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never knows best

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After a hundred and fifty years in a plummeting real estate market, Descanso Gardens has quintupled its footprint in the Verdugo Hills. Now on the third iteration of the beloved Japanese Tea House, across the expanded lake sits the brand new Shōgun Castle adjacent to the century old Cherry Blossom Forest. It's November and the blossoms are not going to blossom for a few more months, so the Cherry Blossom Forest goes for a cut rate this time of the year. Not as cheap as it would be in August, but Maria was able to lock the price in when they scheduled Diego's quinceañera four years ago.

The castle wasn't part of this event but the Gardens threw it in at no charge because they can't lease the castle separate from the forest, so this was a big win for Maria and the family.

It ended up being a bigger win for Descanso Gardens when they were shown the guest list and who RSVP'd.

Because a handful of the attendees are high profile, security for today is astronomically tight. The park is still open for business so on top of the three dozen or so visible Secret Service agents is a whole company of ghost droids running around the place arm-n-arm with Delta operators, and where the park is open the airspace was closed off for ten kilometers in all directions. Orbiting overhead to enforce the no fly zone are four 'beauty and the beast' teams consisting of a white USAF Bulldog fighter and one of the black SA-Cerberus fighters shadowing them as their wingman.

Esthetically, no one likes the Cerberus and pilots have called it the Beluga out of spite, but now that it has proven itself as a monster in the CAS roll it's popularly referred to as the Evil Beluga around these parts, or Waluga for short.

Having learned everything he could from his wife, Ophelia, as well as her sister, Agatha, Léon is thrilled to be catering this event for his granddaughter. Léon and his staff have long been cleared by the Secret Service as well as by the RaSP to handle food for VIPs such as the first lady, Esma Mofid, Queen Victoria, as well as the Xhemal but, per policy, they must always sample the food at length.

Oh, to be so put upon...

Along with the Xhemal VIPs are Paris and Chell from Second Hand and, like with Esma, Piper Hartcourt was also extended a last minute invite and these three showed up with Eight, Copper and Peanuts who came with Scott, Cricket, Bill, Sandoval, Artyom and little Angela. Keeping company with Diego this week was Cap who herself has been a constant and a "candle" in her life for some time.

Rufus Tyrol and Paula also crashed with seconds to spare.

Monique and all the family members from La Cañada as well as Los Angeles and Havana are here but Junior was the one person that put the Secret Service on edge. Assigning their best field agent to shadow Junior kind of backfires because, having as big a personality as Maria, Junior is such a slick operator that he quickly finds himself chatting him up, comparing battle scars, and hitting it off so well that Junior scores a hot date with the agent that very evening.

Since it was Adolphina who did most of the planning and legwork for today's festivities it is she and Lucia who ends up emceeding the event with the girls from *iFamilia Cubanaza!* all dolled up as Diego's *Corte de Honor*. Diego wanted to avoid the stale traditions like *Damas* and *Chambelanes* because none of her small number of actual friends who were attending could wrap their brains around it, but since the cast members knew how to snark, strut their stuff and dance their asses off she bowed to the will of the family. Remotely controlled octodroid cameras are everywhere filming everything for the show so the *Cubanaza Damas* hammed it up like the consummate professionals they are—and they only get one take.

Starting things off at eleven, after the benediction and prayer given by Syleste, are three Mariachi bands who, vying for position on stage in a comically absurd Ranchera riff-off, end up strolling through the crowd in different directions while performing perfectly in synch with one another. Now, whether you like Mariachi music or not, what caught everyone by surprise were our catnip-crazy *Cubanaza Damas* performing their own twist to the *Flamenco*, with precision, and this blows everyone away.

Fashionably late, Jessica steps up to the edge of the party in a heavily embroidered dark green and white *Áo dài*, and says to herself, "So, whadda we got this fine morning!"

With one of the Mariachi bands approaching her, playing and singing their hearts out, Jessica takes a moment to drink it in—but it's not the music she is sampling here. Taking a deep cleansing breath, Jessica nonchalantly glances in Monique's direction who, with Jordan, Carlos and Peter, are hugging and yucking it up with Lucia, Adolphina, Paula and Tyrol. After a few seconds Jessica huffs with a nod while quietly muttering to herself, "No shit, hu!"

She then rolls her head in the general direction of her father who is flanked by Glados, Alex and Sasha. Locking her radar down she allows her gaze to follow the Mariachi's as they stroll past, and after only a few seconds of poking around she and the others clap for the musicians as they motor along—all the while she laughs to herself, "Now, that's a double-dipped no shit with whipped spunk on top!"

Jessica again stares at Monique for a few short seconds, then back towards Sasha, and after shaking her head in amazement she turns her eyes forward towards Maria, who is between them at the center table, hugging Esma by the raised dance floor.

Maria is taking Diego around to meet everybody and tagging along is Victoria, no surprise there, but while Diego is focused on Artyom, Esma motions for Piper to come over to them.

"You have a half an hour to shut her up."

Jessica blinks, "My God, I had no idea."

"Be the brick, think you can do it?"

Jessica turns her head then looks down at her brother, Seth, "I wish you would have told me what this was about."

"Life should have some mysteries, no?" Seth points to her and smiles, "You have always said it yourself and, considering...us, I think they are words to live by."

"Okay, what mysteries me is you dabbling in Mini-Mon!"

"Oh, that...cultivating the future? Liken to your Josav, I get to have one confidant don't I?"

"He doesn't know shit."

Seth shrugs, "Josav is not stupid, he knows you work for the Annex, but that's not the problem. Then, like Cloé, both of them are madly in-love with you and still that's not the problem. Then again, Josav and Cloé tag-teaming like rabbits when you're not around is still, yet, not the problem but...you not wanting to rock that boat is—"

Jessica almost growls at him, "I don't want to hear this."

Seth smiles, "You know, when I tell *them* on new year's that they've been stagnant for a thousand millennia, twice over, and that

their golden age is at their fingertips, well, I'm here to convey that message to you...too! Dive into that *ménage*, babe, capsize that boat! Spread your leathery wings and expand your horizons."

