

46

free range clover

LCTN: SOL-3, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.998au from SOL)
DATE: 2314ce-JANUARY-1-THURSDAY
TIME: 17:28zulu (local 10:28pst)

On the landing platform at the top of the One-Klick facility, one thousand and eleven meters above downtown Los Angeles, Maria and Jacob are waiting for the limo with Paula, Tyrol and the Clones to arrive. These two joined Bob this morning in a video conference with the UN Secretary General and the President of the United States on how to set up roadblocks to the peace process.

It's not that anybody wants a war, in fact nobody really wants this war, it's just that everybody wants this conflict settled once and for all. Those who understand the history and dynamics between the Hyades and the Frontier and the Co-op and the Annex realize that any negotiation or treaty will simply delay the inevitable.

Which happens to be war.

The people who are truly running the show in the Hyades are a shadowy-inaccessible corporate caste who use their elected ministers as chess piece intermediaries so a discussion over anything, even the time of day, becomes some byzantine legaleze skull-fuck.

The meeting that followed with the President and the leaders of Russia, Great Britain, France, Germany and China was a discussion about Secretary General, Lebedev himself. In their eyes he's gone "full tilt clinton" but they decide to do nothing—except to lend him the rope in which to hang. It was the Russian Prime Minister who closed out with, '*Until we find the right tree let us not talk of the rope.*'

Only the US President and ambassador Mofid knew of Bob's earlier deal with Tillsdale and are frustrated that this group could only come up with the exact same delaying tactic of jurisdictional disputes through the courts, and with no viable alternatives the timetable is set.

Bob ditched Michal this morning because her goal is peace, so as he takes a glider back towards the chateau to smooth things over with her, the limo passes him in route and lands on the platform.

With one of Monique's meaner looking goons, the one who was the acting photographer last night, and happened to impress the shit out of the Xhemal's photographer who was working beside him, slips out of the driver's seat and comes around to open the passenger door. Nikki-8, 52 and Paula get out with little effort but Tyrol has yet to budge, so as Paula steps up to Jacob and Maria, the clones laugh at Tyrol who appears stuck in the limo.

Paula is shaking her head, "We found him by the pool with two of his girls. We don't know where the third one crashed."

It was then the driver opens the adjoining hatch and Tyrol rolls backwards out onto the platform then bounces up on his feet and wobbles while trying to get his bearings. He is in one of Monique's long red satin gowns that is way too small, a pair of big dino-clawed slippers, and red sun glasses with huge heart shaped lenses.

As the driver hands him his Bloody Mary, with a stalk of celery and an umbrella sticking out of the top, he respectfully addresses this drunk by his full last name, "Good luck, Mr. Tyrolia."

With a stammer in his step, Tyrol heads towards Jacob and Maria while calling back, "Thank you for everything, Mac!"

Jacob and Maria are laughing as Paula says, "We got him shitted and showered and in the limo as fast as we could."

Maria catches her breath, "His clothes?"

Tyrol heard that and says as he stops in front of them, "Best we could do on short notice." He yawns big and, "The foot-gear are from Carlos, and I dunno about the glasses but Connie says they go with the threads. Waddya think?"

Maria just shakes her head, "We've nothing for you to change into before you get to Cue Ball, so it'll have to do."

"Paula said it was a come as you are."

Jacob leans in and shakes his free hand while he tries to suppress his own laughter, "That it is, son! I showed up here in boxers and flip-flops so we both started on similar footing."

Michelle Kiel and Pete, both suited up, have cantered over with Peter pointing at Tyrol, "Now, this is a fashion statement!"

Tyrol nods, "Who the fuck knows what I'm trying to state?"

Kiel plucks the Bloody Mary from his hand and gives it to Jacob while urging, "We gotta go, guys. The window is closing."

Peter races to his Bulldog fighter, "Later, gators!"

