

36

the lesser yhvh

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TIME: 01:40zulu (local 17:40pst)

For Maria and Jessica it is 1:40zulu on Tuesday the 16th but here in Los Angeles it's still 5:40pm on Monday the 15th and the commuter traffic leaving downtown LA is starting to thin out. They are both on their second dose of the *jolt* booster-med which gives them about three hours before it starts to wear off. They're hoping to get to the 9:00pm beer run before they totally peter out.

Diego is on local time so she's up an atom.

The café outside the Bonaventure hotel is pleasant enough and if it wasn't for the patio heaters the ocean breeze from a coast twenty miles away would still chill you to the bone. When the weather is cool this is the hang out for most of the SA working out of One Klick across the street. The Co-op and the CIA used to watch everything the Annex did but it was such a fruitless effort that nowadays the spies only come around when it's someone like Maria in town. There was a time when the fear of assassination was an all-consuming worry but that was long ago. The standing Rules Of Engagement still apply today as they did way back when they were first adopted and will continue to do so into the next conflict...if it ever comes.

The obvious-obvious rule is that you don't touch anyone holding diplomatic credentials especially in neutral zones. Regardless of one's war footing this is always considered bad form. Another adopted rule is you never accost any combatant in a non-combatant mode in a mutually agreed to neutral territory like Earth or Sapphire. Busting on someone during R&R is looked upon as uncivil or uncouth nowadays. And what flies in the face of suavity is to gun someone down in the presence of family members or children. Anymore this is considered a no-no and you would think that Emily Post would have

weighed in on this back in her day.

Maria always has all three of these sewn up whenever she comes to Earth with that last one being an unintentional but normal circumstance here or on Sapphire for that matter. It also helps that they are not in a state of war but that wouldn't matter because she is considered a head of state in her capacity. To top it off there are so many people who want to see her dead that the ROEs may simply be academic in her case so she always has a shadow team watching over her just for giggles.

Oh, to be so popular.

Random chance encounters with people from your distant past are a rare thing indeed. On most of these occurrences you will see such-n-such a person and continue on your way while mentally trying to place said person on your historical time-line. You will think to yourself *where the fuck was it* and inevitably wake up at three in the morning going *holy shit that was so-n-so!* You almost never realize who that person was at the very moment when it could have made a difference in your day. Case in point, the salt and pepper couple two tables down from them has been gnawing at Maria ever since the hostess seated them. Maria thinks she recognizes them but the mental time warp trying to figure this out is making her cranium hurt.

The ongoing discussion since the surgery has been about Diego choosing a girl's name going forward, but before Maria could weigh in and settle the issue she goes, "Motherfucker!" Then pipes up loud enough for the couple to hear, "Morning Star, is that you?"

Ndosa Khumalo, a long lost native of the Natal Province of South Africa, would look every bit at home in a civet skin with ikhwa in hand as he does in the polo shirt and the three-wood he favors. As a Captain in the SADF he was sent to 83-Tau to work with Blackstone, consulting on counter-insurgency operations, and never looked back. He tutored Maria when she was a young'un and taught her everything he knew. When Maria came up with the plan to knock off the SS Colonel that wiped out her platoon at Saiph-6 he was like a proud Sifu watching his protégé go forth and kick ass. The last time Maria physically saw him was just a year ago but nobody knows that. Last time she saw Siusan Faulkner, the lady currently sitting next to Khumalo and the daughter of Blackstone's owner, was over three decades ago when she was carrying their first child.

Khumalo looks up, "Yeeea, depends on who you are?"

Maria stands and points to herself, "Tiger! Way back when?"

Both Khumalo and Faulkner do a big eyed double-take with Faulkner saying, "Holy Jesus!"

Khumalo stands to hug her, "It's been what, thirty, thirty-five years or so? My god it's been forever!"

Maria has stepped up to hug both of them, "About that. How is your baby? It's all grown up now?"

Faulkner laughs as Maria turns to hug her, "We ended up having three and we've got two grandbabies now!"

