

60

one-eyed got

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Monique Ribot is really stoked because tonight most of the people on her expanded give-a-shit list are here under her roof.

Pretty much family is a given but it's always been the younger children that she finds most intriguing. Like Diego's Yin to Connie's Yang, Seth and Mini-Monique have always paired up like glove in hand, yet they gravitate towards Scott's little one now that she's been in the picture. Where Seth and Mini-Mon tend to be reserved, Angela has a demonstrative personality, animated and bigger than life.

Monique has never seen a kid command a room like this one. With two missing front teeth, Angela has been 'Sylvester spitting' her words with precision, and has an exacting mic-drop-and-walk skill not seen even in professional comedians—and this child has mastered it in grade school. Like how Monique kept an eye on young Jessica, she points this precocious blond hyper-synapse of a critter out to Carlos who is now watching her every move like a hawk.

The question is what to do with her?

Where Monique took a liking right out of the chute for Peter's fiancé, Nordi Dukuzumuremyi, she really doesn't know what to make of Jacob's girlfriends. She adores the petite Glados, a sprite of an AI piloted cyborg, but her hackles are up over Sasha Dimitri—and she is fully aware that it's all driven by jealousy. It's not that Monique would want Jacob back, with Tristen du Conde servicing her now she's never been happier, she doesn't want Jacob's memories of her in competition with this meaty-bone of a bombshell.

What bugs Monique is that she cannot pinpoint exactly where she thinks she recognizes Sasha?

Anyway, her stepson, Alex Dimitri, is as shockingly attractive as Josav, or Jacob was when he was in her employ, and Monique finds herself having impure thoughts when this young man is in eye-shot. As for Alex's steady girlfriend, Nikki-29, who now goes by Copper, she's a walking-talking carbon copy of Eight, and Monique absolutely loves her and Cap, so Copper is a definite shoe in around here.

Monique had dozens of under the radar business dealings with Alex's father, the legendary tycoon, Antonio Dimitri, but after his untimely death over two years ago, losing his life during a diving expedition with a U.S. presidential hopeful, his stepmother's on and off again relationship with Jacob has just recently become casually open after having kept it on the down low for so many years.

Speaking of keeping things on the down low, in the media's eye Maria and Victoria Wilson have become 'best friends forever' yet the depth of their real relationship is kept respectively quiet. Victoria has become the most popular British monarch since Elizabeth II, and as much as people relentlessly speculate about these two together, any 'shipping' in public or social media is met with hostility—and this is all because her fans and detractors alike both agree that Victoria has a right to a private life that's actually private.

Where Victoria's sex life is off limits, her public engagement to her old WSO from Nufa, now Major, Alastair Neville, has surprised the shit out of everyone! Victoria had to find someone agreeable to pop children out with and the Nippers was actually open to it. It helps that he's stupidly attractive and knows his place. It also helps that he secured his own VC two years later in Afghanistan by throwing himself into a desperate fight against the Sunni Nuqi-Taliban. Nobody thought this poltroon had it in him, but that's a story for another day.

Now the Xhemal, Caesar and Sheila, always have a standing and open invitation to Monique's, and that's a given, but dinner tonight is in honor of their bestest friends, Bob and Michal.

Tonight's festivities is to celebrate these two heading out to the peace talks tomorrow being held at 32-Tau, talks that Michal pushed hard for and Bob tried desperately to quash from the shadows, and everybody here is here to wish them well—all the well knowing that their respective intel services have good reason to believe they may not make it out alive.

Tonight the risks to them are not something anybody will dare dwell on, and after three toasts to Bob and Michal, Nicole stands to offer one to their longtime friend and confidant, Yaqub Ahmed Mofid, "On behalf of Bob and Michal, I want to thank you all for your well wishes. It is much appreciated, but at this moment I want to thank President Mofid for all his heroic efforts in getting us to this point."

Bob raises his glass and goes, "Here-here!"

