

90

concha like a stradivarius

LCTN: SOL-3, LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM
 CORD: SAO-0.01 (0.998au from SOL)
 DATE: 2319ce-FEBRUARY-8-SATURDAY
 TIME: 10:30zulu (local 10:30gmt)

From inside the famous Australian State Coach, surrounded by the last horse cavalry unit on Earth, known as the *Blues and Royals*, Maria asks, "What's with Alastair's apology yesterday morning?"

While waving to the cheering crowd overflowing The Mall, Victoria glances at Maria and, "Me Nippers happens to be an astute practitioner of what the royal family calls, Dontopedalogy."

Maria huffs a small laugh, "The fuck is that?"

Victoria cracks a smile, "The art of foot in mouth speechcraft."

"As a professional myself I am kinda curious, what'd he say?"

Continuing to wave, Victoria goes, "The bloody media won't stop banging on about our VC's so, in a snit, he straight up says to this hackette that he'd rather pitch the medals in the loo if he could."

Maria notices a young girl pointing at her, so as Maria waves back, "The third and fourth squads you ran into, you went at 'em like god-damned Judge Dredd so waddaya expect?" She looks at Victoria, "As long as you live, *cariña*, you'll never hear the end of it."

"Afraid of that." Victoria rolls her eyes and resumes waving, "By Sod, I do wish your people would'uv yanked me chain."

Maria reaches up and touches a white, gold and green wreath Star Ribbon, the Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath, dangling around her neck, "How 'bout you'd take this thing back?"

"Not on your life. You earned it, darling."

"The order still kickin' up a fuss?"

"After Polaris those toffs, as you would say, fuck the shut up!"

Victoria again glances at her and snorts, "Also, *ipso facto*, Maria speak, you happen to be a citizen of the City of New Sydney so—"

Maria corrects her, "Resident."

"Well, when splitting hairs my ruling stands, so be a good subject and maintain a stiff upper lip how 'bout."

With the coach circling the roundabout onto Parliament street, Maria starts to chuckle, "I got a stiff upper lip for ya."

"I bet you do!" Victoria breaths deep, then her eyes go wide while saying, "Oh, we haven't yet chat 'bout this but you giving 'em all Majin Buu, as many as they can take on, and at no out of pocket! Well, I have to say that you have gobsmacked the lot of 'em."

"We're building the Trung platforms at virtually no cost, so we might as well pass the savings along, right?"

"Capital kit that is beyond everybody's reach, and here you are giving them away!"

"There are strings attached."

"Yes, as long as they taxi science missions around for your CXi, and I'll have you know that my Air Chief Marshal says that you getting everyone to dance to your tune is bloody genius!"

"That's a bit of a reach, don'chya think?"

"Overnight you go from the Co-op's bog-roll to Admiral Yi incarnate, and with the Kid Buu Wrecking Crew running wild, word is every one of us will be jumping on that CXi bandwagon!"

"That's good to hear."

Victoria laughs, "An' that demo made Cobalt Bluer all twee by comparison. You've leveled the playing field giving it to all comers, but command thinks you're off your trolley by offering it to the grays."

"That's the price for peace."

"Everyone talks big on working together but now...now they have too. Now they all work for you, Maria Lynn Ramirez. On this very day you swing the biggest stones in the universe."

Maria gives a smug, "But you always thought that."

"Nooooo, those are the exact words from my Air Marshal."

"Correct me if I'm wrong but, as I recall, they always thought I was beneath the crown."

"That was The Ton! My command staff however, thought you had something up your sleeve." Victoria stops waving to glance at Maria, "And you did. He said he's going to enjoy working for you."

"That's not what this is about."

"True 'nough...but what he says has clarity." Victoria nudges Maria in the arm, "Everyone way underestimated you, love."

"Keeping 'em in the dark was the goal."

"An' pulled the wool you did."

"Purdy much, 'cept for the intel community."

"Nobody there knew for sure what you were up too, but our joint SOCOM with the Yanks had a pool on you for the third."

"Based on?"

"Time of day!" She points over her shoulder, "And, by Jove, it was my Corporal of Horse who made off with that pot."

Maria thumbs behind them, "You mean Chess, right? The guy with that crazy psycho-spikey hatchet?"