"Oh, my god! Seriously!" Maria thumbs back at Diego and Jessica, "I got my daughters with me. How about you join us?"

They both look at each other and say, "Sure!"

Two tables were pulled together and for the next hour and ten minutes they had a great time. Maria and Khumalo's charade was so perfect that nobody, not even Faulkner, could have guessed that they have been working together this whole time. After some catching up the discussion amongst them turned too Diego's name and things didn't get quite settled.

Diego wants to keep her name because that's what she's always known, and a girl called Diego is not without precedent but it's usually a nickname for Diega or Dora of all things. Diega is not even a real name but it has been under consideration. First names, with Diego as a middle name, have been bantered around with the top contenders being Ophelia, Maria and Sandra which is Jacob's mother. Jessica did jokingly suggest Sian as an option but with that name proceeding Diego, Maria warned they would never hear the end of it. '*Something* Diego Ramirez-Graves' kind of rolls off the tongue but there is no pressing need to settle this for now however; Maria made it clear that Diego has to decide by the time of her Quinceañera which is a little less than five years away. It was here and now that Maria let on that she and her mother, Ophelia, have already picked out the ball gown, the venue and the Mariachi band which made Diego groan and roll her eyes and everybody else laugh at her expense.

What none of them realize is that Maria wasn't kidding.

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The deception on the patio restaurant between Maria and Khumalo was so well played that when they decide to head on over to One Klick for a quick tour, the spies for the CIA and the Co-op just shrug at hearing this. It is clear to these 'boots on the ground' that following Maria around for some chance morsel of intel has yet again proven to be a colossal waste of their time.

With Jessica and Diego taking Siusan Faulkner around the One Klick facility, Khumalo and Maria head for the offices of the SA on

the first floor.

Entering the lobby Maria says to Khumalo, "That went better than expected."

Khumalo shakes his head, "There was a lot of people hovering around and watching over you."

"On top of my three man shadow team..." Maria stops in the middle of the lobby to count on her fingers, "There were six special agents from the Secret Service, three Delta sniper teams on the roofs, then the three Co-op and two CIA spies listening in on everything we said, which is fun to watch because I think they're all on a first name basis with each other by now..." Maria then gives a confused look, "And there were four other plain cloths types that I just can't figure out who they're with? But, they did blend in well I might add."

Khumalo says, "Oh, them, that was my doing. Those guys and gal are from a BDF security detail."

"Ah, watching over you!"

"No, watching over you."

"Hu? I thought you were supposed to be killing me!"

"Things change. A week ago, last Friday, Hartcourt sent all of us a note saying that you were now off limits."

Maria feigns shock because she knows the truth, "What?"

"My same reaction!" Khumalo points up for just a second, "And you were at the top of his proscription list for the last three years! I talked to him that afternoon, and I do see him a lot ya know, and I asked what that was about and he said (mimicking his voice) I'm extending Marshal Ramirez a professional courtesy."

Maria acts amazed, "Really!"

"Ya, beat that!" He then leans in, "What happened on the second of December is what I'm dyin' to know, and everybody is keepin' quiet 'bout it."

Maria gives him a look, "Ah, duh, you know."

Khumalo gives it back, "Ah, duh, I can't afford to break character. Not even here, 'kay? I don't know shit!"

"Got'cha!" Maria then sighs, "Thanks again for keeping me abreast on the Tinef Op. That was fricken crazy!"

Because of Maria's diplomatic standing any attempts on her life would have to be staged as an accident or the shit will rain. The thing that Khumalo cooked up, by the request of Hartcourt after the debacle from last May, was to programmatically commandeer the

Church Key Junket that ferries socialites, billionaires and high rollers between Las Vegas and New Sydney so they can take a shot at the budding casinos at the Kilosphere and the Necropolis. Since this is a chartered flight, and not subject to the scrutiny of the commercial carriers, the A.I. was updated to, when given the proper encrypted signal, feign a catastrophic failure and pitch itself into Maria's home on the approach to New Sydney, that is if Maria happened to be home. Khumalo kept her apprised of this effort and Maria made it a point never to be home when that flight was coming in.

