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bigger balls than standard issue

LCTN: SOL-3, GLENDALE, CALIFORNIA  
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.009au from SOL)  
DATE: 2309ce-MARCH-31-WEDNESDAY  
TIME: 20:15zulu (local 12:15pst)

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 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—peaking 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.

Ashley 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 of our intentions, 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 smiles, “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. 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. Maria points to another but Ortega butts in like Ashley did.

“Do you expect a response?”

“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 *always* does.”

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

The 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, “That 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 terrorist organizations—which is why the United Nations Security Council declared all independent retrofit programs a crime 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 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. 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, "Yeaaa Mommy! w00t!"

Jessica just shakes her head and looks out the window.

Noticing, 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 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 guys 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 pin him down '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, "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 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, "Considering the invasive capability of Fifty-Two, I suspect she knows quite a lot."

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 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 amused, "What makes you think I wouldn't perceive you as a pain in the ass?"

"Me? A threat! I know my place."

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

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

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

Jessica hisses, "They're an abomination! I can't tell if they're simply naive or showing the 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. Promising I won't give you a 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. She, 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 her 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 she 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, ya 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 she 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 made of grey stone with a deep-blue trim, and leaded windows. The micro-turret 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 breaths 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 opens 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's 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 want to apologize for my ugly behavior. Looking back, you have to admit, it was such a trivial matter."

"No, I 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 this time is enough."

"I think we'll be able to do better. 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 this is Josav, Jordan's first, and Connie."

Jacob pats Diego on the back, "Go play, 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 thumbs Jessie to follow him, and as they walk away, Monique turns to Maria, "You must be Maria. I've 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. Carlos worships the ground she walks on. Your little boy, Diego? He's a gem."

Maria smiles, "Yes."

"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."

"Jessie is going to be a heart breaker."

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

"Appearances are 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 pleasant is the adjective I'm thinking of."

Monique offers her and Jacob a double recliner, "Trust me. She may be 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, Jacob turns to Peter, "She hasn't changed a bit."

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

"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 he starts off for the kitchen of the chateau, Jacob turns to follow.

"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 he hears a loud pop, and he nervously looks over his shoulder—only to find Peter pouring champagne into a pitcher of orange juice. Feeling silly, he opens the frig and again 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 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. 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'?"

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 wrong angle—went in under my arm, and spun me around."

"You almost got me for 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 the 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 approach you. Just tell them the truth when they do."

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

"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, he'll get himself knocked off and make you a rich bitch! Till death do *he* part, right?"

Jacob moos, "Buuuuull-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, "Stop it! Be nice! I like him!"

Maria smirks, "I am being nice! I let him live another day didn't I?" Then, taking the can of beer, 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 pushes, "Hey, Peter, where would you know this guy?"

Jacob gestures to his forehead, "Sapphire, remember?"

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

Peter adds, "I was '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?"

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

"Ya, 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, dumbshit!"

Peter protested, "We were taking fire, and there was only one of them! 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 down by one man. Cripes, did we get our asses kicked or what!"

Slightly embarrassed, Jacob apologizes, "Sorry."

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

He raises his glass to her in a 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 too coincidental.

Monique swirls her drink and nods her head, "Then I think it shouldn't complicate what I'm about to tell you."

Jacob, Peter and Jordan look at Monique with curiosity. Maria, however, rolls her eyes. 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 you to architectural eye-candy that is this chateau, and Jessica has never seen such 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 interspaced 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. He is already managing it very well on his own. 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, wealth, and industries; and that Peter and Jordan are okay with this because they themselves want nothing to do with it. Josav's polarity, wealth, and flat-out sexiness may mean he's a hot-ticket to many an ambitious female; but it is 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. More than 95% of them lose it to one of the opposite sex before they

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

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, she has a coy, but knowing look in her eyes as she lifts her face up to his.

Instead of shying away, Josav boldly comments, “You have pretty eyes.”

When their lips touch it is soft and tentative at first. Jessica is impressed by Josav not trying to eat her face, and by his skill in looking for the invite. So, to push on, she parts her lips slightly and the tips of their tongues meet.

Few things are remembered as much as the first kiss. Usually both the participants are awkward and inexperienced, and the moment is cherished as a remarkable event simply because it was the first. This kiss is remarkable 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, it 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 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!”

With Josav in tow, and at a safe distance, Jessica weaves her way through the chateau and blasts out the doors to the cool deck by the pool, all the while broadcasting, <“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!">

<"When is it ever a good time with you people!"> Jessica screams in her head as she stops besides Maria and Jacob.

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 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, "Is that him?"

Monique confirms, "That's him."

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?"

"That's his call sign with the Steel Annex. In the Co-op they call him Azrael."

"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 says, "Hi!"

"No shit?" Josav asks.

"No shit!" Maria confirms.

It's not everyday that, as an adult, you meet your father for the first time. Jordan and Peter never expected this to happen, but here they are. And it's not everyday that you meet your grandfather for the first time, but this is not a trauma for Josav because he knows his father, and he knew of one set of grandparents and that 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 the day?

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