiving. I see a lot of her father in her. I think you will be pleasantly surprised by her outcome."

"I don't think that 'pleasantly' is the adverb I'm thinking of."

Monique offers her and Jacob a double-wide recliner, "Trust me on this. She may appear a little rough around the edges to you, but to me she's a diamond in the rough."

"Right now she's more like a chigger in the bush, but I hope you're right about her. I got my doubts."

As Maria and Monique sit, Monique sighs, "I know people."

"And I respect you for that. Your reputation precedes you."

Standing side by side with Peter, Jacob turns to him and says, "She hasn't changed one bit."

"I wouldn't know any different." Snorts Peter, then, "Where are my manners! What can I get you to drink?"

Jacob shrugs, "Beer? Any kind will do."

Maria adds, "We're not particular."

Peter turns to his grandmother, "Monique?"

"Oh, surprise me!"

He looks over at Jordon, but she waves him off.

As Peter starts off for the kitchen of the chateau, Jacob turns and follows him, "Let me help!"

Little has changed in kitchens over the last few centuries and, much to Jacob's surprise, nothing has changed in Monique's kitchen since he was last in it. Making a bee-line to the refrigerator he notices a plastic plug covering a hole made by a bullet that just missed his head thirty-six years before.

Suddenly Jacob hears a loud pop, and as he nervously looks over his shoulder he finds Peter pouring champagne into a pitcher of orange juice. Feeling kind of silly he opens the refrigerator and, to his surprise, he finds his and Maria's favorite beer. He pulls two steel cans of the brew out and turns towards Peter who is already tossing a church-key his way.

“Rapture Red. Those are some killer suds.”

Never before seeing champagne and orange juice mixed together, Jacob asks, “What are you doing?”

“Mimosa. Try it, you’ll like it.”

“Naw, I’ll pass.”

Peter smiles, “Maria will want some. I’m sure of it.”

“Probably right, but I’ll take her a can just in case.”

Peter shrugs and looks away, and while stirring the concoction he pipes up, “So, Jacob, what do you do? Monique hasn’t had time to clue us in but, if I had to put money on it, I figure you’re military.”

“Does it show?”

“Afraid it does.”

“What do you do, Pete?”

Peter pulls the spoon out and tosses it into the sink, “I drive a Bulldog for the Forty-Sixth Marine Air Group.”

“Marines! Way kewl.”

“The Few, the proud, the dead on the beach!”

Peter, having poured three glasses of Mimosa, has stepped up to the frig and puts the pitcher in it, and as he does, Jacob notices a spider web of faint scars on Peter’s forehead around his left eye.

Gesturing to it, Jacob asks, “So, you get punched through a canopy or somethin’ along those lines?”

Peter snorts, “Naw, ground action if you can believe that. Got caught off-guard swingin’ bigger balls than standard issue.”

Peter stops and the realization hits him just as it hits Jacob.

Peter laughs, “I don’t believe it...it’s you!”

“Wow, small world!” Jacob’s astonishment then downshifts into a twinge of guilt, “Sorry ‘bout your people.”

“It wasn’t our fight. We should have sat it out.”

“At least you did nail me. That round you got off, which by the way was well placed, but at the wrong angle, went in under my arm and spun me around.”

“You almost got me good.”

“I made a point to just clip ya.”

“Thanks! I’m glad you meant to do that.”

"My aim is true!"

Starting out towards the pool, Peter nods, "Ya know, I laughed for days after watching you get chewed out the way you did. No one believed me when I told that story. No one could possibly believe that you, of all people, would take a dressing down like that! But, hey, everybody has to answer to somebody, right? It's pretty wild that I get to meet you for real, Mr. Graves. It sucks that I can't tell anybody about meeting you today."

"It's, Jacob. Please, I'm nobody special and, yes, thank you for wanting to keep our little visit on the Q.T. but we are being watched and they will end up approaching you about it. Just tell them the truth when they do."

"It's not like I'm gonna pick up on anything special, right?"

Jacob nods, "You got that right."

Stepping up to the group, they pick-up on Maria lecturing Jordon on the secrets of a good marriage, "No-no-no! Jordan, the sign of a successful marriage is when you can lead his ass around like a bull by the nose. Better yet, if he's real stupid! I mean, if he really loves you that is, he'll get himself knocked off and make you a rich bitch! Till death do *he* part, right?"

Jacob moos, "Buuull-sheeeeeit."

As he hands Maria the can of beer, Monique laughs, "Jacob, where ever did you find her? She's incorrigible!"