Khumalo adds, "Ya, it kinda smacked of desperation."

"To think, they would waste all those celebs and big players just to whack lil ol'e me! Made me feel special."

Khumalo adds, "As Boxy would say..."

Maria chimes in with him, "Little pawns."

Both laugh, then Maria then adds, "Which is funny because after tonight my work will be done. I'll be coasting after this."

With that Ndosa asks, "Maria Lynn, I have to know. You really wanna to do this thing, right?"

"Ah, Ndosa, Morning Star, love of my life!"

"You mean the quickie in your youth!"

Maria nods and then shrugs with a smile, "Look, babe, my job is to ultimately win what's a-comin'...in the end. Towards that goal, to achieve this objective, my job is to make *you* look good! You've been battin' a thousand since day one and they *are* listening to everything you say now, right?"

"Hangin' on every word."

"Well, they'll continue to do so until they start gaining ground. By then you'll be voice of reason saying caution-caution-caution when they're winning-winning-winning and not hearin'-hearin'-hearin' what you're sayin'-sayin'-sayin' just like last time."

"Sure about that?"

"In eighty-seven did you not show them the road to the big win, and what happened?"

Khumalo was telling them to get out of Nu Ara and to bypass the Pleiades altogether—advising them to extend their dominion around the Pleiades and bottle up the SA because they would be committed to protecting those assets. The gains made by the Co-op up to that point now rendered them tone deaf to his advice. After the fiasco at Nu Ara it was a grind down to the inevitable stalemate.

This time Khumalo is giving them what they want and yet again he cautiously nods, "You're right, Tiger. They will overextend themselves if given the opportunity."

"I'm banking on it." Maria jabs him in the chest, "So, you're gonna give it to 'em, and we'll be sandbagging *all* the way!" She thumbs towards the conference room, "Let's get this over with."

Entering the conference room Khumalo sees, on the other side of the holo-screen protecting his identity, Lieutenant-Colonel, Peter Ribot and Ambassador, du Conde.

As Khumalo sits, Maria crosses through the holo screen while giving the quick introductions, "Colonel Ribot, Ambassador du Conde, I would like you to meet Impetus."

What's funny to Khumalo is that the Co-op has known about the existence of the "Impetus" mole since before 2280 and they've failed to link it to anybody they know. His gamer ID has always been "impiTUS" (impi for a Zulu warrior and TUS for The Ultimate Shakan) and this coincidence made them ask him once before the Nu Ara battle in 2287. And, when you think about it, nobody in their right mind would allow the use of their gamer ID as a clandestine mole name because it would be so damned obvious—and it's worked! Khumalo, with his spot on advice and unblemished loyalty, is so far off the radar for this mythological Impetus double-agent motherfucker that after this round between the SA and the Co-op he's thinking of hanging up his spurs and writing his memoirs and Maria has already agreed to give safe haven for him and his family to do just that. What kills Khumalo is how many times he sent information to Maria full well knowing that she couldn't use it except to anticipate a loss and minimize casualties. Then again, to lose a battle while avoiding mass slaughter is a big plus in most people's ledger book. To top that off the Annex excels at 'sandbagging' and making a loss look great for the Co-op, and terribly bad for themselves...when it's all bullshit to begin with.

du Conde opens with, "The great Impetus, I can't believe I'm sitting across from the legend himself."

Khumalo's voice was deep before, but now it's deep and fuzzy, "Thank you Ambassador. And to be sitting here across from you, the apocryphal 'snake-in-the-grass' in the flesh. Like, my god! The irony is that they know all about me and the shit I do behind their backs but you-YOU do it in their face! You feel 'em up then knife them when they kick and they're still clueless! I am truly humbled."

du Conde gives a look, "I'm not sure how to take that?"

"Praise. Consider it high praise, Ambassador. I am damned glad we're on the same team."

du Conde glows as Khumalo addresses Peter, "And you're the son of Field Marshal Graves and the grandson of Monique Ribot. I hear that you are an excellent officer and pilot. An old-school hands-on pilot I hear. A rare skill nowadays."