"I don't want to lose them."

"Who says you're going to lose them?" Seth then points out, "Not everything should be packaged for immediate consumption, or nibbled to death to prolong the end-avoidable. Like a heady cheese or a fine wine some things need to age to be savored but, who am I?" He gives her a little brother hug, "Right now you'z got a job to do!"

She looks at him and, "I don't want Mini-Mon hurt."

"She and I have a long future ahead of us, on and off, but at least with little Monique I can drop the innocent autistic façade."

Jessica points out, "That shit façade keeps you alive."

Seth nods, "Yes, but necessary for only a few more weeks."

"What about you and Peanuts?"

"Aaaaah, the older woman!" He cringes at Jessica as if she caught him with his hand in the cookie jar, "Let's not rock that boat, shall we? I really do enjoy the diversion." Seth gives her a quick kiss then, "Angela deserves to get this revelation on Christmas morning, Diego deserves to have today be about her and, mostly importantly, Scott needs to focus on missions for the next two weeks."

"You haven't shown me why...why?"

Seth stares at her and, "Let's not approach this task with a sense of desperation? I'll show you after the party."

Jessica nods and as she steps off she stops and looks over her shoulder at him to ask, "Leathery wings?"

"Ominous...foreboding? Feathery doesn't convey that."

Jessica rolls her eyes while suppressing a laugh, "Ya prick."

"If I may, since you are not one for complements—"

Jessica turns towards him, "Shut up."

"Ah, no...you look gorgeous today!" Seth immediately slinks in closer with, "When you are out and about with Cloé doesn't it get annoying how people fawn over her?"

Jessica is frustrated with him, "The point is?"

"Nobody can pay you a complement without you projecting hatred? Just so you know..." Seth nods towards Cloé who is hanging with Josav and José on the sidelines, "People may be fawning over her but they are all, without exception, drooling over you."

Jessica snarls quietly, "Get real."

"Sorry, but sometimes your ego needs to get stroked against your shitty judgement, and you can't deflect it from me...I get a pass."

"How 'bout you take a break and fuck off?"

"My, don't we have a seriously bruised sense of self-worth!" Seth dons the autistic façade while saying with his normal speech impediment, "Big sis, we'u gonna haft'a wurk on dat."

Jessica leans in to him and, "Right now, fucking off would be in your best interest. Think you can handle it?"

In her face, Seth kisses his middle finger, flips it towards her, then touches it to her hip and shudders with the sizzle, "S-s-s-s-s!"

Suppressing a laugh, Jessica makes an observation, "By the way, you're sounding more and more like Boaxter everyday."

Seth thinks about it, "Box...he does have a beautiful mind."

"He's rubbing off on you."

He mimics Boaxter, "I dare say, yes. I'm dug in like a tick!"

"Have you uncovered anything I need to know?"

"On a need to know? There's nothing you need to know."

Jessica stresses, "Yet."

"Life should have some mysteries, remember? For you, yet, in this context is a ways off. Think you can handle it?"

Turning away, Jessica says under her breath, "little prick."

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"Glad you could make it, Piper!" Jessica says, then gives Esma a hug while nodding at Piper, "I hear you two go way back."

Esma laughs slightly, "Waaay-way back!"

As Jessica gives Maria and Victoria a hug, Piper tells Esma, "Easy, baby, I'm gettin' a tag for late February! Care to join?"

Victoria asks as Jessica pulls away from her, "A tag?"

"Safari! A wee-little hunting expedition."

Esma asks, "Bunny? Drop bear?"

"Gettin' me a tag for a Jabber!"

"Are you shitting me! Thought those were protected now?"

"Not when they be prayin' on your garbos!"

Maria asks, "What the hell is a Jabber?"

Esma laughs, "They've got dragons on the Queensland Vista."

Piper says, "A Jabberwocky, three tons of chomp and chaw!"

Esma adds, "They're dusk gliders, most active when the sun is low on the horizon." She then looks to Piper, "But they don't stray far from the northern terminators so what gives?"

"We bagged too many banders an' the bumbles exploded so the Jabbers came down for the snackies." Piper then says to Maria, "To them humans look like baby bumbles and both are easy pickings."

Esma gestures to Piper, "Twenty years back I saw her nail a Jabber in a dive. I couldn't believe the lead she had to give that shot!"

"The fun and games is making it so you don't have to lead."

Victoria realizes, "By making yourself the bait I take it."

Piper smirks, "Gives 'em a sporting chance!"

Esma rolls her eyes, "You're a fucking asshole."

"Yes, and my husband revels in it!" Piper then says to Maria and Victoria, "Since Easy is prevented from going, how 'bout you two ladies? We have a whole family of four to drop!"

Victoria puts a finger up, "I'm up for it!"

Piper smiles, "Lovely! We'll have a stonking good time!"

"The fuck!" Maria turns to Victoria and, suddenly realizing she can't prevent her from going, looks to Piper and asks, "What do you use on these, I dunno...god-damned dragons!"

"Ummm, fifty B-M-G, bolt action. Get's the job done!"

Maria, against her better phobias, flash-processes the specs for the old .50BMG and says, "Hooooow 'bout...a Ma Deuce? I won't pitch a bitch if Vic and you all have our M2 to play with."

Piper looks at her, "That BR1? The eighty-eight BR1?"

Maria nods, "I'll have Michelle Kiel deliver a dozen of 'em with crates of ammo and the N2 interface to boot. They'll drop a Fifty-One so they'll put the fuck to a Jabberwocky, I guarantee!"

Esma looks at Piper then slowly towards Victoria while saying, "Now, I'm gawd-damned jealous of you two fucking bitches!"

Piper blinks, "Well, Easy, instead of making curt observations how 'bout you try throwin' us an insult maybe?"

Victoria, in open-mouth astonishment by Piper, laughs big, "Oh, bloody bollocks, I love this woman!"