As Kiel hurries Tyrol, Paula and the clones away, Maria calls out to Tyrol, "Hey, Rufus, I forgot to thank you for spending all that time with Diego after her surgery. It meant a lot."

Tyrol, having turned around, adjusts the gown, "I absolutely adore your girls! That was the best ten days of my adult life so, in actuality, I have to be thanking you!" He pulls the glasses down and looks slyly over the lenses, "Still hate me?"

Maria smiles, "I'm now your biggest fan!"

Paula and Kiel yank him into the hold of the warthog.

Peter's fighter is already in the air circling the platform as the Warthog is given the go for launch. Because there were people standing on the platform they couldn't just shoot up as usual. The ship drifts slowly at first and when it reaches forty meters above the platform it shifts to a three-gravity vertical crunch into the sky.

With Jessica, Diego, Cloé and Victoria climbing the ramp to the platform, Diego goes, "Damn it!"

Maria says, "Sorry, hon, they were behind schedule."

Jacob suggests, "I tell ya what, when I go get them in six months you can come with. Sound good?"

Diego asks, "I gotta wear that suit-shit, right?"

Jacob shrugs, "If ya wanna go?"

Diego's shoulder's sag, "Okay, I'll gear up!"

Maria adds, "We'll have to scan you a week ahead of time."

With the drop ship initiating a burn, adding a lateral trajectory towards the southeast, Diego grumbles, "Fine."

Maria then motions for them to put out their hands, and as she counts twelve coins each the Bulldog fighter does a flyby while rocking its wings, so Cloé asks Jessica, "Who's in the fighter?"

"Pete."

"Why doesn't he just ride with 'em?"

"You know about Fifty-Two, right?"

Cloé is looking past Jessica, obviously just noticing a handful of shadows around them, saying, "Her abilities, ya."

Jessica makes a shooting-gun motion with her hand and, "C.Y.A. protocol. Everywhere she goes." Then pointing at the ground, "And those shadows, security for us. Everywhere we go."

"Oh, okay..." Looking at the coins Maria just put in her hand, Cloé then asks, "What are these for?"

Maria smiles, "Just do what everyone else does with 'em."

Diego adds, "Which is to throw them on the floor."

Cloé does a slight double-take, "Some of these are pennies!"

Jessica laughs, "Almost a crime, ain't it?"

Maria then urges them to get to the limo, "Come on, there are tamales and margarita's waitin' for me!"

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The direct route from the top of One-Klick to Maria's aunt's residence by the Echo Park Lake is a twenty-three degree glidepath due north. A three-degree glidescope is considered a normal decent, and twelve-degrees is standard for an emergency decent, but diving at greater than twenty-degrees has all the earmarks of a pending crash or a combat drop—depending on one's objective.

Big Mac could have requested clearance for a civil glidescope decent pathway—which would take them at least twelve kilometers out of their way. He could drop the limo to the ground like an elevator and opt to take to the streets—which would be stop and start ridiculous and still all of three or more kilometers out of the way.

Maria Ramirez, however, has diplomatic credentials and a VIP on board so they were cleared for the most direct decent route with a leisurely seven minute window.

They touch down in front of her aunt's house with a shadow squad of six cloaked troopers who have followed the limo down and instantly spread out in guard positions around the vehicle. The other cloaked squad from last night have already scoped the place out hours ago with the squad leader in anchor position in the front yard, two in high sniping positions, and three who have infiltrated the residence and interrogated the party goers unawares—hugging the ceilings and scanning for weapons.

The driver, Mac, comes around and opens the door.

They all pile out with Maria being the last to step on the curb, and as she does she looks down at her feet and, seeing a massive crack in the pavement, she gives a quiet prayer, "*Deus lo volt.*"

With everyone moving towards the house, Jacob quietly asks, "That's where he bled out?"

With a grim smile, Maria nods, "Yea."

Mac speaks up, “Marshal Ramirez, Marshal Graves, I’ll be out here if you need me. Just give us a shout.”