Peter breaks an ever so slight smile, "Thank you, sir."

du Conde says to Peter, "You know I always wanted to meet your grandmother, Monique."

Peter snorts, "I think she'd hate your guts."

"Ya, but she would love me if I got her on her back."

"Ya, but on her back she'll love anybody!" Peter then laughs, "Which is funny 'cause she asked Caesar if he wanted to invite anyone for New Years so you and Mofid get an invite."

"Mon Dieu! I made an impression on our feathered friend!"

"And, it pains me to say ya kinda grew on me."

Maria pipes up, "Guys, I got two more meetings after this one so, to cut this short..." She looks at Peter while pointing at du Conde, "A c-note says he scores."

Peter smirks, "I'll take that bet."

du Conde rolls his eyes as he turns back to Khumalo, "We know each other pretty good around here. If you make it out of there, wherever that is, I'm sure you'll fit in." du Conde huffs and continues, "Now, I represent Fifty-Two for the United Nations and I function as her advocate. Her protector you might say. But, I'm handing the floor over to the Colonel because this meeting is about his issues."

Peter picks it up without dropping a beat, "I'm attached to the United Nations-D.P.K.O. and I'm charged with overseeing the security built around Fifty-Two. Our concern is one of containment. To risk sounding melodramatic, when we think of Fifty-Two other things come to mind like, oh I dunno, say...ebolaX...Chicxulub...elevator music! You know, really scary things."

Khumalo interjects, "Preacher to the choir, Colonel."

"Ya, well, that may be but we need to get the message through loud and clear. Your operatives have been trying to get a sample of her DNA and I think it's time we help 'em along."

Khumalo asks with some concern, "To risk sounding more than slightly confused, but why the fuck would you do that?"

Peter has pulled an envelope from his breast pocket, opened it and, putting his hand through the holo-screen, he shakes a business data card out on the table while saying, "Well, we're getting tired of

your ops following us everywhere and, quite frankly, they're gonna eventually succeed. So, why fight it? You came really close in Warsaw and we were surprised you didn't get it then."

Khumalo picks up the business card for the Bonaventure's business office and looks at it, "What's this?"

"This morning, while having coffee across the street, I hacked my own PC and copied the whole fucker down to that card. Before you ask, yes there is a lot of shit they should not have but any really-really Secret Sam shit is not on there. What you will find are all the communiqués between me and the State Department, the White House, the D.P.K.O. and the Security Council regarding Fifty-Two and what happens if they try to clone her. If the Co-op successfully makes one then neutrality goes right out the window and every option is on the table from I-SOC all the way to W404. And, for their edification, that means deploying the model Sixty-Four version of that warhead. All sixty-four mega-fucken' tons of it."

Khumalo is surprised, "You weren't shitting them, were you!"

du Conde adds, "That stuff spells it out for 'em. Our entire play book from black ops to embargos, quarantines, blockades, all the way to dropping nukes and, let me stress this, nukes have not been ruled out as a first-step option. That is very much on the table."

Khumalo signs with relief, "Thank you. I can't even begin to thank you for this."

Peter says, "So, the hand off is going to be Wednesday morning in Europe." He sits down beside du Conde and continues, "Tomorrow, the Ambassador and I will be taking Nikki to Paris where she will spend three days and two nights with Alex Dimitri. You know the story there I take it."

"Yes, I do."

"After the first night, when we're at the Louvre, have your ops just take the tooth brushes, okay? Don't even bother with trying to replace 'em. I'll have her scrub her cheek real good."

"I know they're hot to get this but if we don't have the protocols to make the magic's happen...what's the point?"

"In the files are several protocols and one is for Nicole Burke, the NCL-3.1 protocol. We know they have her DNA but they do not have the protocol for the 4.0 which is for Fifty-Two and they'll never get it, but if they diddle-dick around and create a 3.1 in an attempt to deconstruct the 4.0 protocol then Fifty-Two will know and we can start the whole confrontational nonsense with embargoes and the shit can roll uphill from there. The 'nuke-outright' option gets shelved."

