

54

divas

LCTN: SOL-3, MALIBU, CALIFORNIA
CORD: SAO-0.01 (1.002au from Sol
DATE: 2318ce-APRIL-19-FRIDAY
TIME: 01:35zulu (local 17:35pst)

Jessica is in a limo, a Mach-glider, racing over Griffith Park on its way out to Malibu with ol' Mac piloting it. She's sitting shotgun instead of riding in the back because Mac is usually a lot of fun to chat with but today he's seems more than a bit preoccupied. The awkward silences leaving her wondering what the hell is eating at him?

They're running just a smidge late because over the last two hours Jessica has been engaged in a "captivating" heart to heart with Monique Ribot. What floored Jessica was that Monique already knew she was Scarab, which was why she stopped bugging her about career goals over four years ago, and that was also about the time when the rumors of Scarab started circulating in the intelligence community, but Monique wouldn't divulge on how she knew back then and informed Jessica that she'll fill her in when the time is right.

With the conversation finally coming around to what Monique was really tunneling for, what Jessica knew about her and her business interests, Monique was surprised that Jessica deemed her off limits just like Maria and family. The one exception being her father and Monique relished in the explanation as to why—and was floored by hearing of Jessica's resourcefulness and outcomes when put to the question. Monique now realizes that the *diamond in the rough* she met years ago has cut and polished itself all on its own.

Walking Jessica to the limo, as a parting gift, Monique points to her own head while saying, "*Ma moltié*, sooner than you think I will let you ransack this. I'll insist on it."

Now over Malibu, Jessica looks at Mac and asks, "Agatha?"

Mac just shakes his head with a sigh, "I should never have started smashin' on that."

"I saw you on *Cubanaza* a couple of times."

"Fuckin' keeps trying to bring me onto that damned show and I don't know why?"

"Well, let's review!" Jessica wiggles a finger at him, "You're the size of a bear and cut to ribbons. You have a perfect afro and always dressed to the nines. Mac, dude, you are one hot commodity! She's just showing off goin' *look what I got!* Fuck, I would!"

Mac snorts a laugh, "Thank ya, Red."

"So, what's the problem? She putting the shackles to ya?"

"No! It wasn't exclusive. I could do what I want."

"So, what's the problem?"

"Lucia." He puts his hands out and motions them like he's gripping her butt cheeks, "Have you see dat ass? It's like yours, its mesmerizing how they move independently and flex and shit!" He then puts his hands down and huffs, "To risk sounding, as Monique would say, cliché, she's rubbing off on us all, but baby got back."

Jessica just shakes her head, "Lucia is a bit of a slut."

With the limo descending, Mac says, "I tried not to look! Tried to be good, and I tried to steer clear but that bitch is relentless!"

Jessica is about to burst out laughing, "So you caved?"

"Ah, d'uh, yea! I tore that shit up!" Nodding big, Mac smiles, "Made 'er tap out."

"Hu? Wha' Lucia?"

"Yup, bitch cried, Uncle."

Jessica laughs, "So, why the long face?"

"Agatha kicked me to the curb but wants to start up again."

"So, she did break if off!" With the limo setting down outside of Khumalo's Malibu ranch, Jessica realizes that Mac is going to see her today and laughs, "You really need to think this through, Mac."

"Aggie is the best lay I have ever had *and* she cooks great! What am I supposed to do?"

With her door opening, Jessica asks, "You here tomorrow?"

With Mac nodding yes, Jessica gives him a quick hug before she hops out of the limo, "Not Lucia! That shit off limits."

Walking up to Khumalo, who is unloading supplies from a small utility floater, Jessica stops and asks, "Ndosa, where'd you get this stuff? You're painting your own house? Seriously?"

Khumalo smiles, "Specialty hard ware store in Topanga." He looks around, "And yea, the neighbors thought I was the hired help."

"You got the biggest ranch within miles of here. At your level, shit dude, bots do this kinda work."

He nods and, "Well, my house, my labor, my sweat. I didn't afford this place by paying others to do shit I should be doin' myself."

"Plumbing too?"

Khumalo points up, "Now, that's where I draw the line."

"Okay." She motions for him to follow her, "We don't got a lot of time here." Entering the main house she says, "Let's get these two out of the way first."

In the family room she surprises Cloé and Siusan and throws her hands out for them to stay seated, "Okay-okay, if you got an insomniac, an agnostic and dyslexic, waddya got? ...Someone who stays up all night wondering if there is a dog!"

Cloé rolls her eyes while saying, "You're kidding."

"Waddaya got when you cross an elephant with a fifth of scotch? Hu? Hu? ...Trunk and disorderly!"

Both could not stop themselves from chuckling so Jessica says, "Okay, the Atlantic Ocean with the Titanic? ...About half way!"

They actually laugh, with Siusan going, "Give it up!"

