30 truth in wine

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The "big reveal" was a first-rate air-tight mind-screw and had exactly the desired effect which was to throw the attendees completely off balance. When the representatives from the US State Department, the FDA, UN, FIS and the press were told on approach that they were going to meet "aliens" they all rolled their eyes in absurd disbelief because they've been fed this gimmicky bullshit before however, the sight of ginormous sauropods noshing away on tall trees during touchdown should have suggested to them that they were in for something completely different.

The vision of the Xhemal elder, Caesar, greeting them at the debarkation ramp, and a half-dozen more of those things walking freely about, seems to have overloaded their collective startle-reflex, and if it wasn't for Bob and Michal standing there with Caesar you can bet they all would have high-tailed it back up the ramp.

Caesar gave them a quick rundown of the itinerary while on the way to the brewery where he handed them off to Snoopy—their primo brew master. All during the tour Snoopy had to keep reminding the FDA inspectors to note where they were holding to the FDA as well as the Institute of Brewing and Distilling standards out of London. Focus was a little off because this feathered monster was a delight to listen to and so damned well versed on requirements that they themselves had to bone up on before arrival. The one chief-inspector they brought ended up being the voice for the group and he had a wonderful time chatting it up with Snoopy over things like hygiene, mash, temperature and cask preparation.

The protracted discussion at the winery covered a whole galaxy of oenology practices such as pressing, must, racking and the

need for malolactic fermentation because of the thirty odd varietals of the berry they harvest have many characteristics more akin to Earth's cherries than grapes.

To close out the afternoon, at the distillery the focus was on tertiary fermentation of wine with bleached sugar for distilling vodka, and raw sugar for refining the Rakija. Snoopy's claim that the sugar they source from United States producers have the quality and product consistency they needed but the State Department rep already knew better and kept that tidbit of truth to himself. Prying open a direct export pathway to the Pleiades has been their primary concern and this nailed it for them.

There is big mischief afoot—forces that he is indirectly mindful of who want to see this deal done and are putting the screws to his superiors towards that end. This is not exactly a simple thing being proposed here but both a precedent setting and human altering event. The public knows that there are whole planets of alien life out there but this would be the official "first contact" with an intelligent alien species that the public will be made aware of. A species that can be spoken to in English, is conversational for being a predatory dinosaur of all things, non-space faring as well as technologically unthreatening, and the owners of RRI Bottling, out of Sapphire, who gainfully employs over two hundred human beings and distributes an ale that they've been brewing on their home planet that many in the general public have been happily schnockering back for what is now going on twenty some-odd years. News at five!

What does give the State Department rep a sense of relief is that the Xhemal pass the FDA inspection with flying colors without his intervention but, on the jaunt to the wine tasting event, the questions come up about how to publish said findings and how exactly is the press is going to cover this reveal?

So, it's off to see the Caesar.

"Ah, what to do?" Says Caesar as he pokes at the slabs of brisket on the barbeque with metal tongs—everyone there hanging on his every word because...look at him!

Scratching his nostril with his wrist, and adjusting his apron that says 'Kiss the Cook' on it, Caesar mentally whips out the scripted responses that he, Michal and Bob were already ready for, "Maybe you should consider reporting this as you would anything else you would report on? From what Michal Pitney told me your people are going to have an incredible range of reactions from flat-out denial and it'll go right up the scale from there! There's no kit-glove treatment that I can think of that's going to help this one. Just be as matter of fact as you can."

One of the three reporters asks, "Just like that?"

"Ya!" Caesar then wags his tongs at him, "If I may suggest, how about you and your cameramen, all of you in fact, stay for the next two or three days and we give you a tour of the off-shore farming operations, you can see that, and we can also take you on a photo-op and get some shots of the local...what you call dinosaurs."

Another reporter asks, "What do you call them?"

"Food?" Caesar snorts a big laugh and gestures to himself, "What do you think we are?" He then points to the barbeque in almost a wide-eyed panic, "This is cow! Just so you know it's beef brisket and I love beef. It's like candy to us. In fact we barbeque pretty much everything we hunt now. It's sooo much tastier!"