Khumalo nods, "Brilliant, absolutely brilliant! So who came up with this one?"

Maria answers, "Scarab thought it up. These two have never met Scarab but you get to in a few minutes."

Khumalo asks, "I am?"

"Yeppers, Impetus! Soon as Pete and Tristan are gone." Maria then asks Peter and du Conde, "We cover everything, guys?"

When they nod yes, Khumalo adds, "I look forward to meeting you gentlemen for a beer when this is all over."

du Conde smiles, "We too! Bonjour."

With Peter and du Conde stepping out Jessica quietly slips in through the door behind Khumalo and says, "Diego is taking Siusan up to the observation deck."

As Jessica steps around towards the wall panel to turn off the holo-screen, Maria rubs her eyes and says, "Only one more to go."

Jessica has turned it off and is now leaning against the wall, and as the longest of seconds pass, Khumalo wonders, "I thought you had two more? Like, me meeting Scarab?"

Maria stops rubbing her eyes as Jessica wiggles her fingers at him while saying, "Oi!"

Maria points to Jessica then to Khumalo "Impetus, meet Scarab. Scarab, this is Impetus."

Khumalo shakes his head, "Hu?"

Maria asks, "Ah, what did you expect?"

"Oh, from what I heard, to keep Fifty-Two in check, Scarab had to be like Medusa evil or something worse even! So, *you're* the one who's got her on a tight leash?"

Jessica nods, "I got her on a God damned choker chain, and I love yankin' on it." Jessica can feel his doubt, "I get the feelin' you have concerns about me. That was quick."

Khumalo breaths in and says, "I...was maybe expecting more? This was...not expected?"

Maria nods, "Fair enough but this is what we have to work with. In fact, Ndosa, from now on your contact will be Jessica."

Jessica tells Khumalo straight up, "Your encryption code will remain as 'impi' plus 'TUS' in large case, okay."

Khumalo asks with surprise, "Who told you that?"

Maria answers, "Nobody did, and that's why we're here."

"I don't get it? What *are* we doing here?"

"Changing of the guard?" Maria leans forward, "You know, it's getting risky for us to keep in contact the way we have. Something is bound to slip up and it will be something stupid like when things get posted. My analysts have done a study on JPEG communications and it's the postings that can be a dead giveaway. It doesn't tell ya what's being said but it does tell ya who's sayin' and who they're sayin' it too. Our postings, when compared, have shown a little too coincidental of a pattern when bounced against each other."

Khumalo is amazed by this news, "Then that's why your responses have been put off for days on end! That's why you're also putting up more non-coded images but...we're not on any common lists or networks?"

"It doesn't matter, and don't be wiping out any of your threads thinking that's going to make a difference. That will only bring attention to yourself so don't do it."

"Then how do we get in touch with each other?"

Maria readies herself, "Like I said, from here on out you will be working with Jessica. She'll be our go between."

Jessica takes the floor, "For her offing the Colonel the way she did Maria was called 'Babe Satan' by your group, which I thought was catchy, so her codex became YHVV7734. Since I'll be the lesser yhv in this venture we'll use the same codex sequence for me but the first four characters will be in small case. Agreed?"

Khumalo was trying to get this all to sink in, "Ya-h-weh...you wanna run that by me again?"

Jessica thumbs toward Maria then herself, "Yhv, the lesser yhv. You know, the Metatron. Get it?"

Khumalo gets his wits back, "I'm not working with you. You're a kid for Christ's sake!"

Jessica's lips purse just a tad at the insult, and she leans in ever so slightly, "What's it gonna take for you to work with me?"

"I dunno, I'd have to say..." Khumalo looks towards Maria with wide eyes, "An act of God?"

Jessica looks back at Maria who, with the sweep of a hand, gives Jessica permission to have at it. There is a box of facial tissue on the table by the water pitcher so she pulls three out and hands them to Khumalo who takes them.

Jessica sighs, "You're gonna need these."