Maria throws her hand out to Jacob, "Don't answer that! What they don't know won't hurt you."

Trying to suppress her laughter, Jordon blurts out, "Stop it! Be nice! I like him!"

Maria smirks, "I am being nice! I let him live another day didn't I?" Taking the can she asks, "What took you boys so long?"

Jacob plops down beside her, "If you must know, the Major and I were getting reacquainted."

"Major?" But before Maria could finish her question, Peter hands her a glass and she blurts out, "Mimosa!"

Peter gloats at Jacob, "See, I told you she'd go for it."

Jordon frowns, "You two have met before?"

Peter tries to cut it short, "Long time ago. No biggie."

Maria prods, "Hey, Peter, where would you know this guy?"

Jacob points to his own face, "The Marine thing on Sapphire?"

Maria mouths the words, *That's him!*

Peter adds, "I was a 'Lieutenant Mimosa' then."

Jordon scowls, "I want to hear this, Peter."

"No, you don't." Peter shakes his head.

"Jordan's a big girl." Monique reassures Peter, then turns to Jordan, "Eleven years ago your brother led a counter-attack against some lunatic who was shooting up a base where he was on layover."

Monique then turns to Jacob with that *your turn* look in her eyes, so Jacob adds, "I was that lunatic."

Monique then turns to Jordan, "Satisfied? Go ahead, ask."

Jordan looks at Jacob, then turns to Peter, "So, that's how your face got all fucked up! I thought you've always been a pilot?"

Jacob interjects, "Marine pilots are ground qualified first."

"Yea, but no one in the platoon was going to follow my ass without Top. Unfortunately, Top got hit half way up."

Jordon scolds, "What were you thinking, ya dumb-shit!"

Peter protested, "We were taking fire, and there was only one of you!" He looks to Jordan, "On his way down this guy shot a bunch of holes through our ships! What were we supposed to do?"

Maria coughs, "Ya, how tough could one guy be?"

"I'll say. After a few minutes of his shit, I was the only one that wasn't hit. A whole squad downed by one man. Cripes, did we get our asses kicked or what!"

Slightly embarrassed, Jacob apologizes, "Sorry."

"No need for that. We should have ran the other way." Peter turns to Maria, "Marshall Ramirez, I have to thank you. The way you chewed Jacob a new ass-hole made my recuperation bearable."

Peter raises his glass to her in salute, "I am honored to make your acquaintance too, Marshal Ramirez."

"You're welcome, I guess?"

Frowning at Peter, Jordan snarls, "You asshole!"

"I gather there are no hard feelings between the two of you?" Maria points to Peter and Jacob.

The two respond in unison, "We're cool."

They look at each other and laugh out loud, and to Maria that was just way too coincidental.

Monique swirls her drink and nods her head, "If you two are on good terms then it shouldn't complicate what I'm about to tell you."

Jacob, Peter and Jordan look at Monique with a curiosity. Maria, however, rolls her eyes because she has already figured it out.

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The tour of the chateau was impressive to say the least. Remarkable by its artistic appointments, but surprisingly devoid of ostentatious-ness, it is exactly how Jessica remembers it. That is, exactly how Jacob remembers it.

Memories that she has quietly taken from her father.

Living in space rarely avails one to architectural eye-candy that is this chateau, and Jessica has never seen such a décor in the minimalist and almost Spartan world of the Annex. To experience the opulence of hotels and resorts is one thing, but to tread in such a place that people *actually live in* is something quite another. On the way to his wing of the chateau, Josav understates the importance of the artworks that litter the place, yet interspaces between the works of masters he points out the insanely powerful illustrations by Ralph Steadman, and the delightful watercolors by the obscure Matthew Monks. Liken to Josav, these artists also cry out to her.

Art has been a hobby for Josav and with trillions at her disposal, Monique has entertained his desire to procure these works. The payoff is that she has successfully groomed him into being *the* expert on her collection. Josav is already managing it very well on his own and so much so that curators and dealers are starting to contact him directly. Anymore to say that Monique only holds the power of veto, and the checkbook, is not an exaggeration.

Josav didn't tell Jessica any of this—she just took it from him. As well as the knowledge that Monique is positioning him to inherit all her art, estates, and industries. Peter and Jordan are okay with this because they themselves want nothing to do with it. Josav's polarity, wealth, and flat-out sexiness means he would be a hot-ticket to many an ambitious female, but it's his humility, industriousness, and self-effacement that impresses Jessica the most. More so that she knows that he is checking her out at every turn, and he sees potential in her as both a partner and a confidant.