That toast was for the benefit of Michal because everyone else there knows that Mofid was working with Bob trying to stop the talks.

Mofid has been called the accidental president. Because of his long service at the U.N. he was chosen as a running mate for the late Bryon Smith—who died in a mini submarine with Antonio Dimitri deep in the Tonga Trench by Pago-Pago. During the livestream the pressure breached a micro-fracture in the hull that manifested itself near crush depth and, well, can you say purée? The nomination was handed over to Mofid who, to the surprise of everybody, actually won!

Mofid has been coined the 'man of little words but big action' and is so nationalistic that it shocked the voting public after him having spent so many years at the United Nations. Mofid is a dyed in the wool 'classical liberal' but what Jane and John Q Public learn during his short time on the campaign trail is that it was because he was at the U.N. for so long—it forged his 'America First' mindset.

And the voters ate that up!

What helped on the stump was that his wife, Esma, and he came as a matched set. As the hottest thing since Dawn Willoughby, who to this day is in a tight second place to Melania Trump, Esma had this wickedly acerbic tongue in contrast and counterpoint to her refined beauty. When the press or the pundits lit into Mofid over made up shit, if they didn't have their ducks in a row then here came Esma with the rhetorical dick-slap to put them in their place. Hands down, Esma triumphed in the battle of wits against the press and their opposition like a boss.

And the voters ate that up too.

*Exempli gratia*, when the press misrepresented her husband's voting record on the Security Council, after Esma's crotch-shot of a fact check, in their face on a live broadcast, her follow on comeback was to offer the reporters and producers of the show a job mowing the White House lawn, saying it was something they could probably do without fucking it up too bad.

Esma stands and holds her wine glass towards Nicole, "Thank you, Marshal Burke! I finally get to meet you...wow!" She nods and, "Who I want to thank is Madame Ribot for hosting our lil' soirée tonight! It is mucho appreciated." She pulls her wine glass down and, "Ya know, you didn't make it to last year's Whitehouse Christmas party and Tristan had to come all alone, you should have seen his pouty widdle face, but you *are* going to make it this year, yes?" She leans in slightly, "Queen Victoria is scheduled to attend and I hear she's a down to Earth kinda gal! I can't wait to meet her myself!"

Monique looks at du Conde who is pointing at his mock frowny face. She smirks and turns to Victoria next to her, who is sitting hand and hand with Maria, then back to Esma and, "You know, I always wanted to meet...Vicky. We would be delighted to attend!"

With everyone rolling their eyes and snickering, Esma turns to Bob and Michal, "You two, well...what can I say!" She raises her glass to them, "If it doesn't work out, and chances are it won't, if you happen to be looking for something to do?" She looks both ways and, "The Rose Garden could use a good pinch back!"

Now with everybody actually laughing out loud, our Esma innocently shrugs and Victoria speaks up, "What a tosser!" Then to Maria she points and asks, "Are you listening to this?"

Maria goes, "Yea, I know, Vic! She's stiff competition."

Scott nudges Nicole with a grin, "Go on, go on, give it to her!"

With the laughter dying down, Nicole pulls a large-sheathed khukri from under the table and slaps it down in front of Esma, then says, "I hear you wanted this! Hell, I hear everybody wants this thing, but you—you get it!"

Esma sort of recoils and asks, "This the one from New York?"

Nicole nods, "Yup, Karr's blade! Read the engraving."

Esma pulls the huge knife from the sheath and reads, "New York City, twenty-three-oh-nine April one, TOS: 0128, 0769, 0014, SA36-CCMS Burke Nicole..." She squints and says, "Works great!" Laughing big, Esma shakes her head and, "Oh no! I can't take this! This should go to your Jessica!"

Jessica shakes her head towards Esma, "No, I got dozens of those things. I don't need another one."

Esma looks to Nicole and asks, "Seriously? Really?"

"Seriously! Really!" Nicole points to Mofid, "I figure it'll end up at his presidential library. You'll get more use out of it!"