He closes the barbeque and motions them to follow him and Snoopy to the wine tasting tables, "So, you have Michal here, why don't you ask her to host a documentary? I'm sure she'll do it! Get all your footage together and cut a show from it. Post it a few days after the initial news report goes out. I'm sure you can throw a script together pretty quick. You're reporters! This is what you do."

Already at the wine tasting venue, with a table for each of the four wines, two beers, vodka and Rakija, each presentation clean and pleasant with bushels of the berries and stat sheets for show. Caesar picks up a glass of what would be best described as a Malbec. He sniffs the bouquet with the reverence of a maître d' spiriting away the last bite of a masterpiece.

"Sorry that this flight is strictly vertical, but I think we can improve on that in the future." Swirling the wine in the glass he adds, "This is my favorite. We've brought in and sampled many of the wines you enjoy and I always come back to this one. As much as I'd like to secretly think of myself as a Sommelier I realize that I can never be. I'm prejudiced by our output. But, hold off on this till the end because it goes best with the brisket."

With that, Caesar spreads his arms out towards the other tables and smiles, "Sample, sample, sample!"

Most everyone wander off to the other tables save for one reporter and her cameraman who decide to do some reporting, "Caesar, I hate to bring this up but there will be those out there who believe that you should have been allowed to stay in your natural state. What are your thoughts? What would you say to them if you were given a chance?"

"What a quaint notion!" Caesar hands her the wine he held and adjusts his eyeglasses, "I hear that they'll be, I think the words used were...indignant, arrogant assholes. However, the adjective I

like is ludicrous—and all that it implies. At least I'll be the one having to deal with all those tree-hugging environmentalist idiots."

"Because you're the leader."

"No, I'm an elder, Snoopy is the leader."

Snoopy pipes up, "Until tomorrow! Chell, the pretty one over there by the Rakija table, she's the new Xhemal leader."

As they look over at the table they notice the one female standing amongst the others which is noticeable because she is slightly smaller and has flowers in her two-tone plumage."

Snoopy puts his old beaten up fibre-weave hard hat on the FDA inspector's head, "I've already introduced you all to the new brewery, wine and distillery masters. After today, both Caesar and I will be off on new adventures."

As Snoopy ambles off towards Jacob, Bob and Jessica across the flight, the reporter turns back to Caesar asking, "New adventures?"

"Yes, might as well come clean." Caesar sips on a wine glass he just picked up and clears his throat, "We'll be joining the FIS as a full member. The vote will be next week. The following week my Sheila and I will be going to the United Nations in New York and petition for an observer mission status for Second Hand."

"Second Hand?"

"Ah, yes, the Annex refers to it by the code name for, Sierra Hotel, but we did toy with the idea of maybe renaming our planet. And then, after we've given it a lot of thought, everybody has been calling it Second Hand for so long it's kinda grown on us."

"Why Second Hand?"

Caesar nods towards the jungle perimeter, "For you humans, out there, if you were not properly trained and outfitted your life would be measured in seconds. That's not an exaggeration."

"It's that dangerous?"

"Oh ya, very much so!" Caesar then asks, "On that note, can I elaborate on environmentalists and what they think about the natural state? I really want to nip this one in the bud."

"Please do. We got time!"

As the camera pulls onto him, Caesar lays into it, "I want to talk about this...belief that many of your people have thinking there is a natural order or balance in nature. I hate to break it to 'em but this idea is, basically, a preposterous idea. The truth about the natural order is that it's always changing or in transition. The natural world is

pure unmitigated chaos with no balance in sight. Anyone who wants balance can take a snapshot, and that's the best they can do. Thinking you can strike a balance in nature is inane ecological hubris."

"That's a harsh indictment of the environmentalist cause."