As Victoria, Esma and Piper laugh it up, the three Mariachi bands are back on stage and end their set with an abbreviated take on Mozart's Violin Concerto No.3. Here the three violinists' are seamlessly flipping bars from one to another during the solos and this brings theirs and most of the other conversations to a grinding halt.

During this stunning performance, Jessica pulls in close to Maria whispering, "The Nefers agree to be at the rendezvous on time, but I need to talk to you right after Leon cuts in on your dance."

Quietly frustrated, Maria asks, "This can't wait?"

"I have a brick for you." As Maria nods with understanding, Jessica ends with, "I'll be in the castle keep."

With the Mariachi's set ending there is an explosive applause for the musicians but, before Jessica could get away, Diego clotheslines and pulls Jessie towards her and Artyom, "You're not getting away that fast. You gotta say hi to Artyom!"

Artyom looks at Jessica and shakes her head, "Jessie, you look beautiful, but then you always do."

Jessica hugs Artyom and sizes her up, "Wow, I have to say that blistering-hot raven-haired Persian works for you! I mean..." She thumbs towards Diego, "I didn't expect to compete with this thing here and now to contend with you in that mix!"

Artyom blushes with, "You're too kind, Jess."

"I hear you got the Ninety-Six?"

"Diego helped me pick *Artemisia tou Caria* as the persona for the ship, and that's primarily so that I can keep my name."

Jessica gestures towards her body, "How long with the bod?"

"Nine months now, and Glados was right! The oral fixation is troublesome but my colleagues, all of them, are accommodating."

Jessica laughs, "The slut!" With Artyom coyly smiling at that, Jessie asks, "Was Glados right? You feel alive now?"

Artyom nods, "Yes, being alive feels wonderful, and scary."

Diego cuts in and says to Jessica, "Okay, you gotta hear this!" She then taps on Artyom's head while going, "Knock knock!"

Artyom laughs, "Okay, okay Sian!" She takes a breath and then opens her mouth and says in the exact voice of Michal Pitney, but only a half octave higher than normal, "Oi, Jessie, love! You be taken' good care of our lil' roo rat 'ere!"

Jessica gives a slight double take, "Mikey?"

Because of an infamous mass murder case, by UN treaty it is illegal for “ghosts” from hosting worlds to operate androids and bots in the real world so Michal Pitney had to sneak in by stowing away on Artyom’s brand new electronic brain in “her” spanking new human body. As the SYLN-b AI for SA96, a block-3 Trung class platform currently under construction, only the sail has been laid so the core interface module has yet to be installed on Artyom’s pop-tart brain.

Michal was uploaded and masked as an imbedded subroutine and after about a dozen attempts it was clear that she couldn’t actually pilot Artyom’s body. Everytime they tried Artyom’s walk and gestures made her look like a drunken Sicilian marionette, so they focused on what they could get out of the language center. Speech transposition through the tacnet-interface was so good, flawless in fact, that Michal is able to speak with her own register, inflections and accent.

Michal as Artyom says, “SWAG’d it on the first try!”

Jessica cringes, “Quiet, you gotta keep this on the down low!”

“I hear ya, Red. Chat ch’ya up at Monique’s!” Artyom then takes her voice back with, “She’ll be with me for a few months testing the interface and it’s fascinating to say the least. It’s like I got this little person in me watching me eat, poo and fuck.” Michal again takes control of Artyom’s voice, “I’m havin’ a balls-bloody blast with this!” She then looks to Diego and, “Told you I’d make it here, doll!”

Jessica urges Artyom/Michal to, “Knock it off already!”

Diego bumps into Jessica, laughing, “Isn’t this a scream!”

On the stage Adolphina calls out, “Okay, we need the daddy to bring our Quinceañera up to the stage!”

Jacob is already there with a smile and his hand outstretched towards Diego, “Come on, honey. Let’s go change your shoes.”

With happy tears in her eyes, Diego kisses both Artyom and Jessica saying, “I love you guys!” Then cupping her hand she says in Artyom’s ear, “You too, Mikey!”

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Changing the shoes of the Quinceañera before the father and daughter dance, like most quinceañera ceremonies, is usually a solemn affair but for Diego’s party the focus here is on having fun and not taking any of this seriously. Jacob is visibly startled when he finds and extracts Diego’s old baseball cleats from her feet and this is great fun for a big laugh. To have her beautiful new pumps brought out on a gilded pillow—and replaced by crapped out sports shoes on said pillow

makes for a fantastic visual in the memory book.

The traditional father-daughter dance has also trans-morphed into an “all ya’ll come dance with the Quince” dance, and the Mariachi rendition of the Nutcracker’s, Waltz of the Flowers is uniquely perfect for this moment. Jacob in his charcoal back suit, formal attire for the Annex, and Diego in her stunning dusty-rose dress is a beautiful sight that everyone applauds when time came for Maria to cut in.

The schedule is tight and where Jacob gets ninety seconds with his daughter, Maria is only allocated a precious minute. Maria is also applauded when Léon cuts in—and as the cuts continue everyone else can now take to the dance floor.

From the tower rampart of the Shōgun Castle, Jessica enjoys the beauty of the moment. Watching as Léon gets cut by Ophelia at the thirty-second mark, followed by Seth, Victoria, Esma and Piper, but it’s when Bill then Scott cut in that she is awed by how handsome they both look dancing with her younger sister. Before just now, Jessica has never thought of these two as sexy per se, but she finally realizes what her mother saw in Scott.

Noticing Maria approaching from the outer walkway, Jessica quietly slips into the first floor castle keep. Maria steps in after her, and before Jessica can say anything Maria already breaks the ice with a long shot, “Riddle me this...what’s red and bad for my teeth?”

Jessica nods with genuine surprise, “Very good!”

“So, I gotta be doin’ somethin’ or be shuttin’ up my pie hole?” With Jessica touching her own nose on the second option, Maria says, “Let’s play that game! You know the one, simple answers?”

Jessica agrees, “Let’s do that.”

“The floor is yours!”

“Okay.” Jessica thinks about it for a few seconds and asks, “You know how lil’ Angela has wanted a full-time sister, because Diego and I are gone a lot and, well, ask and ye shall receive!”