"The very one!"

"Seriously, would he really use that thing on a horse?"

Victoria shrugs, "Farrier Axe and, yes, he has."

Maria rears back and, "The shit!"

"That 'e is." Victoria then adds, "I would have considered Chess but he's from Catholic stock...more the pitty. The Nippers, however, is from the family Neville and he does know his place."

Maria shrugs, "It helps that Alastair is fricken hot."

"What also helps is that he's a bonkers of a shag."

Wide eyed, Maria says, "That's good to hear."

Victoria cringes, "Sorry, I didn't mean to—"

Maria throws out, "No! No, that is good to know, actually."

Victoria comes clean with, "I wanted to share this with you earlier but...well, when I proposed to Alastair he had this odd look on his face, and I thought he was going to leg it. Instead he throws me down and has his way with me where, afterwards, trying to catch my breath, I say to 'im...'I take that as a yes.'"

Maria snorts, "That's a scream!"

"I thought so!"

"Is he going to be okay with us?"

"He has his boy-toys and, be assured, he knows his place." Victoria leans in, "But then, I'd trade 'im for your consolation price."

"Aaaaah, ya heard about that."

With their carriage approaching Parliament square, Victoria says, "Word is you snatched Sasha out from under ol' Chuckles."

"Like to think so but Sasha said that after six years they were on the outs. Him now being gone all the time was the final straw."

"I say, that would be a catalyst, yes."

Maria then shares, "But, fact of the matter is, on New Year's she tried to put the screws to him. Wanted to tie the knot, and that actually gave him the opportunity to hit the brakes."

"Yea, and you the opportunity to slither in." Victoria then snickers, "Is it true? Jacob said she has a concha like a Stradivarius!"

"That's my line! Motherfucker owes me royalties!"

Victoria thinks and, "So, you said that about me, no doubt!"

With a guilty look, Maria shrugs, "Well, d'uur?"

With them circling the square, Victoria asks, "So, is it true?"

Maria gets her digs in, "You bet it is, but the way I heard he played it, it was more like nails on a chalkboard."

"Harsh!" Victoria laughs big, then points out, "Yet, I find that difficult to believe the way you keep going back for it."

Maria huffs, "Yeeea, ya got me there."

"Intel says that she's connected to the grays." With Maria nodding, yes, Victoria then asks, "Is she POTUS fifty-eight?"

"You gotta keep that to yourself." Maria then smiles as the carriage comes to a stop, "And, yes, she is curious about you."

Victoria leans in with a smug, "A three-up? If it ever comes to that we dare not be shy." As the door to the carriage opens, she looks at Maria and sighs, "Well, duty calls."

Victoria is helped from the carriage by one of the footmen, followed by Maria handing her modestly short elliptical train off to an attendant. Maria slips out of carriage as Victoria is handed a cascading bridal bouquet by the wedding director, and with the crowd going wild Maria takes a few quick seconds to drink Victoria in with her eyes.

Victoria's wedding dress is a beaded-laced mermaid design. It is so form fitting it dramatically accentuates the hips and looks like she had to be sewn into the thing. An off the shoulder cut, the lace that spirals about and cups her breasts seamlessly wraps around her arms like vines on a branch. Where the color of the dress is off white, matching Victoria's long blond hair, the pencil thin silvery compound

that fills the scar on her face looks like it is flowing from the platinum fringe tiara sitting on her head.

In sharp contrast Maria, in her formal charcoal-black dress suit for the SA, has the knights star around her neck and a tiny silver star on her left lapel—and this look frames Victoria perfectly.

Because the groom, Alastair Neville, is a Major decked out in his finest military red and black dress uniform, loaded with medals and braided frogging galore, Victoria was asked to don her VC for today, and pinning it up under her left breast as an attempt to minimize it actually makes it stand out even more.

Before they step into Westminster Abby, three RAF, HWG99 Razorback gunships conduct a low speed, low altitude flyover from the north. They followed the parade route along Parliament Street and banked right at the square, and as they fly overhead the cheers from the crowd reach a crescendo.

These ships were from her old active duty squadron.

What Maria notices overhead, and probably no one else does, is Jacob's Thunderbird dropping in towards the SA landing platform in the City of London, just three kilometers away at the Annex tower on the south-east corner of Cannon and Dowgate.