"No, the phony environmentalists who think they have a right to have an opinion when they don't know what they're talking about indictment! This is a very specific group. Look, most of your people will step outside on any given day and say 'what a beautiful ladybug' and they are totally oblivious to the horrors upon horrors that thing wreaks on the world around them. Take it from me, an apex-predator in the natural order of things, the undisputed master of this-here planet, as a participant there is nothing balanced, orderly or beautiful about the natural world. And, in all honesty, the harshest indictment of all is when I lose sight of that...I become you."

"Wow." She then changes direction, "What is it that you like about having humans and technology around?"

"Oh, gawd, where to start?" Caesar thinks for a moment, "Pull a lever and water comes out—thirst is quenched! Push a button and *whoosh*—poop is gone! Plumbing, now that I have it I don't know how I ever lived without it? I could go on and on about conveniences but why? They're so obvious. Steam, okay, every one of us has their own Steam account! I love FPS!" Caesar points to himself then Chell, "You know, I just finished my Masters in political science through Georgetown University's on-line program, and Chell over there just got her MBA through UC of San Diego. My social page, yes, I have a social page, it has over a-hundred and thirty friends listed, and won't that be a double-take for them when I finally fess up to who I really am! Which will be in about a week or two."

The reporter laughs as Caesar then offers up a more poignant statement, "What troubles me when I think about it is that if you didn't come along when you did then we were destined for extinction. You people pushed a couple of rocks out of the way that were threatening this planet. Without that intervention then we'd have simply vanished as if we were never here. Not a memory, not a trace." As the reporter nods Caesar closes the deal, "Now we own a thriving business and want to make good on our own. Rub elbows with your species if you would allow us too."

The reporter now asks the obvious, "Don't you think that people might be scared of you? Being a predator and all?"

"Why?" Caesar shakes his head in amazement, "We hunt to feed. We don't kill just 'cause. Let's say we don't kill out of instinct. We're not animals. We operate with our higher brain functions and kill towards a purpose which is to acquire nourishment. We don't murder

if that's what anybody is worried about." Caesar points to the reporter, "I've read your histories and I'm curious as to what your species kills for exactly? You excel at it! In our eyes, you, you people are the scary ones by comparison. At least we give thanks for the victims we take."

"Is that for religious reasons?"

"No, it's the polite thing to do!" Caesar puts his hands out, "We don't have gods, or wood sprites, magical vestments, nor mysteries of faith. These are alien concepts to us. We have always been utilitarian and philosophically pragmatic in how we approach things like...astronomy for instance! We have always been able to see that our planet is an orb, orbiting a larger orb, orbiting a star that orbits a larger and more distant star. We used to theorize that air was a type of fluid, like water but only thinner. That is, until one of us demonstrated that water evaporates in air. It was at that point we did not know what to make of it. We couldn't imagine the concept of a gas, but we did know that there was a component in air that fueled our internal fire. That was oxygen. We knew it was there because in a closed space you would use it up and your internal fire would go out and die just like a real fire would go out and die in the same space. Observations that are all very logical."

Caesar points at the reporter, "You people brought us many answers but, the fact is, in the end you brought us many more answers than we had questions for and that surprised us! At least I know that, going forward, we both have the same questions ahead of us. Questions we can share and noodle over together."

Caesar takes her hands and looks her in the eyes, "I want to thank you for coming when you did." He pulls her in and hugs her big, "We have a bright future ahead of us because of you." Pulling back he gives her a peck on the cheek and says, "We can pick this discussion back up later. Let's mingle!"

Caesar pulls away and approaches Michal at the Vodka table, "Michal, baby, you ready for this?"

"Ready as I'll ever be. You stick with the script?"

Picking up a frozen syrupy-thick vodka shot, Caesar nods, "Pretty much. Had to ad lib here and there but I got out what we wanted me to get out. Hope they don't sound-bite it to death."

"Mention the ladybugs?"

"Not really. Makes sense to wait until we lay the rules out regarding security and invasive species." Caesar slams his shot back and adds, "Damn, those fuckers were a nightmare."