Maria laughs, “Who did Scott knock up?”

Jessica thinks about it, “It’s not who, so much as when.”

Maria asks, “Have I met ‘em?”

Jessica nods yes with, “The end product, an’ that’s really not gonna help because you know all the candidates and there’s so many to choose from! Wanna kick the difficulty level up a notch?”

“Sure, I’ll take a hint, two words max for the pot. Throw me a curve ball and give it your best fricken shot.”

"This, right now, is why I hate playing password with you on the opposing side!" Maria shrugs big while Jessica ponders the hint, "Okay, for the big win...ninety...years."

Maria rears back in total confusion, but it's only temporary.

Jessica is amazed by watching Maria visually transition from a perplexed 'what the fuck?' to an aware 'what the fuck!' as the cogs and gates in her brain case clank and pachinko and cypher it all down to only one possible candidate, followed by her quietly saying, "whoa."

That was the easy part because Jessica is even more amazed as Maria, while having a two-way mental conversation with herself, turns towards the cannon portal in the castle wall, and after a pregnant pause with her looking out over the party she turns to Jessica while pointing out that portal—making the wildest possible ass of guesses, "Claudia or Rachel?"

"Whoa is right, you're already connecting the dots...Claudia."

Maria thumbs out towards Sasha and asks, "Jacob does not know that's her?" Jessica shakes her head *no*, so Maria states clearly, "Jacob does not know that Alex is him."

"Not a clue."

Maria wonders, "How does Monique factor in with the Nefers?"

"From what little I was able to gather she provides a lateral pass point for info, data, materials, money...people!"

"Obviously, they got that sample from her but...she just found out who Sasha was-is when she told 'er who Scott was to her, right?"

Jessica moves her finger back, forth and back, then, "Yes!"

"So, Scott doesn't know about Monique, and she just found out about Scott, Angela *and* Sasha, or Claudia, but if Scott is working for us then where would we be hemorrhaging gray now?"

"Chief Nelson. I snagged that tidbit from Luc, quiet like."

Maria is shocked, "Zach? Isn't he the Co-op mole we doubled against them? This makes him, what, a triple or re-doubled agent?"

Jessica thinks about it, "Maybe a third-party double, I think?" She then shakes her head and, "Back to the issue, you were going to say something to Scott and Monique in passing and—"

"The fuck I am now!"

"Exactly!"

"You do have to admit they'd make excellent bed-bugs!" Jessica rolls her eyes as Maria continues, "Okay, I was wondering why

Monique was inviting him and Angela over without us around and now I know!" Maria then asks, "Wait a minute, does Monique know you're our Annex contact with the Nefers?"

"Yes, but she doesn't know I know that she's one."

"If you plug the dyke here then when is Scott gonna find out? He *is* going to find out, right?"

"Christmas. It's just that they can't know just yet."

"Because...it would fuck up the upcoming missions?"

Jessica nods, "I don't know how but *he* won't show me."

"How can two stupid-simple insertion missions get screwed up to cause so much blowback?" After a long pause Maria thinks out loud, "Jacob is next in line if anything happens to me."

"That keeps the Co-op in check."

"And...if he ever dies?"

Jessica realizes, "They won't count on him becoming a ghost!"

"oh, my god, if I get whacked there'd be no stopping him." Maria whispers, then looks to Jessica with sad eyes, "I'm trying to save lives, here. That's been the plan all along."

Jessica mouths the words *I know*, then, "On all sides, I know." She then huffs a laugh and adds, "If you die he won't play nice and, in spite of what you may think otherwise, father still loves you."

Maria shrugs, "He's got a funny way of showing it."

Jessica almost laughs at that, "Yea, an' you don't?"

Maria admits, "I know, I can be a cunt at times."

Jessica smiles, "You mean, *not* a cunt at times."

"Well, ya got me there!" Maria nods then asks with stabbing eyes, "Now, I long ago figured the Nefers had to be involved with the Geisha bullshit somehow but, tell me, how does Monique factor in?"

"She doesn't factor, but gray-matter did provide funds and eugenics controls. They bowed out when they found out about me."

Maria squints at her with, "There's an *and* in there."

"Aaaand, him. They wanna talk to The Alter."

Maria visibly goes from really pissed off to a quiet resolve within a few short seconds, followed by, "And what if I say, no?"

"EEEEENT!" Jessica makes a loud buzzer sound then laughs, "Wrong answer! Try again."

"For my edimifuckencation, why should I agree to this?"

Jessica thinks and blinks and, "My brother and I play an odd game on a regular basis. We try to surprise the other but it's all ass backwards because, for us, the winner is the one who *gets* surprised!"

"Figuring out how well you tune shit out, right?"

"Yea, so don't ask if you wanna win this round."

Maria shakes her head, "I don't like this game."

"Neither do we, but for us it's kinda rewarding." Jessica then puts a hand out, "So, after the demo I'll bring them here to Monique's and, before you say anything, when the time comes you'll be like all cool with that. Trust me, you'll be pleasantly surprised." Jessica then points towards the party and, "I still have time to get my cut so, remember, you need to talk to José before the candle ceremony."

She nods yes, and as Jessica steps away Maria calls out, "Hey, is Jacob banging Paula already?"

Jessica looks back and snorts, "Liquor a man up and spread your legs and waddy think is gonna happen?"

Maria points out, "That goes for all of us!"

"It's for laughs, and they're keepin' it quiet."

Maria then asks, "Did he figure out Babs yet?"

"No, but when he does I'll be your fly on that wall."

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Lucia puts an earbud-mic on Victoria and, "You're on, *chicas!*"

Victoria takes Diego by the hand and, "There are many a little strumpet in the world who dream of a coronation and there are some, like us, who dreaded it and couldn't ditch theirs. You, my dear, came to mine to laugh at me walking around in my silly looking dress, so it's only proper that I come to yours in good turn!"

Diego snorts a laugh, "Sorry 'bout that!"