Maria asks, “Three-hundred feet, right?”

“Madame, I don’t know—”

“Mac, you don’t work for me.” She puts her hand out to offer him some coins, “You can do your three-hundred feet in this direction.”

“Ma’am.”

Maria turns and looks up at him, and at six-feet eight-inches Mac towers over both her and Jacob, she points to him and laughs while saying to Jacob, “Tall son-of-a-bitch, isn’t he? Big!”

Jacob snorts, “Don’t argue with her, dude!”

Mac shakes his head as she starts to count out the coins, “I’m not going to win here, am I?”

Maria smiles, “Do you know why I am who I am?”

“You don’t lose?”

“Ding-ding-ding!” She then says, “We’ll get you fed and a tequila doggy-bag to go on the way out.”

“Mighty kind of you, Marshal—”

“Nope! Today it’s, Maria.”

They reach the steps and climb, and as they do they see that Jessica, Diego and Cloé have already swept their coins through the doorway and are waiting for Victoria who says, “How humble is this!”

Jessica informs her, “Well, with pennies going for about eighty dollars apiece in U.S. exchange, they’re not exactly humble.”

Maria says to Victoria, “At least they’re not throwing buckets of water out the window.” Victoria obviously wonders about that as Maria adds, “Just strange shit us Mexicans do!”

As they step through Jacob, Maria and Mac drop their coins with Mac taking the broom and saying, “A handful of those pennies would make for a great weekend in Reno.”

Jacob quietly agrees, “That they would!”

Entering Maria’s aunt’s home, gingerly stepping on the small fortune in coins lying on the floor, Maria takes Victoria to the kitchen while Diego, Jessica and Cloé are sucked into the cousin vortex in the back family room. Jacob and Mac are stopped in their tracks by a small table with chips and three different salsas to choose from.

Jacob turns to Mac while reaching for a chip, “You like to eat?”

Mac smiles, "Favorite pastime...after brunettes."

"Well, the food here is just fucking ridiculous!"

In the kitchen Maria hugs both her mother, Ophelia, and her aunt, Agatha, from behind, "Thank you for having us!"

Ophelia turns around, "*Mi pequeña niña!*"

As Ophelia hugs her, Maria goes, "English, mom."

"Okay, okay!" Ophelia then sees Victoria, "*la Reina?*"

"I told you, it's Vic. Okay?"

"Okay, okay!" Ophelia reaches over and gives Victoria a big hug, "Bless you, Vic, for looking after my daughter!"

Maria's aunt, Agatha, steps in and after wiping her hands off on her apron she hugs Victoria, "Welcome to our home, *su Alteza!*" Then with Maria giving her a look she corrects herself, "Vic!"

Victoria smiles, "It's smashing to be here! Thank you!"

Maria say to Victoria, "They're a bit of a huggy bunch."

Just then, Adolfinia steps in from the back yard and goes, "God damn, you two! That was a hell of a fight last week!"

"Vic, this is Adolfinia I told you about."

After Adolfinia hugs both she grabs a bowl of butter and garlic with a brush, and as Victoria surveys the kitchen Adolfinia leans into Maria to whisper, "This your squeeze now? *Esa jeva es un mango!*"

With Maria gesturing for her to keep quiet, Adolfinia nods then elbows her, "We got a pig on a spit! Come tell me about Nufa."

As Adolfinia slips out back Maria turns to Victoria who says, "All this wonderful food! I am so peckish right now."

Noticing Ophelia motioning them to get out, Maria points to Victoria, "You wanna try real Mexican in a pinch?"

With Victoria nodding yes, Maria whips a bowl out from of the cupboard and pours cheerios in it—followed by milk and equal amounts of Kahlua. Handing the bowl and a spoon to Victoria, Maria says slyly, "Wrap your lips around this."

Taking a spoonful, Victoria's face lights up, "Oh, my God!"