Jessica points to her and, "You should know this one, what's the quickest way to a man's heart?" She leans in and laughs big, "Through his chest!" These are so stupid that both are laughing at it so, "I got a million of 'em! I'll be here every Friday night this week!"

And with a simple thought, like her father, they drop.

With these two out cold, Jessica turns to Khumalo, "Thank God I didn't resort to *poultry-geist*." She points to them and adds, "Since REM is twenty, I have to be back to un-fuck this in fifteen."

While preceding Khumalo into the family room, Jessica is pulling her neuronet pocket PBDi (Peabody) device which is the size of a small smart-phone. Usually they are accessed via a neuro interface, and even though they are still touchscreen enabled the only time most people touch theirs is to charge it. Jessica's is SA-tacnet enabled so there is much more to be had on board, so as she whips it out, lasers flash and a two-dimensional image of Maria Ramirez materializes behind her and swinging in time with Jessica's arm movements.

With the 2D, flat as paper Maria, flailing her arms around, "Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! This is making me fuckin' dizzy!"

Jessica plops it on the carpet and steps back while tossing a couple of crystal marbles on the floor out a few feet behind it, "Here, Mar, this'll fill ya out."

Inside a second the PBDi locks onto the marbles and the 2D Maria pops into a 3D model of her, so she says, "Oh, that's better!" 3D Maria looks at her butt and goes, "This make me look fat? They say it adds five kilos, ya know!"

Khumalo looks at his router output through a neuro-interface and realizes, "There is no signal going out. Construct?"

Maria, with a guffaw, "Well, d'uh!"

Jessica points to her own head, "Yea, but she's watching though here." She gestures to Maria, "Chat with her and if the real one has somethin' to add I'll relay it to ya."

3D Maria adds, "Head fuck ain't it? I was uploaded just this morning so I'm pretty much the real deal...well, from half a day ago."

"Okay." Khumalo turns to Maria, "I can do this."

Jessica informs her, "He's painting his house himself."

Maria is surprised, "Hu? Seriously? They have bots for that!"

Khumalo's shoulders sag, "I'm having fun, okay?"

"Sure! Whatever floats your boat..." She points to Jessica and then to herself, "Do I have anything to add before I get started?"

Jessica smiles, "Ya, you're saying for me to tell you to shut the fuck up and get on with it."

Maria nods, and to Khumalo, "I don't know what you know about Jessica and the clones going to 83-Tau but, what do you know?"

Khumalo nods, "Boxter is on the level."

"Really!"

"Yea, surprised me too! We're handling security and the SS troops Boxter assigned to us is from a battalion specifically groomed for this, called the Honey Badgers." Pointing to Jessica, "The narwhals will know about Jessie but not the clones, an' when people start disappearing, trust me, they'll put two and two together real fast."

"They'll hold off on the arrests till after they leave, right?"

"The real work will start after they leave, yes, but there won't be any arrests. Just executions." He shrugs and, "Boxter ain't playin' on this one. He's going after everyone they uncover so what ends up going down is gonna get leaked and it'll scare the fuck outta everybody going forward. If our intent is to stop Geisha shit once and for all then

this'll do it." Khumalo thinks about it, "He has a real piece of work as his go to gal, a Captain Lyn. In her interrogations she redefines the concept of what it means to be a hard-core psychopath."

"A bloodbath? Fu-real?"

"Yup, like I said, he isn't playing."

Maria blinks her eyes, "So, my girls are gonna be fine?"

"Oh, yes...he admires Fifty-Two. When he mentions his, what you call, conversations with Eight, it's like he's speaking of his own daughters. Trust me, you have nothing to worry 'bout."

"He know about Jessica's...abilities?"

"No, but he suspects it. No matter what, he's looking forward to meeting her."

"Red will be with them."

He shakes his head, "Yea, about that."

"Sorry, she's part of the package."

"No! He's looking forward to meeting her again, too! He thinks they'll have common ground. He admires Red."

Maria is surprised, "Well, everybody is on the same page!"

"Ya, ain't that a kick, and just so you know he's cancelling their military cloning project."

Maria is surprised, "Why the fuck?"

"They were getting the results they were looking for but you know that comes with a hefty price tag. Bottom line, after crunching the numbers, it's way-way cheaper to hire on cannon fodder and let the crème rise to the top."

"Budgetary considerations. Sure, I can respect that! Ours is costing us a fuck-ton and we still have no idea what the end product will be when we get there."

"Pulling the plug?"

"Too early to tell? We'll see soon enough."

"Boxter thinks you're on the right track with your program."

"Really?"

"You started with the right blueprints."

"We're trying to make well-rounded people. We're not tryin' to make soldiers out of them."

"He also sees the wisdom in that. Box is dying to find out

what the end result will be in twelve-fifteen years time."