"Oh no, my love, all's fair but, unfortunately, I am cheated from mocking you in yours because...look at you!" Victoria holds Diego's hand up and turns to the crowd, "She's just too damned stunning in this thing." Victoria lets go of her hand and points to a chair, "Have a seat 'cause it's time for us to dish it out."

"Dish it out in full, I take it?"

"Just two scoops, me poppet!"

With Monique's antique medieval scissor-chair here as Diego's throne, Diego fluffs her skirt out and sits gracefully as Lucia points to her and goes, "If you know Sian like we know Sian, then you'd know Sian ain't a tiara kinda gal so, what to do? And, of all people, the only level headed one of us, our Aunt Ophelia, comes to the rescue!"

Ophelia steps up beside Diego saying, "*Mi bomboncita.*" She then looks out over the crowd and nods for a laugh, "I know, I know *Inglés, Inglés!*" Ophelia touches her shoulder, "When Diego, our Sian, was two we called her *El Niño* for a reason! Our *mija* then was a little bundle of terror." Adolphina is already leaning in with an open hatbox, "Here in this box is what you get for being such a rotten little tot!" She kisses Diego on the head as Maria reaches into the box, "You did not know *tu abuelo*, your grandfather, but he knew you."

Diego gives a little shriek as Maria pulls her grandfather's fedora from the box—the hat that everybody in the family has coveted and, skipping generations, now goes to Diego. The fedora matches so well one would think that the dress was designed with it in mind from the onset. As it's placed on her head the Xhemal, Sheila, inserts one of Caesar's black and red feathers, one she plucked from him minutes ago, into the hatband then gives her a little nuzzle from behind.

"No way!" chirps Diego as everyone applauds.

In tears Diego hops up and kisses and hugs Ophelia, Sheila, Lucia, Adolphina, her mother, and as she sits back down she gives a double thumbs-up to Ceaser with a cheerful, "Thank you!"

Caesar double thumbs back with an, "Owie!"

This gets him a big laugh since Caesar yelped aloud when Sheila harvested it from his neck plumage.

Victoria slithers in and goes, "Well, this next scoop is on me for obvious reasons because I happen to know about scepters and I know first-hand of little girls who don't want their scepter!"

Lucia hands Victoria a long box and, "Sure about this, Vic?"

Victoria pulls the top of the box off and says, "Waddya think?"

Lucia looks into the box then at Diego while she elbows Victoria with a laugh, "Yea, it's her! It's definitely her."

Victoria steps up to Diego saying, "I had to take my scepter but, for you, I brought a fine substitute over impractical tradition. Reach your hand in here and take a swing at this!"

With Victoria holding the box out with two hands, high enough so that she cannot see what's inside, Diego reaches in and is surprised by the heft of the object. She tugs and with party poppers going off,

showering her and Victoria in confetti, she pulls a mace from the box all spruced up with black and red bows and ribbons tied to it.

Laughing hysterically, Diego goes, "It's a, it's a...a mace!"

"Fifteenth century, Italian. Use it in good health, love!"

Diego's laughter quickly flips to happy crying because things could not be more perfect than they are now, and with everybody laughing then clapping while she hugs Victoria, Lucia steps up and raises her glass of champagne, "Before we take some photos and start the banquet." Lucia then throws out, "And the green tamales *son mejores que singlar!* I want to propose the first toast for our quince, Sian Diego!"

On that note, Maria slips away from the proceedings...

Standing in the shadows of the cherry trees, away from the party, José Ozo has an excellent view of the stage. With the third toast for Diego being given by Victoria, Maria strolls up beside the now incredibly tall and handsome José, and quietly says, "You know, I've come to love you as my own son."

José couldn't resist, "You mean, the son you never had!"

Maria cracks up, "You're right about that!"

As her laughter dies down, José drapes his arm around her shoulders and Maria is actually surprised by his deep voice and how big he has become. He's not a man yet but he might as well be, and Maria has to remind herself that she can't look at him in those terms.

Maria thinks about it and opens up like never before, "I owed your father. He bought me a precious few seconds that turned that fight around. Mahko saved our asses."

"He was doing his job. You don't owe him a damned thing."

"I owe him my life."

"If you say so, okay, but what still sticks with me sore is that you wouldn't let me see his remains."

Maria deflates because this is something they never really talked about before so, finally, she begrudgingly says, "I carried his legs out. That was all that was left. I couldn't let you see that."

José thinks about it and nods, "Okay, I can let that one go."

"Thank you!" Maria then ventures to guess, "To risk asking a stupid question, but, are you still in love with Diego?"

"d'uuuh." José huffs a laugh and, "Stupid question is right. She says she thinks of me as a brother now."

"I'm curious, back when you were hanging out together on Second Hand when you were eight, were you two intimate?"

José swallows hard then quietly says, "every day."

Maria nods, expecting that answer, "Then she is choosing to see you as a sibling and not as an option because...you are not safe." Maria bodily turns towards José and adds, "If you stay here you will not have a chance in hell with her. You do understand that."

José nods, "Kinda."

"Look, you are family to us and you will always be family but, honestly, I can't think of anyone I'd rather have with my daughter, but with the feels Diego is a chickenshit so that's not gonna happen if you stick around. You gotta make yourself scarce."

"I figured, I know you talked to my mom already."

"Clem has all those restaurants in a dozen major cities. She travels everywhere so you two would have fun!"

"I liked my roots being here."

"That's why she was okay with you staying here, and your roots will always be here but things change. Let me rephrase that." Maria pokes him in the chest, "That is, if you want things to change. If you wanna take that chance then right now is the time to skedaddle."

José scrunches his brow, "You mean, right now."

Maria pulls a card out and slips it into his breast pocket and, "This is Mahko's. There's a lot more but this will get you steppin' out right. Mac is waiting to take you to Monique's where your mom will have a limo pulling in, in about twenty minutes." Maria gives him a motherly kiss and, "I want to see you whenever you come to town."

"You're kind of busy, remember? Waging a war and shit?"

Maria nods and smiles with, "I always make time for my kids."