Early on a lady bug got through on a supply shipment. In the high oxygen atmosphere of Second Hand it exploded onto the scene and within a handful of years and successive generations it's progeny grew to the size of a tea cup and was killing everything in sight. Any creature smaller than a chihuahua was fair game, and it took fifteen years to wipe that evil thing out. Just a few examples still exist in the lab and when this tour is over, and the press gets an eyeful of what can happen to an innocent little bug let loose on this planet, the lab techs will kill those off once and for all.

Destined for the pin board golgatha, and making light of all the destruction they caused, some now suggest that a wooden stake soaked in garlic oil would be in order—after drowning in holy water with a silver bullet chaser.

Just then a wadded up stat sheet bounces off Caesar's head with Snoopy asking from the ale table beside them, "Ready for next week, grandpa?"

Caesar and Michal turn towards Snoopy and the others, and with a laugh Caesar asks, "Are you ready for your little adventure?"

Snoopy laughs, "Where you're going is fucken' dangerous."

Caesar smiles, "Let's not go there, Snoop."

Bob assures Snoopy, "Don't worry about him. We'll keep our eyes peeled for all the crazies."

Caesar insists, "You know I can take care of myself."

"No, you can't." Bob is slightly miffed by Caesar being flip, "You will be a walking target everywhere you go. We're not gonna have this discussion again. You just can't up and go do whatever you fuck well please."

Jacob chimes in, "He's right, Caesar. Snoopy is going to be much safer than where you're going to be."

Caesar points out, "If he gets through next week then you'll probably be right about that."

Snoopy tries to assure him, "I'll be okay."

Bob cuts this short, "Pull my focus and I'll bag your ass and throw you on the first trash-run outta there."

Caesar laughs to himself, "This is gonna be fun."

"I'm not joking."

"I know. I just think it's funny that he's going off to do some wet-work and I'm going to be in New York—and I'll be in the danger zone!" Caesar shakes his head, "Can any of you see how bizarre and

counterintuitive this sounds? Anybody?"

Jacob drives home a point, "Earth is a beautiful place and the people are wonderful, but on Earth they can't lock up the crazy ones! Now, off-world if they can't fix or manage those with mental problems they send 'em back to Earth where they are stuck with that problem. Some nutcases are obvious and you can steer clear of them, but most are walking around looking quite normal."

Bob adds, "It's true, Caesar. We have to treat everyone who may approach you as if they're going to shoot you."

Caesar shrugs, "It's hard to believe."

Michal speaks up, "Well, believe it. I know."

Bob throws this out, "Michal had three assassination attempts on her while she was the Secretary General. One was a professional and two were psychotics."

Caesar gives an almost startled look as Michal says, "I have to have a security detail everywhere I go on Earth. Maybe even for the rest of my life."

Jacob pats Caesar on the back, "Remember the environmental nutcases we warned you about? There are more nutcase-nutcases running around on Earth."

"Hu?" Caesar, in an attempt to deflect the conversation, looks at Jacob then down at Jacob's hand, then back up and suddenly he recoils from Jacob with a feigned indignation, "Get your hands off of me you damned dirty ape!"

All but Bob and Jacob are slightly surprised by that until Caesar points to himself with a big grin, "Caesar! Hu? Hu? Get it?"

Bob now pats him on the back, "It's 'get your stinking paws off of me' and I'm the only one here whose gonna get that."

Michal snorts, "Cultural references should be timely, Caesar."

Caesar comically rolls his eyes, "Well, I never!"

Bob laughs, "And you shouldn't!"

Just then Caesar's mate, named Sheila, steps up and says, "Hon, let's pull the beef and get it ready for serving."

As Caesar steps off he nods towards Snoopy, "You just come back in one piece, but I'm not going to blame anyone here if you don't. This is your choice so I'll blame you."

As Snoopy pulls his beer up to take a swig he says, "Gee, 'bout time you figured it out."

Just then Jacob pokes at Jessica, "Maybe you want to look into that?"