Jessica may be twelve, but she is starting to blossom. In the last year this skinny twig has started to fill out. She may be twelve, but she is way behind the curve in losing her virginity. Granted, most children lose it early-on, and usually to someone of the same gender, but following that they'll start dabbling in the opposite sex by the time

they reach puberty. Because of her abilities, Jessica has experienced more ten-fold, by proxy, than anyone else could possibly imagine before they-themselves reach the majority. Jessica finds it odd that people put so much stock in sex and intimacy, but now that she has run into Josav she finds herself conceptually at odds with herself.

Now in his suite of rooms, covered wall-to-wall in movie marquees, Jessica realizes that she has interests other than listening to histories about movie blockbusters and disasters. As he shuts the door he turns and faces Jessica who has closed the distance between them. Just inches away, Jessica has a coy, but knowing look in her eyes as she lifts her face up towards his.

With Jessica deep inside his bubble, instead of shying away Josav cuts what little distance there is between them in half, and boldly comments, "You have pretty eyes."

When their lips touch it is soft and tentative strokes at first and Jessica is rather impressed by Josav taking his time and patience while looking for the invite so, to push on, her lips part slightly and the tips of their tongues meet.

Few things are remembered as much as the first kiss. Usually both the participants are awkward, clumsy and inexperienced, and the moment is cherished as a remarkable event simply because it was the first. This kiss is truly remarkable for Jessica because of the depth of skill and maturity demonstrated by Josav.

Jessica will never forget this moment for two reasons. First is the mind-blowing connection she makes with Josav. The second is the almost Earth-shattering revelation that floods her mind and so rudely encroaches on the moment.

Suddenly, Jessica breaks the kiss and jumps back as if someone had slapped her, "What the fuck!"

"Did I do something wrong?" Josav pleads, "I'm sorry!"

Jessica throws her hands out, "NO! You did nothing wrong! I—ah, something came up! And—ah—nothing wrong at all!"

"You okay?"

"No—yes!" Jessica grabs her head, "Okay, this makes no sense, but we're okay! I'm not!"

"Hu?"

Jessica growls, "I'm gonna hurt someone!"

Jessica stomps out of the room and weaves her way through the chateau with Josav in tow, keeping a safe distance, and as she blasts out the doors to the cool deck in her mind she broadcasts to

Jacob and Maria, <"I finally meet a boy I want to get to know, if you know what I mean, and...and I don't fucking believe this one!">

Via the tacnet Maria shoots back, <"Stand down, Jessie!">

Jessica stops beside Maria and Jacob as she screams at them in her mind, <"When is it ever a good time with you people!">

Maria shakes her head, <"Now is not a good time!">

<"I lose a sister and it's not a good time! When were you gonna tell me about her, hu? I've cried myself to sleep about that one but I couldn't say anything because, well, because it's obvious!">

Maria looks at her and pleads, <"Now *is not* a good time!">

Oblivious to their conversation, Josav breaks the apparent silence by asking, "So, what gives?"

Jordan clears her throat, and asks Monique, "So, that's him?"

Monique confirms, "That he is."

Confused, Josav goes, "Hu? Somebody gonna clue me in?"

Peter gestures towards Jacob, "Josav, I want you to meet your grandfather. Jordan's and my father...Buzzard."

"Buzzard? My grandfather is a...bird?"

Peter smiles, "Buzzard Chow is his call sign with the Annex. In the Co-op they call him Azrael."

Josav asks, "Azrael?"

"Mortis Angeles." Monique adds.

Because of his involvement in art Josav is a student of Latin, so to clarify he asks, "So, my grandfather is the Angel of Death?"

Jacob awkwardly waves by wiggling his fingers towards Josav and sheepishly chirps, "Hi!"

"No shit?" Josav asks.

"No shit!" Maria confirms.

It's not everyday that, as an adult, you meet your father for the very first time. Jordan and Peter never expected this to actually happen but here they are. Then for Josav it's not everyday that you get to meet your grandfather for the first time but this is not a trauma for Josav because he has always known his father and he knew of one set of grandparents and those two more than made up for the loss of the second pair.

The others being either dead or *non grata*.

And it's not everyday that you find out that someone related to you has an important job per se—but on someone's payroll as the *Angel of Death* is a little over the top in anyone's book. Then again, if memory serves him well, wasn't his great grandmother something of a bad-ass herself back in her day?

All this goes through Josav's mind, but the only thing he could come up with is a simple, yet quietly understated, "Kewl!"