José gives her a big hug and, "Can ya tell Cap bye for me?"

"Thank you for not resenting Cap all these years."

"Why? I feel sorry for her." Maria gives him a confused look so he points out, "Diego is not complicated. Cap is a toy to her, she's always been, but after this deCap shit hitting the N2, and even though she denies it, everybody knows it's her. Diego was rippin' pissed about it when she found out, but she feels more bad for Cap."

Maria feels a little guilty, "I didn't authorize that."

"Yea, I know. Eight told me." José gives a little smirk, "See, Cap may be Diego's toy, but Eight has been mine."

Maria grins big with a genuine sense of relief, "I have been wondering where she's been gettin' that smile!"

"Thanks for letting me get cut early. She loves it!"

"Glad to be of help. Mac is waiting, *vámanos!*" Maria gives him another little peck, and right as he starts to step off she says, "Hey, I heard that some scouts were checkin' you out!"

José shyly grins while looking back, "Yea, and Diego too."

"That may be but if anyone has a shot at the pros, you do."

He spins around and prophetically adds, "Don't rule her out."

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The banquet that follows is a monumental hit but the families from Havana and locally are confused to no end. The flavors here are all Ophelia and Agatha but León stabilized their recipes for a consistent outcome and labored to death over presentation—and it shows.

What was beautiful to the palate is now beautiful to the eye.

If there ever were to be a five-star Mexican-Cuban restaurant hybrid then León could pull it off with this fare. He actually toyed with the idea over multiple glasses of a wicked *Franc Bordeaux*, thinking of *olá* as a possible name, that being the first letter of their three names, but a pipe dream spawned from a bottle of wine is still a pipe dream.

Their luncheon takes the better part of an hour but Diego only has time to shovel in a quick bite of *pollo asado* before the dreaded Candle Ceremony—fifteen candles on stage, and fifteen people to be called up to light them with her. If one averages out the time on stage it's about two minutes per candle, but Diego fears that this thing will be an ordeal to get through. It can also be sort of confusing because the 'candle' for a year denotes the year leading up to that birthday.

It isn't butterflies in Diego's stomach but pterodactyl, plural, because this process usually comes with lots of hugs and tears.

Maria is presented the very first candle and she is the obvious choice because she is the mother, and Ophelia was the second candle because what can you say about a grandmother!

Agatha got candle number three all because she didn't drown Diego in the toilet, she was a rotten little kid, and Jessica followed with candle four for the exact same reasons.

It was Lucia who brought baseball to Diego in her fifth year, followed by Adolphina for discovering and pointing out to Diego who she really was in her sixth year.

Monique took the seventh candle because, without knowing it, she inspired Diego on how to be a lady, and the eighth candle was secured by five of her little league teammates who remained friends with her to this day through thick and thin and thick again.

It was here that Diego was, not exactly frantically looking around, but not seeing José she sticks to the sheet and calls out for Chell to step up with, "Chell, here, is my ninth candle. She taught me a lot about her world and their biosphere. She and I bonded and we had endless and wonderful conversations back then."

With them lighting the candle together, Chell goes, "I may have been your tutor but I really was your friend."

After hugs and kisses Chell steps down and Jessica says to Maria through the tacnet, <"We dodged that bullet.">

Maria shoots back with, <"So this *will* happen, right?">

Jessica gives a sly smile, <"The theme for today is pleasantly surprised, remember? Let shit play out naturally, okay?">

Maria raises and rubs her middle finger against her cheek and jaw in an obvious stealth flip off, which makes Jessica chuckle.

"Artemisia, please come on up." Diego asks, then tears up, "Michal Pitney was my tenth year candle and one of my best friends. She helped me get over the hump to becoming me. I paid forward what Michal did for me with Artyom." Then to Artyom as she steps up, "I want to thank you for being here for Michal."

As they light the candle, Artyom says, "Sian, I will always be grateful what you did for me. Being there for me."

With tears streaming down her face, Diego laughs big, "Everybody is thanking everybody today, aren't they!"

Frivolity and fun comes with Rufus Tyrol who shares candle eleven with Cap, and Victoria who scores candle twelve, but of all people it's Junior who lights candle thirteen because he spent quite a bit of time rounding her edges off—where Monique stands and points at him while laughing, "So, *Monsieur*, that was your doing, *tu cad!*"

Where Junior innocently shrugs, "*Si*, my apologies, *señora!*"

With him stepping off the stage, Diego looks out and can't find the words, so after a good twenty seconds it is Angela who speaks up, "Sian, what you are doing here-now is between me and my flan!"

Diego rolls her eyes then points at little Angela and says, "You, I got your number. Just you wait!"

Angela spins her hands around at Diego while mocking her, "Yea baby! You got my number!"

With everybody laughing, which is normal around Angela, Diego takes a deep breath and, "Most everyone I know complain that their fathers are not around. My family complained that my father was never around." Diego points up and, "But, I don't know how, but he always knew when I really needed him. I mean it was my fourteenth year and I was awkward! With Jacob still sitting she starts gesturing at him excitedly, "Come on, get up here already!"

"Like my mom he's a busy guy, and I was sprouting and I was a damned mess, like all thirteen year olds, but he knew I needed him." And as Jacob steps up, Diego winks at him, "Sometimes I think he never knows best but...he always knew. I never had to say anything and he was always there when it mattered. That year we went places, and binged on shit cartoons and, god, I love him for it!"

With them lighting the candle together, Jacob whispers, and just enough to get picked up on her mic which gets him a big laugh, "You can shut the fuck up now, You're making me wanna cry."

Diego gives him a huge hug to a loud round of applause, and as he steps away they mercifully come to the final candle.

Diego now looks down towards little six-year-old Angela and, "Didn't I say I had your number? Well, that number is fifteen!"

"Wha?" Angela goes—then realizes, "No shit!"

Diego pulls a chair around and points to it, "Get your butt up here, already!" With Angela moseying along like a snail Diego laughs, "It's now *you* between you and your flan!"