Two tables down Paula is walking arm in arm with Josav but she's trying to get Jessica's attention. They didn't know what to do with Paula until the next training cycle started after the first of the year, so she's been given to Jessica, and even though their bond is not by direct blood kinship they're becoming very much cousins.

Jessica was there for a purpose. Maria wanted Jessica to make sure all the puzzle pieces fell into place the way they wanted, and if she needed to pull any strings Paula has been keeping Josav conveniently occupied.

Jessica asks Jacob, "You good?"

"Ya, we're ducky here. You did good."

Jessica steps over towards Paula and Josav, and as she approaches Paula let's go of Josav's arm and does a slight and urgent hop, "I gotta go pee!"

And as Jessica faces Josav she notices in the corner of her eye Paula mouthing the words *'Tell her!'* at Josav. From the other corner of her eye she sees Josav shrug, so Paula then stamps her foot and gestures for him to *get on with it*, whatever it may be.

Jessica flat out asks Josav, "Ready for some buzzkill?"

Josav lifts his glass of wine, "Not yet, but soon."

"So, what's going on?"

"Not much."

"Paula sure was anxious to get away."

"She had to pee."

"Right."

Josav pipes up as he sits at a bench, "How are you involved with what's going on around here? Just curious."

"Ah, beating around the bush are we. Okay..." And she takes a sip form her wine, "I'll play. What makes you think that?"

"Just a hunch." Josav points to the glass of wine in her hand, "For starters you're still nursing that one and that's not your style."

"Sayin' I'm a lush?"

Josav smiles, "Can be?"

"My aren't we observant?" As Jessica sits beside him she rests her hand on his knee all the while noticing a Razorback dropping

in for a landing at the airfield, "What else do you have on your mind? Not to say I'm busy but instead of dragging your feet how about you spit it out before I beat it out of ya."

Josav starts laughing big, "That sounds so..."

Jessica joins in, "Aunt Maria! I know. I know. I think she's starting to rub off on me."

Josav corrects her, "No, she's done rubbed off on you."

"And...that's bad?"

Josav laughs, "I watch her interact with Jacob and I get to see what's in store for me as time marches on."

"And that's...bad?"

Josav whips his head back and guffaws, "I'm so fucked!"

Jessica prods him, "So you had a question?"

Josav nods yes with a shrug, so Jessica decides to goad him on, "You know you're way behind on fulfilling your quota of stupid questions, having a Y-Chromosome and all, but dragging a stupid question along only makes it even more stupid. With these questions ya kinda just blurt 'em outright! *In vino veritas,* feel me?"

"Hu?"

"There'd be truth in wine."

As Josav laughs, Jessica makes exaggerated hand from mouth motions showing him to puke it out.

Josav looks around, pursing his lips, thinking better of it, but then he finds the stones to ask the question he's been avoiding for quite some time, "How do you tell someone you love them?"

Talk about being blind-sided.

Jessica was not expecting this one. With her abilities she can know everything that everybody is thinking, like she has been at the wine tasting flight, but in her day-in and day-out activities and her personal life she refrains from doing that because she thinks life should have some mystery to it. Jessica also has the ability to manipulate what people think and physically do, like she was with the reporter talking to Caesar just minutes ago. With the power to know, fold and spindle people's thought and behavior like she can you'd think she'd be able to sidestep issues and avoid complications like what Josav just laid on her, but in Jessica's mind that would make life so uninteresting. Jessica has suddenly come to the kooky realization that the scenic route she chose to take, just a few years ago, has reached a rather provocative fork in the road—and the gore point is sharp.

Jessica looks out over the wine tasting event with her brow scrunching up here and there, and this went on for the longest count of seconds before she turns her glance over at Josav and says with the clearest and matter of fact voice she could muster, "I love you."

Josav was surprised by that one because what she said was a statement of fact and not an answer per se, "Really?"

Jessica couldn't resist sarcasm, "Don't let it go to your head."

Josav laughs big, "So, what do we do?"

"Does this change anything?"