"Why would..." Suddenly, and without warning, Khumalo's fist balls up and, like a shot of lightning, he punches himself in the nose, "WHAT THE FUCK!" He was spun halfway around in his chair, and as he unwinds, covering his bleeding nose with the tissue, he says while hiding the shock, "What the fuck was that!"

Maria asks with a lilt in her voice, "Didn't you just say?"

Khumalo puts a free hand out, "Yes-yes-yes, I know."

Jessica then says, "That demonstration was probably a little too blue-collared. How about we opt for interpretive dance?"

Khumalo's free hand flies into the air, and as it sweeps straight out to his side he stands and raises one foot forward in the air.

"Okay-okay-okay! You made your point!" Jessica gives him back control of his own limbs, so he asks, "How'd you do that?"

"I'm not a psi-clone so I don't rightly know." Jessica reaches for a handful of tissues and says, "While Hartcourt and Maria had their meeting two weeks ago I was sitting in the next room and, from now on, I can read his mind like a book when I have direct contact."

As Jessica pulls a chair up to Khumalo he jokes, "So, if you're not a clone then, just maybe, it's Midichlorians! Ever think of that?"

Jessica chuckles, "You're a dick." She then pulls his hand with the bloody tissue and, with spit and adept motherly attention, she starts to clean his face, "I now, like Fifty-Two, can read him enough that, from a distance, I can feel what he's up too. Between the two of us we can keep you apprised what he's actually thinking and, what you don't know is that you, of all people who is not family, are the only person alive in his good graces. If he were to ever consider anyone being an actual friend in life—you would be it."

Khumalo cooperates with Jessica and lifts his nose so that she can get to it, "Somehow I don't find that comforting."

"As well you shouldn't, but it does give you a leg up. In three weeks he'll be asking you about today and you simply say you were reconnecting with a buddy from the past. A totally random and chance encounter."

"Someone I was trying to bump off."

"Ya, but by the time he gets around to asking you can tell him to fuck off and you'll quit 'cause you can but...he won't want that because by then you'll be giving him victories! *Mucho grande* victories! And with victory, doubt, in all its shades of gray, flies with the wind like leaves. He will not argue with winning."

"It's that soon?"

"About a week, dude. Let's say that at eleven, thirty-seven *clocks will synch*. Just keep it to yourself."

Maria speaks up, "Something you need to be aware of, there's an effort to bump off Hartcourt. We need you to bring the hammer down on it. Saavedra and Tillsdale are spearheading this effort."

"Don't you want Boxxxy gone?"

Marie feigns surprise, "No! He's not military and, like last time, he'll fuck things up for ya. We talked about this at length last year. As smart as he is he won't let go of shit and that's his Achilles heal. Write your final report and retire before Polaris. Okay?"

Jessica adds as she finishes brushing off his polo shirt, "You'll be so marginalized by then he won't even notice."

Maria then asks, "So, Ndosa, are you going to work with her or not? I need to know P.D.Q."

Khumalo stands and nods, "Okay, I think I can work with her." He looks at Jessica, "You are one tough cookie."

Jessica snickers, "Naw, ask anyone, I'm a marshmallow pie!"

Khumalo shakes his head, "I'd love to go with you to a casino when you're old enough. Just to dick with the house."

Jessica looks back to Maria, and Maria agrees, "When you're of age we'll figure something out. Okay?"

"Cool!" Jessica turns back to Khumalo, "Two things, your eighteen year old daughter, Cloé, she's going to UCLA, right? When you leave tell Siusan you're going to hook her and I up for a play date after the Christmas break. That'll give you and her an excuse to touch my social page—start things off right. I'm in town a lot so I can show her around and hook her up with some of the in-crowd."

Khumalo nods, "Okay, she says she's been bored. What's the second thing you had in mind?"

"There's a really nice not-so-little villa in Malibu, in the Francisco Ranch area. It's definitely in your price range so I'd grab that up while you can."

"Kid, you really are on top of shit."

"Kid, eh...I'll have you know I'm secretly a red-head sociopath with blond ambitions, but you'll acclimate to me. In time."

"Right!" Khumalo smiles at that and before he steps out he looks back at Maria and remembers the night they got drunk and she came up with her infamous Plan-B, "You know, play your cards right and you'll never have to turn to that fucked up Plan-B of yours."