Maria glances at Jessica then nods, "I have to say they're an obstinate bunch. Challenging little fuckers every step of the way."

Khumalo is surprised, "No shit!"

"No shit, what?"

Khumalo looks at Jessica with a smile, "So, you're the Omega! Ever since you were found out the intel community has been speculating about that." He throws his hands out, "I'll keep it to myself but, oh my God! An army of you? Holy shit!"

Jessica says on behalf of real Maria, "She says you need to keep this to yourself you know."

"Oh, no! It's safe with me, but...damn!"

Maria adds, "We were thinking about cutting it off at a Division and spread the love around."

"You know, your Alpha scares the fuck outta them, but this!" He points to Jessica and asks, "You fight like your mom, right?" Jessica nods yes, so he goes, "Fuck me, a Company of you would make my balls jump up into my throat."

Jessica speaks for herself, "Glad we're on the same side." She turns to 3D Maria and, "We need to cut this short, anything else?"

"No!" Maria looks to Khumalo, "Ready for retirement?"

"Actually, yea. I really want to enjoy this place." He mentally pulls up Jessica's shared peer to peer drop box and drags a file in it, "Just gave Jessica my final report but, honestly, Boxter already knows what I think."

"Tender your notice and the report already?"

"Last Wednesday. I laid it all out, giving him my full analysis including what you're really doing now, just like last time, and he's ignoring it...according to plan."

Maria is introspective, "It makes you wonder if maybe he's not ignoring it? It makes you wonder if maybe we're being played?"

"Why?" Khumalo thinks about it, "He's winning big! How would that benefit him?"

Maria shrugs, "I don't know...I just get this weird vibe."

"Well, when that vibe comes into focus, clue me in."

Jessica snorts, "Real Maria says you're an asshole."

3D Maria agrees, "Like I said, you're an asshole!"

Khumalo laughs, "Look, Jessie here has to wake the girls. We have reservations, then Cloé and Jessie have a party to go too."

"No prob! Go have fun and..." Maria looks to Jessica, "Tell Cloé happy twenty-three for me, and congrats on landing KBOS!"

Khumalo then goes, "Oh! Before you go, they picked up the engines from the Grigori out at Calar-3. I just found out today."

"Great! That's perfect!"

With a confused look, Khumalo asks, "You wanted that?"

"It was the perfect opportunity! Why waste it?"

"What's your angle?"

"Add to their load? Fuck with their wallet? Those engines are extraordinarily expensive to build. We're going to release the Dips soon so to get more speed they need to reduce the cross-section to the IR5 fuselage. Cracking that engine will give them a foundation for a new I.R. series, maybe even resurrect the IR4? And, if you haven't figured it out, we already have a response for that planned in advance. We were going to leak the design but...opportunities abound!"

Khumalo then realizes, "I haven't heard back from you on the Grays test firing, Fly-Swatter. Will there be a joint response?"

"Not joint, but it will be shared when the time comes. Ciao!"

3D Maria fades out and as they are about to step through the doorway, Jessica takes a queue from the real Maria and turns to Khumalo, "A last minute item, Mar believes that Box may think you are *the* Impetus. She'll give ya the details when she sees you next."

"Then why am I alive?"

Jessica relays the response, "Outside of him thinking of you as a friend, his only real friend, you served a purpose."

While taking a second to digest this, Jessica, bobbing her head in acquiescence, raises her hand and calls out, "Hail Hydra!"

Khumalo starts laughing big, and after a few seconds he says, "Oh, that takes me back! She gone?" With her nodding yes, he asks, "Do I have reason to worry?" Jessica shakes her head *no*, so he adds, "I don't want to trip over my own dick at this point. I'm so close to the finish line and I still have to go back and greenfield Blackstone's Security Services footprint. After that, I'm free."

"Ndosa, I'll make sure the coast is clear before you go back but, truth be known...I'm thinkin' we're all getting played."

He snorts a laugh, "Yea, all hail Hydra is right."

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It's late Saturday morning and Jessica delights in her mug of coffee while watching Cloé run through her morning Tai Chi katas. She has never before had pure Kona straight from Hawaii, which is damned incredible. What Jessica has come to realize, and finds thus curiously amusing, is that she projects so much confidence that even complete strangers try to emulate her. It's so pervasive that the rising starlets she has met at Monique's also drink their coffee black, just like Jessica. Fact is, Jessica couldn't give less of a shit what people think.

And it shows...

On the other hand, other than Fifty-Two, Cloé is the only friend or acquaintance so far that is her own person and her coffee is spiked with so much sugar and *crème anglaise* it's more like coffee ice cream nuked into a drinkable state. Cloé also couldn't give less of a shit and, for Jessica, this is not only refreshing but admirable.

With Cloé circling hands, and her level of pissed-off steadily on the rise, Jessica finally asks, "You wanna talk about it?"