Through the tacnet Maria laughs, <"Ain't you late!">

Jacob responds with a click, <"Sorry, shit blew the fuck up.">

<"Take your time, dude. We're at the Abby.">

<"I know you wanted to walk Vic.">

<"Thanks for being late, this means a lot to us.">

<"Just draggin' my feet! See you'z guys at the reception.">

Victoria takes Maria's hand and she is walked to the west portico that leads into the Nave, and at the open double-doors they run into the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Dean of Westminster and the Bishop of London. It's these three gentlemen who will lead the procession and officiate for the wedding.

The Archbishop says to them, "*Regina meis*, it is a beautiful day for a wedding!" Then to Maria, "Marshal Ramirez, welcome."

As Maria nods, Victoria smiles, "Thank you, Primate."

The Dean was the chaplain attached to Victoria's regiment when she first got her wings, so he asks, "E'ello Vic, any last words?"

Victoria huffs a little laugh, "How've you been, Captain Kent?"

"Can't complain, I do miss the service though."

"We fully agree, Captain! In the reserves, they short us pilots on stick time. Even me!" Victoria then says to all three, "If you vicars don't mind us queuing up? We would love a quick word with the girls before we get this on the yomp."

They step into the Nave of the Abby and head directly to the left side of the tomb of the Unknown Warrior. To their left are seven groomsmen, pilots from Alastair's squadron, and to their right is Seth, Angela, Peanuts, Minura, Copper, Eight, Cap, Jessica, Michelle Kiel and Diego trailing at the end.

Seth is the crown bearer and Angela is the ring bearer, but Minura was a last minute filler, squeezed in between her Honey Badger missions. Michelle and Diego are both the Matron and Maid of honor, all because Victoria couldn't decide between the two.

Victoria says to them, "My god, you all look so beautiful!"

Peanuts nods to her left, "You mean, these bags of ugly?"

With everyone chuckling, six year old Angela rears back and says to her, "Nuts, you gonna be stiff competition."

Victoria rolls her eyes while saying, "You two are terrible." She then smiles and addresses each one but when her eyes land on Diego she jokingly asks, "You going to make a scene this time, doll?"

Diego wonders, "They gonna play, Zadok the Priest?"

Victoria shakes her head, "No."

"Then you're in luck! I'll be on my best behavior."

"One minute." The Archbishop says to Victoria as he and the Dean set the pillow up for Seth to carry the Imperial State Crown. With that done, and them lining up for the procession, Seth looks over at Victoria with his angelic puppy-dog eyes. When in character he only makes eye contact with Jessica and Victoria, of all people, and always taken by these eyes, with a wistful smile she blows him a little kiss.

As the music starts, Victoria splits her bouquet into two parts, and as this slow procession heads out—first with the Dean followed by the Archbishop, Seth, Angela, then one by one the groomsmen step around her and Maria—each to link up with a bridesmaid.

In a graceful curtsey at the foot of the tomb of the Unknown, Victoria goes, "Top of the morning, my good man!" And as she lays the largest part of the bouquet on the tomb, then slowly stands, she adds, "Hope you like myrtle."

Maria links into Victoria via the tacnet, <"You are gorgeous.">

Victoria nods slightly, and as she looks up from the tomb with an unexpectedly sad face, <"I'd rather be walking towards you.">

Maria's nostrils flair just a smidge as she nods in return.

As Jessica steps away with her escort, with Michelle and Diego waiting to anchor three abreast with the last groomsman, Maria puts her hand out and says to Victoria with a wry, "Shall we?"

Burying deep what she truly feels in her heart, Victoria grins big and takes Maria's hand, "Arse over tits we go!"

0010011-01001010-01001111-01001000-00110010-00110010-01000001

Of the royal family, Victoria was late to the alter and, since everybody close to her by blood was already married, nobody had grounds to bitch when she selected her bridal party. The press and social commentators coined them the 'ginger procession' and even though Angela and Michelle are actually blond, matching Victoria, they pointed out that Diego, with her bronze skin and raven hair, was the "square peg" of the lineup. Ever since the quinceanera broadcast, Diego has become the most famous 'nobody' ever, so on social media those reporters caught the blistering ire of the viewing audience.