Maria just stares at him, "I don't know how to break the news to you, Ndosa, but...this is Plan-B."

Maria nods yes as he says flatly, "Just refined."

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It took another twenty minutes for the next guests to show. Major, Dianna Victoria Wilson, the Princess of Wales, is currently the first in line from the House of Wilson for the British throne held by her father, King William the VIII, and health-wise it's not looking good for him. The oldest of three sisters she went into the Army Air Corps to fly the HWG99b Warthog gun-ship, licensed from the SA, in the assault and close air support roles. Under the tutelage of Michelle Kiel, Victoria has become a *bona fide* monster with that machine and earned the call sign "Hedgehog" by her peers. Her friends call her Vic and her school mates called her Knuckles, but if you call her Princess Di she's been known to break your face for the privilege.

And as hot as she is this is not your Disney Princess.

Victoria was looking forward to going to Dubai because what used to be the U.A.E. has been the center of a regional shooting war that's threatening to fire up again for the third time in the last century. Unfortunately, her father's condition has taken a turn for the worse so in the up and coming weeks, instead of her G-suit and carbon-fiber armor and loving every minute of it, she may be donning a coronation gown with orb and scepter and hating every minute of it.

Victoria is here because the Prince or Princess of Wales has long been the ceremonial commander of the Brigade of Gurkhas for all of Great Britain. Accompanying Vic is the Colonel of the 8th Regiment of Gurkha Rifles (the last standing regiment) Brigadier J.G. Beacock. With them is Sergeant Major, Ganju Thapa who looks every bit of *the* fighting soldier with his khukri and slouching Terai signals hat.

In the conference room, Maria stands and addresses the guests as Jessica shows them in, "Major Wilson, Colonel Beacock, and you're Sergeant Major Thapa, right?"

Thapa snaps a sharp salute and Maria smiles, "Thank you, Sergeant Major, but we are informal around here."

Thapa bows his head, "My apologies, Marshal Ramirez."

Maria opens, "So, Victoria, or is it Vic?"

Victoria confirms, "Vic is good."

"It's really great to meet you. Gun Crazy sang your praises. Said you were a real down to earth kinda gal."

"Nap of the earth is a lot more fun."

"Very much so." Maria then gets to the point, "We've been supplementing the Gurkha Rifles for quite some time and because of the budgetary questions we hear it's become a problem for you."

"Austerity sucks. We are forced to either come clean with where the budget money comes from or we cut the regiment and, let me tell you, that last option is heartbreaking. A bloody tragedy."

"You looking for a home for them?"

Beacock speaks up, "Your organization has not been able to accommodate them in the past, so what's changed?"

Maria leans against the edge of the conference room table, "Last year we updated our JACC fighting suits to the point where even I am now not qualified to join the Annex but, instead of us thirty-thousand grandfathered shorty's continuing to use the previous systems they redesigned a JACC giving the flexibility of the new suits but sacrificing some of the armor protection for the extremities. After extensive testing we think it's a doable and fair trade off."

Victoria and Beacock's eyes go big as they look at each other then to Thapa who is obviously about to crack a smile, with Beacock asking, "What's the height limit at this point, Marshal?"

"With the new JACCs the height limitation is around five-nine or, in metric, one-hundred and seventy-five centimeters; but with the redesign we can go down to a smidge below five-three or, as you say, one-hundred and sixty centimeters. So, for you the door is open."

Victoria clarifies, "Then you'll take the regiment."

Maria nods, "As soon as humanly possible, but there's more."

Beacock asks, "More? What's the catch?"

Maria perks up, "There's no catch, we just need more!"

Victoria blinks her eyes and asks, "How many more?"

Maria pulls out a bottle of whiskey and shot glasses and pours them each a shot while saying, "I have a manpower problem. Of all the billions of human beings spreading out in every direction nobody wants to risk their ass anymore. Even if it's for a good cause! I also got a big fight comin' up, and it's gonna be a long protracted one so I'm gonna need people and, honestly, I would've come to you years ago but I didn't have the means to make the offer I can now."