"Cheerios *vaca marron*, that's sick, right?"

Agatha starts to shoo them out the door while saying, "Go see your sister out back and we'll send out *champurrado de leche.*"

While going through the door Maria requests, "Spiked!"

With them gone, Jacob and Mac come into the kitchen and Ophelia lights up, "Jacob! Mac! My two favorite young men!"

Ophelia hugs them both and has them sit at the table next to Monique's private chef who's been watching Agatha and Ophelia like a hawk—and with an almost envious glare.

With Ophelia putting out a tray of fresh tamales for the three, Mac asks the chef, "Learn anything new, Léon?"

Léon looks at Mac and responds with a severe French accent and *kiss-my-ass* in his eyes, "You know, Mac, I've studied cuisine the world over. I even know the difference between La-Mex and Tex-Mex, but this here is a world with so few ingredients, and yet we have so much variety. An embarrassment of riches!"

Mac bites into a tamale and, "The question stands?"

There is a sauce pan on a hot plate on the table so Léon dips a spoon in it, "Mole? You call this mole?" Léon looks and makes sure Ophelia and Agatha are out of earshot, "Gar-bage! It's like suet, and stone ground cacao brick and desiccated poblano and circus peanuts! *C'est des ordures!*" Léon shoves the spoon in his own mouth and he shudders as his eyes roll back, "*Magnifique! C'est le paradis!*"

Mac snickers, "Then...it's okay?"

Léon laughs while throwing the spoon on the table, "Fuck you! Fuck you, Mac!"

Jacob adds with a smile, "I think he likes it?"

Léon has grabbed a tamale and shakes it out over a saucer. "You have no idea..." Taking the spoon he cuts into the tamale, "I have never seen workmanship like this! It's sloppy, but who cares!" He takes a bite and smacks his lips, "The masa is course but sweet with a hint of salt..." Léon throws himself back in his seat and declares, "It's been decided! I'm going to marry this woman, Ophelia!"

Jacob and Mac look at each other then at Léon who shrugs, "We're the same age!"

Mac then says, "Marshal Ramirez and her mother do look like sisters if you ask me. Ophelia is a beautiful woman." Then as he takes a bite of his tamale he adds, "Nice ass, too."

Jacob shakes his head, "I can't...look at Ophelia as an object. It doesn't register, but...Mexican women do fuck like demons."

With Mac nodding big in agreement, Léon taps his fingers on the table like a gavel, "*Sacré bleu!* Then it is decided!"

"Léon..." Mac reaches for another tamale, "Where's your head. You're fuckin' nuts. Hit it and run, that's what you do."

Léon smirks, "Like demons, no? I can live with that."

Jacob just shake his head in wonderment, "Well, Léon, here's a preemptive welcome to the family! Just watch out, her last boyfriend she, ah, well, beaned in the head with a skillet."

"No!" With Léon that cinches the deal, "I'm in love!"

Diego, Jessica and Cloé wander in and Ophelia rattles away with, "*Mis chicas grandes!*" She hugs them then hands Jessica a tray of mugs with Mexican hot chocolate and asks, "Jessie, *mi roja*, could you take these to your Aunt Maria and Adolfina out back?"

Jessica notices four mugs, "*¡Sí!* Syleste here?"

Ophelia kisses her on the cheek, "By the spit, *vámonos!*"

As the three head for the backyard, Cloé asks, "Jessie, I hate to ask but isn't Maria your stepmother?"

Jessica stops in front of the table where Jacob, Mac and Léon are sitting, and nods towards her father, "Oh, ya, I didn't know my father while I was growing up. My mother and he were not on speaking terms but Maria was around all the time! When I was a little squirt I'd come here and she was my Aunt Maria then. Didn't know they were married but when I finally meet my father they were already on the outs. Confusing?"

Cloé looks at Jacob who says, "Pretty much covers it!"

She turns back to Jessica, "No! All make sense now."