It helps that her mother, Mar, is super popular here.

The wedding was as beautiful as it was opulent, and also surprisingly fun for the girls since they could all crack jokes and make lewd comments about the pilots standing across from them without anyone the wiser—except for those moments when they had to purse their lips to suppress a laugh or two or an obvious drool.

Jessica linked Angela, Diego and Michelle in for the fun, but it was Angela who kept repeating, "Twelve years." And when asked what she meant, Angela goes, "In twelve years I'm gonna muscle in on every one of you bitches. You've been warned!"

They all had a hard time suppressing the laugh from that one.

The reception and Indian-curry themed banquet in the Ball Room at Buckingham Palace was an astronomical success, but it was the much smaller private party in the Music Room that followed for the wedding party, family and friends, that was the most fun.

Since the Annex controls all flights into Second Hand, Jessica and Michelle will be flying them, along with Victoria's two sisters and their families, on Jessica's Fastback—which just landed on the garden grounds outside on the west side of Buckingham.

Jacob is currently sitting at what was the kids table in the State Dining Room, just a Gallery's throw from the Ball Room. Jacob is hiding here because after five days on the jolt meds with no sleep, he is nursing three fingers of a medicinal single-malt Scotch, with a

handful of buzzkill in his pocket. In three hours his next drop-n-swap mission is going to launch and he's sitting here debating on whether he's missed anything or not.

Maria, Jessica and Seth step into the room, and as Jessica parks Seth in the seat across the table from Jacob, with a cup of tea, Maria says to him, "Eight and I are catchin' a ride with Esma and Piper to DC to meet with President Mofid. The girls will be by for Seth in a few. He'll be staying with Diego and Cap until I get back."

Jessica has stepped around and gives her father a hug while saying, "Gotta go mount up. You be safe, pop!"

Jacob gives her a little kiss and asks while she hurries away, "Flying them to Prypiat next week?"

"Yup, and Thirty-Two Squadron will take 'em from there!"

With Jessica gone, Maria just stares at Jacob—where she shakes her head then asks, "Ya'll got that drop in a few hours, right?"

Jacob nods, yes, saying, "Ninety-Five Tau."

"What's the deal there?"

"Swappin' out a recon for a pallet of droids."

"That'll fuck with 'em." Maria reaches over the table for a quick fist-bump and, "Get some sleep, dude. You look like shit."

Maria gives Seth a kiss on top of his head as she steps out, and with everyone else seeing Victoria and the family off—here we have Jacob all by his lonesome with Seth.

After a few seconds of silence, Seth goes, "Ooooooie-long."

Jacob watches Seth take short sips of his tea, looking away as usual, and he wonders what he did to deserve such a sweet boy.

"I am proud of you son. You did good today." Jacob takes a moment, swirling his scotch in the glass, not expecting a response, then, "I really wish there was a way you and I could connect."

After Jacob stares at his drink for a good half-minute, Seth speaks up with a normal voice, "You know that guys...guys don't drink whites but...you do, father." In shocked surprise, Jacob turns to look at Seth as he continues, "Pinot Grigio! Not just any label, one specific house, but I know why you suddenly stopped imbibing in it."

Jacob clears his throat and, "I'm curious, why?"

Seth shrugs slightly and, "Tastes like Sasha. In fact, ya add a little twist of oro-blanco and you've got Glados." Seth turns to look Jacob in the eyes, which has never happened before, "Ya gotta give it up for girls who excel at personal hygiene."

Jacob's eyes squint as he throws out, "In spite of that being true, that is...very asshole of you to say, son."

"Yea, I get that a lot."

Jacob's eyebrows rise. "Who else knows?"

"That I'm the Alter?" Jacob nods, yes, so Seth blinks his eyes in thought, "Jessica, Stepmother, Glados, Fifty-Two, Delphi and, well, you're not gonna like this one."

"Ah, try me."

"Boxxy Babe...Hartcourt!" Jacob gives him a perplexed look so Seth adds, "Trust me, ol' Box Cutter is not what you think he is."

"Can you elaborate on that?"