With Esma mouthing the words, *thank you*, Caesar speaks up, "Thinking about your library, the photo op with you two feeding Fido last year was such a hit that we're sending you his skeleton."

Esma asks, "He died?"

"It was sudden!" Caesar grabs his feathered breast, quivers on his ottoman, and his head flops over with his tongue sticking out.

Sheila snorts, "Yup, he was old and heart just gave out! His shit diet finally caught up to him." She then takes a big bite of fatty prime rib, then says, "Wouldn't that look great in the lobby!"

Mofid shakes his head, "That's worth...it's priceless, no!"

"It ain't worth shit!" Caesar laughs, "Ya know, Yaqub, we were going to give the New York Natural History Museum the skeleton of the Chermera Mountain Cankersaurus, it's dead too, but we could give you that one if you want?"

Sheila nods, "It'd be a bigger draw!"

Caesar twirls his claw at him, "Come on, pick one!"

Mofid was about to protest so Esma kicks him under the table, "Shut up and pick one, ya *beshoor!*"

"*Antareh gav...*" Mofid mutters quietly to her, then gives in, "Okay, I'll take Fido!" He looks to Esma, "That make you happy?"

"Yur durned tootin'! And for that..." Mofid does a facepalm when Esma quietly follows with, and just loud enough for all to hear, "I'll let you mount me on morning prayers for the rest of the week!"

Through the laughter, Sasha, with her heavy accent, offers what everyone there at the table were all thinking, "President Mofid, if you need someone to stand in for you...I am available!"

Mofid huffs a laugh and winks at her with a smile, "Thank you, Sasha, but I got this!"

Sasha nods with a slight frown, "My offer stands!"

Jacob looks at Sasha, "What if I want to offer my services?"

She glances over her shoulder, "Line starts behind me."

Victoria puts up a finger, "I'll queue up next!"

Jacob looks at her, "After me."

Victoria demands, "Ya scrote, ladies first!"

Nicole goes, "In that case I'm next!"

Jessica says, "Forth!"

"You can go before me, honey."

"Thank you, Mom!"

Monique raises her hand and claims, "Fifth here?"

Maria then protests, "Wha? I get sloppy sixth!"

Esma offers, "I'll settle for seventh, Okay!" With all of them giving her a look, she gestures to herself, "Hey, I'd fuck me!"

Alex looks to Copper who is bringing her water glass up to her lips, "You're being inordinately quiet tonight. You gonna get in on this, Copper?"

With Copper taking a sip of water, Esma suddenly grips the edge of the table and pushes back with wide eyes, and after a few short seconds she shudders ever so slightly and blurts, "What the hell! Where'd that come from!"

Maria, Jacob, Bob and Monique give Jessica a look and she goes, "Hey, don't look at me!"

They all turn their faces to Copper who, putting her glass down, sheepishly says, "Sorry, I cut in line."

Esma laughs, "I feel like I've been defiled...do it again!"

With everyone astonished and amazed by this, Maria points to Jessica, "Jessie, since everyone here knows about you, being Scarab and all, can you do that too? I'm curious."

"You're not serious!" Jessica snorts and gives a disinterested look as she scratches her ear, and while acting like she has pulled something out of that ear to inspect it—the rest of the women in the room, including Maria, suddenly perk up and start to shudder just like Esma had. Brushing her fingers off Jessica says, "Easy peazy."

Mofid, looking around table, shakes his head while the ladies catch their breath, "Perfectly immaculate. Ya know, I've been briefed on what you guys can do, but to see this is...this is truly amazing."

Esma laughs, "I'm begging! You two have to come to high tea on twelve-twenty-one! Fuck with the Queen's head!"

Victoria speaks up, "I heard that, love."

Biting her lip, Esma comically looks around and up and down, "I'm hearing voices. Anybody else hear that?"

du Conde speaks up, "Madame, First Lady, as our dear friend Lebedev says, we do live in a world of possibilities."

Jessica squints at Esma, "So, we're party favors then?"