With Jessica and Cloé stepping out Léon motions for Diego to hang back and asks her, "Sian, if you please! I have decided to marry your grandmother. What do you think of that?"

"You, what!" Diego starts cracking up, "You, my granddad? THAT would be awesome! You're a riot, Léon!"

Ophelia has stepped up, kissed Diego on top of the head, and hands her three mugs of hot chocolate, "For you girls." And as Diego heads out the back door, Ophelia turns to Léon with her hands on her hips, "Marry me? What makes you think you can handle this?"

Léon's confidence is vastly entertaining, "*Mademoiselle, au contraire!* A woman is to be worshiped! Not man-handled!"

Ophelia snorts a laugh and walks away mumbling, "*Idiota!*"

Léon smiles, "She's hooked!"

Mac laughs, "Hang it up, dude!"

Jacob shakes his head, "No, Mac. I think Léon is maybe onto something. I got a c-note that says he scores on this one."

“I’ll take that bet.”

Léon looks at Mac and sighs, “You are going to lose.”

Mac thinks about it for a second and pats Léon on the back, “This is one I hope I do.”

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Diego, handing a mug of chocolate to Jessica and Cloé, reacts with a curious horror at the hundred and fifty pound pig slowly rotating on a spit. This makeshift rotisserie was thrown together with crudely welded angle iron and a chain driven spit that makes a weird grinding sound because the electric motor is on its last leg. The bed of coals is harvested from a separate fire pit stoked with apple wood which is very hard to get your hands on here in Southern California. When it comes to food for family festivities, Adolfina will spare no expense.

The skin of the pig, head and all, is slit all over and has a perfect crackle to it. Adolfina is now basting it with a coat of salted butter and garlic to give it a little sheen on its last hour of turning.

Meats of all types, especially the most prized cuts, anymore are cultured, plentiful and cheap as dirt. A single free-range hog, like the one on this spit, can produce so many in-vitro plugs that it could feed millions upon millions through modern robotically-controlled ‘vertical farming’ operations. That’s what the latest VFOC farm animal breeds are designed for which is harvesting tissue samples—where a simple three cubic millimeter tidbit translates into 10,000 tons of end product for market. There are still traditional farms out there who specialize in breeding for slaughter and direct consumption which can get rather pricy when the animal is both plump and well cared for.

Again, for the love of family—no expense is spared here.

It’s just that Diego was not prepared to see an actual animal that was killed and cooked to perfection just for their dining pleasure, “Jesus! Is this thing for real?”

Jessica looks at her sister with amusement, “You’ve never seen this before have you?”

Cloé laughs with, “No biggie here! We do this all the time on the stumps...but the Bumbles are dumb as stumps.”

Diego looks up at Cloé, “What’s the difference?”

“Pigs are really smart and I’m gonna feel real bad while I’m chowin’ down.” Cloé looks at Jessica, “We’re chowin’ down, right?”

Jessica nods, “You can count on it!”

Adolfina hears the exchange and has already pulled a strip of meat and crackle, and hands it to Diego on a fork, "Try this, hon."

Diego looks up at Adolfina and then Jessica and says with a genuine pout in her face and a tear forming in her eye, "This is sad!"

Adolfina quietly encourages her, "*Vale*, it's its gift to you!"

Maria's younger sister, Syleste, a catholic priest in a black collarino shirt with the white tab, squats by Diego and says with infinite gentleness, "Diego, it's part of the cycle of life. Honor it."

Diego takes a bite and her face lights up, "Oh, my! This is sooo yummy!" She looks at Syleste, "I feel so guilty!"

Wiping that tear from Diego's cheek, Syleste smiles at her and stands, "Diego, hon, the bitter truth is you'll be faced with many things in life that should bring you guilt, but...this is not one of them."

Jessica hugs Syleste, "I've so missed you!"