"No." Josav then volunteers some information he looked up, "But, as half-aunt and half-nephew our status is genetically the same as first cozens, and in California and most jurisdictions we would be legal. Off-world it's a total non-issue."

Mentally scratching her head Jessica asks, "I thought the key point in the phrase 'it doesn't change anything' means that 'it doesn't change anything' (now spinning her fingers in the air) means 'it doesn't change anything?' Or, am I missing something here?"

Josav thinks about it, "It doesn't?"

"Good answer!"

After some silence Josav asks, "So what do we do?"

"What we're doing."

"Which is nothing."

"If it doesn't change anything then why would it matter?"

After about a half a minute of silence Jessica comes to the realization that, "It changes everything doesn't it."

"Yup." Josav states matter of fact.

"I have to let this soak in so I can't fawn all over you now." Jessica looks over at him with a lust in her eyes that cuts through the sterile façade, "You'll have to wait until I get you alone."

Josav thinks about it for just a second and coyly suggests, "We can turn in now if you want? We have our rooms already."

"Remember the old saying that good things come to those who wait? Ever hear that one?" Josav nods his head *yes,* so Jessica urges him to, "Wait!"

"Ah, sweetheart, twelve o'clock." Josav points up towards Bob, Michal, Snoopy and Paula. With them is Maria who just happened to have shown up out of the blue.

With Maria joyfully hugging Snoopy, Paula and then Jacob, Jessica wonders why she is here, but with her breaking away from them and heading directly towards her and Josav, Jessica realizes something is amiss and says to herself, "What's this about?"

Maria stops and with a big smile, "Hey Josav! You two having fun? I hear that the food is going to be great. Damn, it smells great! I wish I could stay!"

Jessica, with big wide-eyed surprise, "Hi, Maria!"

"You got a minute?" Maria turns to Josav, "Just a couple of minutes. We won't be long."

Jessica asks, already knowing the answer, "It can't wait?"

Maria snarks, "Unless you're having the most mind-blowing romantic moment in your life then...no, it can't."

Jessica doesn't have the heart to tell Maria that, yes, this is the most mind-blowing romantic moment in her life. The conveyance of love by Josav and herself, genuine and sincere, sitting on this bench, means more to her than all the heated, sweaty and screaming orgasms she could ever experience in a thousand lifetimes. In spite of the awkwardness of the moment it's something they really wanted to drink in and treasure.

On that note, considering the intrigues Jessica is part of on behalf of the SA she motions for Paula, who has been watching them doggedly from afar, to come and keep Josav company while she and Maria break away for a chat.

They meander off to the far end of the clearing where Jessica opens the floor, "Okay, what got so FUBAR to bring you out here?"

Maria says with concern, "I don't know where to begin?"

Jessica asks, "Am I in trouble?"

Maria replies, "No! Not at all, but you're involved! How about we play the question and answer game! Short and sweet answers."

"Okay."

"Good! You got the idea." Maria thinks about it and throws this out, "Does Red know they are you?"

"We're talking about the Omegas, right?"

"What the fuck do you think?"

"Then my answer is, no."

"Do they know they are you?"

"Yes."

"Is Fifty-Two in communication with them?"

"Yes." And Jessie puts her fingers up signifying a little-bit.

"Elaborate." And Maria does the same with her fingers.

"Girl talk, mostly."

"Nothing important, right?"

"Nope."

"Is red encouraging the contact?"

"Yup."

Maria frowns at that one but Jessica puts her hands out trying to calm her down, "It's okay! Remember it's me they're dealing with. Not my mom."

Maria asks, "Are you encouraging them to...excel?"

"No." Jessica puts up a finger and mouths the word *but*.

Maria says it, "Buuuut?"

"I haven't been holding them back."

"Maybe you should?"

"They need guidance more than having their chain yanked. I'll see what I can do." Jessica then adds, "Spooky, aren't they?"

"No, they're unnerving. The boys are spooky."

"But we're not here to talk about the Omegas, are we?"

Maria goes, "Ding-ding-ding! How'd you guess?