Esma acts like a guilty little kid and nods, "Yea!"

Jessica and Copper look at each other, laugh and high-five while Copper says to Victoria, "It's up to Vic."

Victoria nods towards Maria, "It's up to her, not me!"

Maria thinks about this and, "Okay, but no digging!"

Jessica nods and looks towards Mofid and Esma, "If a skeleton or two pops out of someone's closet we'll share but it cannot come back at us, deal?" She then leans in, "I know you want to know what Lebedev has up his sleeve and his wife is like an open book to us."

Copper adds, "She has a very chaotic mind."

“Vasily thinks she’s a clueless social butterfly, she does act the part, but Milanka is actually a walking encyclopedia of what he’s up too. She’s knows everything.” Jessica then paths directly into Mofid’s mind with <“But after tomorrow it won’t matter.”>

Mofid’s brow furls and he thinks, *I understand*, then says, “Well, I’m dying to hear what you find out, but confer with Marshal Ramirez first. I would like her in that loop to make those calls.”

“It’s a deal!” Jessica then again follows up privately to Mofid, <“Just so you know, the Marshal shares all relevant intel with you.”>

Maria says to Jessica, “Jess, just tell him what you find out and let me know later, okay?” Then to Mofid, “And, yea, whatever you use it cannot point back at her or Copper.”

Esma wonders, “Is it true about Milanka?”

Jessica asks. “That her feet never touch the ground?”

With Esma nodding yes, Copper blurts out, “Yea buddy, she’s the slut! And double-yea, Vasily knows.”

Esma gives them a look so Jessica adds, “She’s his beard.”

Maria speaks up, “You can’t use that!”

“No! It’s just that...” Esma looks to Mofid, “Everything about him makes sense now. You knew that?”

Mofid nods, yes, “I still think of him as my friend.”

du Conde throws out, “*Oui!* We still love the man in spite of his many faults and never-ending secrets—layered upon secrets.”

Michal points out, “We all had our secrets.”

du Conde rolls his eyes with a coy smiles when Bob adds, “Yes, we did, but especially you, Tristan.”

Sasha nudges Jacob, “Speaking of loving the man, I need to get you tucked in before too long.”

Jacob nods yes as Mofid asks, “Mission tomorrow?”

With Jacob and Sasha making their way around the table, giving hugs and saying their goodbyes, Sasha hangs back with Monique as Jacob moves on towards President Mofid and Esma.

Monique and Sasha give each other a hug and Monique says, “It was my pleasure meeting you, Sasha.”

“Madame Ribot, my husband sang your praises for so long that to finally meet you...meh, I was not disappointed! Yet, I feel that we have more in common than you may realize.”

With a defensive smile, Monique says, "Curiously, we'll have to do coffee sometime soon. After the first of the year?"

Sasha nods, "Love too, but it may be sooner than you think?" Stealthily she glances around then with zero accent, "Luc says hi!" With Monique blinking, absorbing this tidbit, Sasha continues with a confident smile, "Nine, tomorrow morning sound good for you?"

Like a brick to the head, Monique finally realizes who Sasha really is, "*Mon Dieu!* How about eight?" With Sasha nodding in agreement, Monique points over her own shoulder, "If you want, the Blue Room is available, at the top of the stairs! My home is yours, there's no need to run back to One-Klick."

Sasha's accent returns with shrug, "If you insist?"

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On the top observation deck of the Chateau, Jessica and Seth are sitting watching the Presidential, what's still called a Motorcade, race north for Palmdale, silently clearing the mountainous peaks of the Angeles National Forest, and right after that they sulk as Mac loads Bob, Nicole and Michal into everyone's favorite limo, the Mach-glider.

Bob and Nicole originally set aside two hours after dinner for Jessica and Seth, but these two knew ahead of time that a couple of hours alone with their mother and grandfather would have been gawd awful, so with Jessica and Copper pulling some mental strings the whole party, including President Mofid and Esma, rolled right into the ballroom and everyone had a blast for the next three and a half hours.