As Jessica, Diego and Cloé wander back to the family room, Diego shares the meat with them, and as they slip into the house Maria pats Syleste on the back, "Well now, we've established a firm foundation for some future psychological complex. Good job, sis!"

Syleste snarks back, "Glad to be of service!"

"You're an ass." And as Adolfina hands Victoria a sample of the pork, and Victoria asks her about Afghanistan, Maria pulls her sister aside, "Okay, Mother Syleste, on your last text you mentioned you want to go back to being a parish priest. What the fuck gives?"

"I don't want to be an auxiliary anymore."

"You're next in line for Bishop, d'uh!"

Syleste looks up to the heavens and mouths the words, *forgive me*, then back down at Maria, "Fuck that!" Maria is startled so Syleste shares further, "This is too much work, and I used to get laid a lot more as a simple priest, and that wouldn't be such a big deal with my wife but...it's just that...I've garnered a greater appreciation for real cock now that I'm getting older."

Maria laughs while she recognizes someone, "Slut!"

Syleste reminds her, "I am your sister!"

"Let me ask you something, off topic..." Maria walks around Syleste and thumbs back towards the figure she saw, "That Junior?"

"Ya, our coz is here to see ya."

"So, ah, we supposed to kiss and make up or am I gonna slit his fucking throat in front of everybody? Just curious."

Syleste shrugs, "Well, it is your choice, but I'm one to vote for the kiss and make up option. It's a lot less messy and no cops."

Maria looks over her shoulder for just a second then turns back to announce, "Syleste, Adolfina, I'm goin' over here for just a minute or two. If you hear a commotion, like screamin' and shit. Don't, and I mean it, do not come running. Okay?"

Sitting beside a rusty 55 gallon fire drum is Agatha's son, Junior. Clinging to him is his boyfriend, Fabio. Junior is in baggies and a crisp-white a-shirt that accentuates his cut and build. Even with the scars, green bandana and patch over his missing right eye, Junior is rather attractive—in a brutal, hyper-masculine tomcat sense.

Maria steps up by the fire and motions to him, "Vato, this is The Crazy's hood! Those colors gonna get you scalped."

Junior points to the ground, "This here is a DMZ. We got a treaty so I can rep like a fucken' peacock." He taps a three-finger sign across his chest then gestures towards Maria, "*Homme*, what we got here is a free range clover."

"What the fuck you want, Junior?"

"*Perra Tigre*, you've been off the reservation for so long you don't remember where you come from. It's time for a civics lesson."

Maria utters a simple tacnet command, "Paint 'em."

From all around, targeting lasers flash over Junior and Fabio. Normally targeting lasers are wobbly, so much so you can even see the heart beat of the shooter, but these lasers are rock solid steady.

Junior laughs, "So we got spooky in the woodpile!"

Fabio snarls with youthful hostility, "*Puto gato*."

Junior is about to slap him across the face, "*Fabio, pinche puto*, show a modicum of respect, motherfucker." He sits back and, noticing the karambit knife in her waistband, he smiles, "You know, little Lynn, combat-casual looks good on you. Gives me a stiffy."

Maria flashes her teeth, "I was expecting to get jumped out. What the fuck happened is what I'm wondering."

"Yea, and go to the island with your boy, Jaime, and make babies and shit—away from the life."

"Wanda said I'd get jumped."

"You were Wanda's bitch. You were going nowhere."

"She cut Jaime's fucken throat."

Junior taps his own head, "Think! Wanda pulled on Diamond

so Peek-A-Boo had to call it in. See, you weren't gettin' jumped out. No, you were gettin' whacked."

Maria's predatory gaze is like on fire, "We just got married."

Junior puts a hand out, "Your boy saying that you went to the Justice of the Peace that afternoon, well, he was supposed to watch you die, but that news kinda turned the tables on 'im." Junior nods his head with a frown, "You did bag the two Crazys and Wanda. Nobody thought you could flip and go Rambo on us like that."