Angela kicks it in gear and boogies it on stage and hops up on that chair. Now eye-to-eye to Diego, Angela turns to the crowd and spins her finger around her own ear then points at Diego, where Diego shakes her head and, "Teen angst was the special of the day this year and you went out of your way to make me laugh. You really did."

Angela stares into her eyes and, "You're easy."

Diego grumbles, "You're a little ass."

She pats her own butt and, "I'm six so wadda-ya expect, hu? It'll get bigger!" With everybody laughing at this, Angela asks directly, "If I say nice things will that get me two flan?"

"Sure!"

Angela touches her lips while in deep thought where after a short pause Diego asks, "Nice words, how 'bout?"

"Tryin' to find 'em!" With everyone cracking up Angela puts her hands in the air and, while turning to look into Diego's eyes, she leans in to say, "And cheap!"

Diego is indignant, "Cheap!"

Angela shrugs, "You said it yourself at the discount rack!"

Shaking her head, Diego takes Angela's hand and has to pull her arm in so they can light the candle together. When lit, Angela looks at Diego, snarls a tad and gives her a quick kiss, and then, as is her style, she turns away, bends over and starts spitting.

With everyone laughing, Adolphina hops up and motions for Monique to come forward, and as she does the *Cubanaza Damas* bring a long-flat gift box up to a table on the stage. As they set up, Monique dons an earbud mic while Léon sneaks in with two flan deserts for the giggling Angela who is back in her seat.

Adolphina announces, "Madame Ribot, the stage is yours!"

Monique looks at Diego and shakes her head, "*Ton cadeau*, you were vocally opposed to this but your vote didn't count, but how does one go about buying for someone who want's for nothing?"

Diego laughs, "We can cut it off here if you want!"

Monique shakes her head again, "*Oh-no no-no-no! Ma petite cocotte*, after what we went through? *Oh no*, but this fell on *moi* and I had not an idea, nor a lead to go on, and the family here were racking their brains along with me and, by chance, your father suggested this." With the *Damas* nudging Diego up to the table, Monique continues, "Instead of a reproduction we were determined to seek out an original. The bidding was fierce but our Josav prevailed and, well, *voilà!*"

Diego asks, "You want me to open this?"

Monique sighs, "*Oui mademoiselle!*"

As Diego starts tearing the wrapping, Jacob calls out to her, "With this you'll be a genuine First Class, Space Patrol Officer!"

Diego gives her father a confused look while she unwraps a beaten to death rectangular guitar hard case. Unlatching it, she slowly opens the case to peek inside. Startled, she catches her breath and it slams shut. Diego opens it again and can't believe her eyes.

"Oh, my God, no way!" Diego shrieks, throws herself into Monique's arms, and starts bawling with racking sobs.

Surprised, Monique asks, "I believe we hit it out of the park?"

Through the crying, Diego comically nods yes repeatedly and, "I don't believe it!" And as she stands to collect herself she asks, "Seriously, is this thing real? Really real?"

Josav speaks up, "A nineteen-seventy-seven Rickenbacker. It's real alright! We had it refurbished for you."

As Josav and the Damas pull a blue 4001 model bass from the box and help her strap it on, Josav asks, "You been playing long?"

Diego sniffs with a happy-sad face, "Just a year."

"Ever hear of an Ampeg tube head?"

With a quivering lip, "No, what's that?"

Josav smiles, "You will when we get up the hill!"

Standing beside Diego, Maria looks at Jacob sitting below and gives him an approving nod, transmitting, <"Ya did good, fucker.">

Jacob smiles and uses her line, <"So, when am I right?">

Maria shakes her head with, <"Lick my twat!">

He perks up, <"Is that an offer?">

<"You got a full dance card, buckwheat.">

<"Wanna cut in? For you, just say the word!">

She smiles, <"When I'm in the mood I'll take a number.">

Jacob nods and, what follows absolutely floors Maria because, Jacob blows her the sweetest of kisses. Maria is gut-punched because this was a silly-stupid thing they did when they were first married. Subtly looking around to make sure nobody was watching, Maria snatches it from the air in slow-motion just like the old days.

Only Jessica notices what's transpiring here, and she's moved when Maria's hand drops to her side and grips it tight.

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"I just can't get away from this mutherfuckery, can I?"

Maria is shaking her head as Jessica crosses her arms and leans into her saying, "Nope."

It's late afternoon and the protestors have been there since early this morning. By now they're all shouted out but the second they see her it fires them up again but it's not near as loud as it was earlier. They have been held in the far parking lot and because of the acoustics none of their shouting made it into the park. A police line of a hundred cops is holding them in check and the press is intermingled with the police to take interviews and film the nonsense.

Just then Léon and his staff with the *Damas* start to walk from the park with Eight, Cap, Peanuts and Copper in tow. Five carts piled high with trays of food follow them, and as they reach the police line they set up tables and off-load the trays of food and drink.

Léon walks up and taps the lead officer on the shoulder, "*Monsieur*, this is a gesture of gratitude for your fine assistance today, but we have enough on hand to feed both you and our silly guests here so let's be kind, shall we?"

There is twenty times more burritos on the tables than there are police officers and this was intentional. As the police line pulls back behind the tables, each cop picking up a burrito and a drink, Léon steps out towards the protesters who are actually quiet for once, and waiting to hear what this guy has to say.

"Well, we must be peckish after a long day of making the loud noises, *oui*? For being civil today, *bon appetit!*"

They look at him in shock so he throws his hands out and laughs, "Come on, come on! Please, while it's hot!"

They approach the tables like locusts, tentative at first but orderly, and snatch all but a small pile of these huge burritos from the tables. While they are scarfing them down Maria steps up, takes one of the burritos—and with the clones keeping them calm and focused on eating Maria can unwrap it in full view and in relative peace.

"Kinda hard to shout stupid shit with a mouth crammed full of *carne asada* isn't it?" She takes a bite and looks at Léon, saying, "Damn, dude, this is good!"