With Jacob and Sasha, and little Angela having turned in, they started off with a game of Password, which is popular around here, and after over an hour it morphed into Charades—that is when Caesar opted to give a clue via interpretive dance, which is a running gag for him. With that precedent set, everyone else followed suit.

Where the dinner party was great, this was ridiculously fun, and when it finally broke up everyone was happy and didn't want it to end, but for Bob and Michal the clock was ticking.

For her efforts, Jessica now finds herself indebted to Copper.

As the limo rises a window opens and Nicole blows them both a kiss before it climbs away for the top of the One-Klick tower, which is anchored to the Los Angeles basin far below.

Their silence was broken by Diego stepping up from behind, "Hey, you two! How was the dinner party?"

Jessica asks, "It was great, how was Connie's premier?"



"Hey sis!" Seth reaches up and Diego leans down from behind to hug him, and he asks, "You have fun?"

"Honestly, no, but, like Monique says, Connie has to learn how to manage a flop first." Diego turns and hugs Jessica, then, "Carlos calls it polishing a turd, which he says can net them more return than a blockbuster...well, not on the books that is."

Jessica wonders, "That's so counterintuitive."

"Okay, Connie's project was actually tailored for the Asian market, not the U.S. They planned for it to tank here, so the fire sale will probably be before the end of the year. What's released this summer in that market will be edited way different than what was shown tonight and will end up busting their blocks."

"They planned to flop, intentionally?"

Ten year old Seth expounds, "Jess, it's kinda interesting what they do. Every year or so they manufacture a huge loss by auctioning off a domestic flop, and always to a subsidiary of a company Monique owns. She has five of 'em an' what they make from the international box office and streaming is all stealth revenue and none of it makes it to her books. So, when Carlos has a project they know is gonna clean up here they'll finance it through her shadow corporations..."

Jessica looks up at Diego, "You listening to this?"

"The losses and load, and the interest liability built up during production, that all flattens out the books here locally and fattens her accounts offshore. Funny thing is that it's all above board."

Jessica glances down towards Seth, "T.M.I. little dude."

He looks to Jessica, "I can crunch the numbers for ya, sis!"

Jessica shakes her head, "No, that's okay! You can turn your brain off for tonight, or I'll hard boot it for ya. Your choice!"

Seth chuckles, "By your command—*click*."

Even though it's night and the city is lit up, Diego can see the dot of the limo speeding away in the far distance, "Is that them?"

Jessica nods, "Yup."

Diego breaths deep, knowing what's coming, "I'm sorry."

Tears well up in Seth's eyes, "Yup."

Feeling their sadness, "I'll leave you two be." Diego hugs and kisses them both and makes her way out.

With Diego gone, Seth leans into Jessica, and after the longest of moments he asks her, "Jessie, what's a one-eyed got?"

Confused, Jessica goes, "Hu? A one-eyed what?"

"Scott kept saying that to mother. You were gone a lot, but he'd mumble something and then say that, and he did it all the time. I've always wondered what a *got* was?"

Jessica grins big and, also with tears now in her eyes, tries not to laugh, "There ain't no woman like...the...one...I...got."

Trying not to cry, both are now faced with the Herculean effort of trying not to laugh and, failing that, they both start laughing hysterically with tears streaming down their faces.

After a half-minute of this it starts to die down and Jessica sniffs big and lightly knuckle taps the top of his head, "D'uh."

Seth breaths deep then sighs big, "I'm gonna miss them."

"Yep." Jessica then thinks about it and says, "I think you're going to like Gilroy. For a dumbass, he's a scream."

Seth nods in agreement, "I already do."

Jessica looks down at him and kisses him on top of the head, "We can help him get his PhD. He always wanted to finish that."

Seth thinks about it and says, "We should let them be."

Jessica's gut tells her that Seth knows something, so she asks, "How much time does he have?"

"Enough." He then looks up at her, "You'll like Yoon."