"Well, with all the throaty-cutty back-n-forth action, I just kinda got swept up in it all. So, what the fuck do you want before I tire of your suck and put your ass down."

"Parlay."

Junior pulls out her green bandana and tosses it to Maria. It's still tightly rolled, flat, tied at the ends, with Jaime's blood stains on it after all this time. Maria looks at it and the despair she felt losing a husband of three hours sweeps over her like a flash.

Maria grits her teeth, "What do you have to offer?"

"An olive branch. See, you got the means to seriously..." Junior flashes his hands out, "Poof, Diamond and Peek-A-Boo, but without the Peek-A-Boo force field The Crazys and Bloods will come down on Clover. Popcorn ol' Peek-A-Boo and there's no reason for a truce. We'll lose our turf."

"Yea, I hear you stuck your dicks in a few holes you shouldn't have, but that *turning state's* force field ain't gonna last."

"No, it's good for now. Just have your colors on when you're in da hood and we can put this behind us."

"How about out?"

"You get parlay—not out. If Peek lets you walk after killing Wanda we gotta cap 'im. There's principal to uphold, but the fact of the matter is we need to keep 'im alive...for now."

Maria now knows she killed Wanda, but the hit on herself will only be called off if she dons the colors again, "Parlay, how long?"

"Since this is all for show, you get it forever."

"Forever is a long stretch."

"You could say 'till the rivers flow up from the sea and grass grows into hell kind of forever. Ya know, pretty fuckin' forever."

Maria looks down and, full well knowing that she is now their extended force field, slides the bandana on and adjusts it to line up with her eye-brows, "Keep me and mine out of your shit."

Junior points to the ground, “DMZ, and in the Heights you got Switzerland. I’ll keep you apprised if the winds change.”

Maria thinks about it, “Sorry about your eye, cuz.”

“No biggie, it’s a mark of prestige. I lost my eye to *el Tigre*.” Junior laughs, “Damn, *chola*, you’re a legend! Bangers from all over came to spot their colors with your blood.” Junior points at her, “You know, we pulled up to the Klick to finish the job an’ this snow-white comes out of the lobby with a fuckin’ railgun, so we booked!”

Maria smiles and nods while whispering, “Maggie.”

Just then, Diego steps up between them and, noticing the bandana on her mother’s head, she faces Junior and asks them both, “You guys playin’ nice?”

Junior laughs, “Lil’ *chiquita* looks like a Ramirez.”

Knowing how dangerous he is, Diego pushes the envelope, “Junior, ‘bout that, you may be a Herrero but you look like an asshole.”

Junior is astonished by her backbone, “I love this little one!” He then reaches back and pulls out Maria’s old straight razor and holds it up, “I was supposed to give your mother her blade back. It’s got a lot of serious mojo flowing through it, but now...” Junior looks up at Maria, “I’m askin’ if this here little one should have it?”

This was Maria’s back up blade. The razor Wanda used to slice her up then kill Jaime with—followed by Maria going psycho and using it to kill Wanda, the two Crazy’s, and to put Junior’s eye out. To refuse it would show weakness, yes, but now to prevent it from going to Diego would demonstrate unforgiveable fragility. This razor may have bad mojo but that does not make it a bad omen. In fact, in this world it is a prize to be treasured, so Maria nods with approval.

The pride in Junior’s face is evident when Diego takes the blade from him while Maria says, “I’ll show you how to use it.”

With this détente firmly established, Diego glances down at the yard-toss boards on the ground and looks up, “You know, Junior, these washers aren’t gonna throw themselves.”

Junior lights up, “*Homme*, we got ourselves a challenger!”

By the fire pit, Victoria delights in hearing about Aldofina’s last big fight in Afghanistan, but lurking in the shadows unseen, between the house and the pit, is Jessica. Bullets have been dodged, fences have been mended, and with a deep sense of relief she takes a cleansing breath and slips back inside.