As Maria hands out the shots Victoria adds, "Sounds like you need more than one regiment."

"Twenty-seven...regiments." Maria then smiles at Thapa,

who's eyes are bugging out, "So, Sergeant Major, think you and the Colonel can swing that many people?"

With some urgency, Beacock speaks up, "I think the Sergeant Major is agreeable to this."

Victoria steps in, "Georgie, I believe the word 'agreeable' may be somewhat disingenuous. Sergeant Major, what would your exact words be, and that's an order."

Thapa calls out, "Bloody hell! What are we wastin' time here for! Let's get this on the fucken' hump why don't we."

Maria says, "There's gonna be a fight."

Thapa throws it back with cold eyes, "We've never shied away from a fight."

With a great sense of relief Victoria nods, "You have your answer, Marshal. It's a deal." There was then frustration in her voice, "Can you excuse me for a second, I keep getting interrupted."

"No problem." Maria then turns to Beacock and Thapa as Victoria steps away, "Colonel, we are aware that there are many special requirements for training the Nepalese, so with that in mind we're willing to pay top dollar for you to continue training them during their initial boot stage. Is that a possibility?"

Beacock nods, "Yes! You give us the budget that we can publish and ya! Whatever you want!"

"We'll need to shake-n-bake the entire 8th Regiment into NCOs for the transition. We want the compilation of men to women at no more than four to five. We would prefer one to one but our line in the sand is a three to two ratio, okay? We won't budge on that. Also, if it sounds attractive to you we can keep the 8th Regiment stationed in the British Isles as the Kings Own Gurkha Rifles. There is something special about keeping up with traditions, and that's one to keep."

It was then that Victoria stepped up from her call, "If I may, you should consider calling them the Queens own Gurkha Rifles."

The stunned silence that followed was broken by Colonel Beacock quietly saying, "Long live the Queen."

"Ya..." Victoria says, more angry than sad. She then looks to Maria for sympathy, "I'm thirty-two, got the most kick-ass job in the world *and* respect from my peers because I can do it well. They tell me I'm smokin' and when I look in the mirror...hell, I'd do me!"

Everybody chuckled with that one, and Victoria continues, "Always thought *my* life would end around high-tea. And to think, I didn't even make it to Elevenses before it ended. An inglorious

smashup by trebuchet—right into Buckingham.” She then nods to Maria, “You sure you don’t have a slot for me? It’d be a might better than the circus I’m joining!”

Maria throws in, “No, but you can always come visit me on the Church Key when you want to get away. They won’t be able to find you there!” Maria then points up for a second, “As a consolation prize, a parting gift. Guns informed me your Razorbacks were a little thread-bare, and I got a glut of those just sittin’ around a-lookin’ for people to fly ‘em.”

Victoria perks up a bit, “Really!”

“Same as the last lease. One-pound per-unit per-year. In the ninety-nines I’m offering thirty-two gunships and sixteen slicks, and in the ninety-eights I can spring for eight of the heavy lifters.”

“I...I can’t turn that down.”

“Good! Have fun zooming in ‘em!” Maria then affirms with a smirk, “And, the offer stands if you wanna get away.”

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Maria and the girls accompany Victoria and her people to the landing pad on top of One Klick, and as they quietly go up in the elevator Diego makes an observation for clarification, “Mom, if you’re thinking Descanso Gardens then you weren’t kidding about the Quinceañera, were you?”

Maria goes, “Nope.”

Victoria asks Diego, “What’s that, love.”

Diego sighs, “It’s where I have to put on a stupid looking ball gown and walk around with a goofy smile on my face.”

Victoria snorts, “What I’m going to have to do here shortly.”

Diego looks up at Victoria, “I’m sorry.”

Victoria pats Diego on the shoulder and says, “Tell ya what, doll, you come laugh at me walking around in my stupid looking gown and I’ll come laugh at you in yours.”

Maria and Jessica glance at each other and shake their heads as Diego says, “You’re on, lady.”

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