"We had a great time last night so, no, no I don't."

Jessica points out, "I didn't know you were into Tai Chi?"

Now doing forearm blocks, "I'm not. It's under contract."

"You're all over the place? First it's stylized Tai moves then practical moves and there!" Jessica throws a hand out, "Repulse monkey! What are you doing?" Cloé stops and drops her arms in frustration, so Jessica prods her, "You got one of the most coveted roles ever and you act like you are about to go on a rippin' tear."

Cloé throws her head back, "Fucken' Vinnie Verde."

Jessica protests loudly, "Vernita Green, the origin story! This is a role of a life time! They've been trying to unfuck that remake for damn near seven decades!"

"I signed up for six episodes, but when you read the contract it actually means six seasons! Six God damned seasons! Ten, count 'em, ten vignettes per season! Four of the origin story followed by two seasons of Kill Bill, but that isn't even the worst of it."

Jessica thinks about it, "Shit, that's gonna put the hurt on your PhD. I can talk to Monique if you want."

"I already did. They're gonna make Copperhead a cleaner so there's less screen time and I can get traction on the degree. Whatever a cleaner is?" She then almost shouts, "And the worst part is it's no longer KBOS! You know what they're calling it now?"

Wide-eyed, Jessica says, "I'm clueless?"

"Divas, they're calling it divas! The acronym for Deadly Viper Assassination Squad, but they're already spelling the fucking thing with the small case "i" in it!" She acts like she's about to tear her hair out, "Ruffie was right! This industry is full of comically absurd retards!"

Jessica is laughing, "Really, divas?"

"Can you believe that shit? I do three minor film roles and they go and hand me this god damned thing on a silver platter—"

"The public loves you!"

"The public doesn't know who the fuck I am!" Cloé huffs, then, "The worst of it is that I'm the only one in the cast that has any martial arts experience! Isn't that a poke in the arse or what?"

Jessica points to her, "I see, Tai Chi ain't your thing."

She puts her hands out, "This is where I have to give the production team some credit. We shoot the fight scenes slow-mo like the Tai Chi shit here and crank it up for the final cut, and I have to say it's funny! Cartoonishly fun but, honestly, I fucking hate it!"

Jessica wonders, "Kinda curious, what did you train in?"

Cloé looks around then answers, "Keysi, Aikido, Krav Maga and some Brazilian shit when I was little. My dad wanted me to have a well-rounded kick your ass on the fly skill set. You're the only one that knows. Well, you and the fight choreographer."

"After...he picked himself up off the floor?"

"Yea." Cloé nods, "My bad. Now that he knows I got some moves he wants me to take up Systema for knife work because our Vinnie Verde's speciality is in tactical blades."

Jessica reaches over and pulls a wooden stir stick from Khumalo's painting gear and breaks it in half, "I'm curious." She steps up to Cloé and slaps the stick in her hand, "Mac is going to be here any second so...kill me. Figuratively speaking."

"What do you know?"

"I fight like my parents."

"Which is?"

"A hodgepodge collage of stuff?"

Cloé nods big and suddenly thrusts the square end of the stick forward in a stabbing motion but, instead of blocking it with a strike, Jessica simply spins around, pushing the attacking arm out with her own forearm as she slips past unaccosted.

Jessica turns and shrugs with, "Systema."

"Hu, no shit!"

Cloé attacks again with a barrage of strikes that Jessica easily blocks with Cloé grunting while fighting, "Girl, that's...Wing...Chung!"

Jessica wrenches Cloé's arm around, snatches the wooden knife and swipes it through the inside of Cloé's thigh, across her lower abdomen and around her neck as if it were a Karambit.

"Thank you!" Jessica flicks the piece of wood away and glances at her own forearms, "That's gonna bruise."

"I had no idea!" Cloé is amazed, and with Mac landing the Mach-glider limo near them, she begs, "You can teach me? Please!"

"I would but I got a full plate."

Cloé just shakes her head, "You know, for someone who doesn't do a God damned thing you sure are a busy lil' beaver."

"You don't know the half of it."

"You off to see Josav?"

"Cooling our jets doesn't mean we're cutting it off." Jessica gives Cloé a hug and a quick kiss, "Happy birthday!"

"Thanks, and thank you for last night." Cloé smiles coyly, "You know...curling the toes!"

Jessica wiggles her eyebrows, "Feeling's mutual."

Cloé gives Jessica a deeper kiss, and after a few lingering seconds too long they separate, nod and smile with Jessica saying quietly to her, "Yea, that was great!"

Jessica gives her one last peck and heads towards the limo, and about half way there Cloé calls out, "Hey, if you and Josav ever want to, you know, what we talked about?"

Jessica assures her, "You...you are at the top of that list!"

With a cheer, Cloé pumps her fist at the hip, "Yes!"