"Intuition."

"Or maybe just a good guess?"

"I knew the moment I saw you walking up towards me."

"You knew about the meeting today?"

"That was why you weren't gonna be here in the first place! Remember?"

Maria chews on that one for a second, then she flat out asks, "Is Seth connected to them."

"Wow!" Jessica whispers and nods her head yes.

"In what way?"

"Directly."

"A little more, please?"

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"He's one of them."

"Did you see that coming?"

"No."

"Is it bad that he's connected? Will there be negative fallout with Seth as a result?"

"No."

Maria gestures for more so Jessica adds, "You just have to trust me on that. Any attempt to disconnect them now will blow back in your face."

"Okay, is Jacob connected to the Alphas?"

"Not exactly."

"What does 'not exactly' mean exactly? And I need you to elaborate on that one. Let's detour from the rules shall we?"

"His attitude is spilling off on them."

Maria growls, "Then I gotta fix that."

"No! No you don't, and what's more you can't. They have established a critical foothold with him and you can't dick with that or you'll get the worse possible spoilage."

"The center has had them for four weeks now and they are impossible for the staff to work with. They don't cooperate for shit, but *surprise* they sure *can* talk! I don't know what to do from this point because I have hundreds of them placed and ninety more in queue. I can't start over!"

"You're not hearing me." Jessica stabs her finger in Jacob's direction, "Do you want that?"

"That's the whole point!"

"I met his mother two summers ago when we went to his aunt's funeral." Maria is about to blow a gasket and Jessica puts her hand out, "Let me finish, okay? I pulled her memories and what you see at the center is exactly what Jacob was as a child. You have to let those little guys be who they are or all you're going to have is a fight on your hands."

"How am I going to mold those things into soldiers!"

"You can't."

"Then how can I get Jacob on board?"

"You don't get it. Father will come around when he's ready, but that won't matter because the Alphas are already learning from

him through osmosis."

"Hu? What?"

Jessica laughs, "I couldn't think of a better word."

"This is giving me no comfort."

"They're learning at an exponential rate and there is nothing you can teach them where they are not already ten steps ahead of you. It's like the Omegas, the girls are giving you the impression they are being cooperative and learning but, reality check here, they aren't learning a fucking thing from that staff or anybody for that matter."

"Then what do I do?"

"Stop thinking that you've got putty in your hands or a diamond in the rough. That's not what you have in either of them."

"What do I have then?"

"Plutonium, maybe?" Jessica shrugs big, "Look, when the Omegas and Alphas start mingling and interacting you are going to get some serious competition outta that mix." Jessica again points towards her father, "You'll end up with that but with a little gung-ho for added flavor. Just put off any mixing till they're in their teens."

"Shit serious?"

"You have to trust me."

Maria snarls slightly, and after a few awkward seconds Jessica dares to ask, "What did they say to you?"

"They?"

"The boys."

Maria had to check that she wanted to say and fell back on an evasive response, "Let's just say it spooked the shit outta me."

After a few seconds of nodding Jessica asks, "You stayin' now that you're here? The food is gonna kick ass! Love to have ya!"

Maria shakes her head, "I really need to get back."

"No, you don't."

"What the fuck to you know?" Jessica just looks at her so Maria corrects herself, "Oh, ya, that's right."

Just then Maria decides to probe about something that has been nagging at her for quite some time, "Fifty-Two seems to give you wide berth, like you got one-up on her. So much so it makes me wonder if you're a puppet-master or not."

Jessica dead-pans, "That a question?"

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Maria just shrugs, “No.”

Jessica stands her ground mute, and with no denial offered or forthcoming both know that silence is affirmation without admission. Jessica is careful to not respond so Maria takes care not to pursue it further, but this game changer does speak volumes to both.

Jessica throws a teaser out, “They found a Cankersaurus on the South Peaks. We’re doin’ a fly by tomorrow!”

“No shit!” Maria ponders her calendar and thinks, “Maybe I don’t have to go back just yet?”

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