Maria tosses the burrito over her shoulder where Jessica catches it like they've been practicing that toss, and while she takes a bite, Maria points to the three main protest leaders and thumbs towards the trees at the end of the police line, "My brown ass doesn't do well in the sun, so let's chat over there."

With Maria and the three walking off, Jessica notices a skinny young man in the crowd who's about her age. While she takes another little bite she paths her way into his head and learns something very sad about the people on this planet—the young have no responsibilities to speak of, nothing to look forward to and nothing to be proud of.

He wolfed his burrito down so with her head she gestures for him to come over. Surprised that this gorgeous redhead would do that to the likes of him, he approaches slowly and, "Wha'?"

She hands him her burrito and, "You still look hungry."

Suspicious at first, looking at the food then at her, he realizes that she is being nice so he takes it and says, "Thanks."

Jessica could drop a suggestion in his mind but she chooses to try verbal persuasion in its stead, "You look bored. That seems to be an epidemic around here."

With raised eyebrows he agrees, "You could say that."

She nods repeatedly then quietly asks, "Lookin' for something to do? I can get ya hooked up."

"Right, a job? Nobody has jobs."

Jessica stares at him and says even quieter, "I got something comin' up that, well, there won't be enough people to do the work and we will need people, not bots for it."

"Doing what?"

"Can't say, but you see the tall black building behind me?"

"The Klick?"

"That's the one. If you wanna get a jump on the premier for this show then all ya gotta do is just...walk on in. It's that simple."

Thinking, he nods and asks, "Front row seats, hu?"

She smiles at him, "Best seats in the house."

Maria snags four folding chairs from one of the carts and sets them up in the shade of three trees who are duking it out over the sun, and while working on their burritos these leaders are rattling off to Maria that she is a warmonger, a fascist and a Nazi of all things.

With Peanuts by the cart, channeling herself into their minds, she compels them to now cooperate while Maria puts her hand up to her mouth motioning for them to be quiet then say, "Have a McFuckin' seat already. It's my time to get a word in."

One of the leaders say, "So, you're going to listen to us?"

Maria snorts, "No, what makes you think that?"

"I'm wondering why the press here is not mobbing you?"

"Because I'll punch their lights out, remember?" She smiles big and, "See, if I wanna talk then I'll invite 'em over to ask questions, all nice-nice, but since they're spewing bullshit and spinning lies, well, there's not a court in the land or the four corners of the TPZ that can convict me of assault. They keep their distance now."

The next leader leans in and says, "Then to get your attention we're just gonna hav'ta step up our game."

"Really, that a challenge? If so then I'm up for it!"

"Ma'am, you're evil."

"They jump my shit and I'm the bad guy? Do you really listen to what you're saying? I venture to guess that if the media stopped sucking on the Co-op sugar tit and actually reported the truth then

maybe you'd be pitchin' a bitch elsewhere."

The third leader suggests, "You could sue for peace."

"And then what, peace? What a puerile notion!" Maria leans in towards them and, making sure the octodroid camera that's close picks this up, "I can tell ya right now *that* ain't gonna happen, and all ya'll got left in your quiver is exactly what you are protesting against here. Years ago you started with-like 'make love not war' or whatever it was you were puking out then. Now, three years on you're calling us fascists and Nazis and everything else in the book! Like you really know what those are?" She pulls out a transparent infrared filter sheet and says, "Here, look back at your people through this."

The leader looks out at the protesters enjoying their food and, all over them are little green dots everywhere, so he says, "Oh crap!"

He hands the filter off as Maria thumbs behind her, "See these cops and Secret Service guys here? Tell ya what, I'm gonna cut 'em loose! From now on if it's just me then these guys won't be around and that should give you a clear shot to punch a Nazi, throw a rock or pull a gun, but before you do...lookie here!"

Suddenly, two platoons of ghost droids flash into view, many of them floating in the air with their weapons pointing in all directions looking for threats, but mostly painting the protesters to freak them out. Everyone, including the reporters, see the droids and the hushed silence that falls over the entire crowd is deafening.

Maria continues with the slightest little evil grin she could muster, "I can't seem to shake these damned things off. They shadow me and my people everywhere we go and they are like, totally overkill an' psychobilly overclocked."

Just then, Diego leans in and gives Maria a quick kiss, and Maria says as she pats her on the backside, "You did good today, hon! Give me a minute, okay?"

"Okay, mom!"

As Diego walks out to the limo with Jessica and the clones, Maria stands, "See, this whole time you had it all wrong. The cops and the Secret Service standing guard were not protecting me from you. They've been protecting *you* from me."

The first leader asks, "Is there any way of ending this?"

"Why?" Maria then thinks about it, "I tell ya what, after the first of the year, March-February maybe, I'll be back and the four of us can have a two way dialectic over a beer then. Deal?"

"What's that going to accomplish?"

Maria asks, "Seriously?"

"Yea, what's that gonna do?"

Maria points out, "Reality check babe, the problem you've had all along is that out here in the free world you have a right to speak! What you don't have on the street is a right to be heard."

"Question stands, what'll it accomplish?"

She shrugs slightly, "I'll be listening."

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By the limo Jessica and Seth are watching the others load up, and far enough away for Jessica to ask, "Wanna show me now?"

Seth scratches his nose and, "Well, about that. I was hoping you'd forget." With Jessica slowly turning her head to him he realizes he can't slither out of this, "Sorry I played you but it was necessary. We couldn't let you approach step-mother with a lie on your tongue."

Jessica's lip curls slightly, "You lied...to me."

Defensively he says, "About the missions, yes, and both your imaginations ran wild. It was perfect!" Seth looks up at her, "Point is, this opportunity allowed us to lock-in New Years without having to pull teeth. Remember, Jessie, this is not about us."

"You never lied to me before today."

"Would you like to see how really messy today and the next six weeks would have been if I didn't?"

Jessica realizes, "I'm gonna half'ta let this slide, aren't I?"

"I tell ya what, sis." Seth gives her a peck on the cheek, "If I have to lie to you in the future, I promise I'll ask for permission first."

Jessica gives him a confused look, "That makes no sense."

"When the time comes...it will."

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