"Nope! You are not in the *need to know* loop so, no." Seth puts his cup of tea down and, "Sorry 'bout the autistic façade, but I'm finally off the Co-op's radar." He then laughs, "And sorry for all those visions of Mini-Mon dancing in your head. For me that was real."

Jacob scowls, "And...Peanuts."

"Yea, and you gotta admit, that's kinda where we connect."

Jacob cringes slightly, "Let's not."

Seth is tickled by his father's discomfort, "Have it your way!"

Jacob's eyes drill through him, "Why now?"

"Well, as Admiral Ackbar would say, It's a trap."

Jacob almost laughs at that, "Now can you elaborate?"

Seth, with a cheshire grin, "Yeeea, they're waitin' for ya. See, they picked up on a thermal dump by one of the troopers and were able to pinpoint the recon team, so you'll have to cancel the drop." Seth jabs a finger at him and, "No! Bad! You're thinking that since you know there's a trap you can counter it on the fly but, no. They're not waiting for you with troops, their waiting with nukes."

Jacob shrugs, "Nukes, yea, and?"

"Megaton level nukes. Everybody dies if you guys show up. You should know that your idea on keeping recon teams on the move until pickup is the best idea. You should consider dictating it as SOP. So, for the time being, have recon go get lost until Tuesday."

Jacob breaths deep and exhales with a huff, followed by him staring at Seth and saying, "Okay...okay, thank you."

Seth leans in, "Can I offer you a tidbit of advice that'll help?"

Jacob shrugs, "I'm listening?"

"No, you're not listening. You're hearing, but not listening."

"Okay, point made. I'm listening to you now."

"Stepmother was right, you need to sleep. When you do not sleep and try to get by on jolt, you start making dumb-ass choices. You tend to knee jerk yourself into bad situations and, the problem is, our people are going to start dying if you don't knock it off." Seth puts a hand out and, "No, okay, lets rephrase that! Let me convey this to you in words you'll commit to memory, okay? ...Knock it the fuck off."

Tight lipped but amused, Jacob says, "Message received."

"That's good, but you still got a big fuck up comin' up."

"How and when?"

"Not gonna tell ya." Letting that sink in he adds, "See, father, sometimes bad things need to happen all because—"

Jacob finishes his thought, "Good may come from it."

"Yes...it is a tragedy how much bad must happen for the little good that it does. I have to be careful about what to change and how I go about it." While sitting back, Seth spins his finger towards the ground to emphasize, "This...rabbit hole runs deep."

"Anything you can tell me?"

Seth puts his fingers to his lips, filtering through all the new possibilities and nods, "Okay, this I can tell you...you're gonna get hurt bad, like real bad. You'll be laid up for quite a while, *and* you are also going to lose Glados because of it."

Jacob throws out, "I'm surprised she an' I lasted this long."

Seth nods in agreement, then, "Just so you know, you'll do a bang up job managing the fight while on the mend but, it's when you get t-boned by Missis Right that...well, now you won't be so shocked."

Jacob wonders, "Anyone I know?"

"I ain't sayin' shit! What I can share is that you've been with her once before but you and she were too stupid drunk to remember any of it, and in re what's a-comin', oh, the hilarity!"

Jacob doesn't know what to say, "Oh, great."

"You won't see the humor but the rest of us will."

Jacob grimaces slightly, "Whatever that could be?"

"The kicker is that you just might find yourself surprisingly?" Seth struggles getting this out, "Oh, yea, the h-word...happy."

Jacob shakes his head, "That I find difficult to believe."

Seth cups his mouth with his hands and gives a raspy breath while saying, "I find your lack of faith disturbing."

Jacob again shakes his head while rolling his eyes, then, "Whatever you say, Seth, but I'll believe it when I see it."

"You'll see it...soon enough." Seth suddenly perks up, saying, "And don't worry, father, you'll be in good company! I already know who I'll be marrying and I'll be afflicted with the same intellectually numbing blight, right along with ya."

Jacob smirks with, "The h-word?"

Seth subtly shivers in pain, "uuuuuh, can't bear the thought."

Amused by that, Jacob waggles his finger back and forth between them, asking, "So, how does this work going forward?"

"It doesn't. We're done here. As it relates to you, *mi padre*, we're coasting along from here on out. You just do your thing. If the Alter needs to guide you it'll come from Stepmother or Jessie."

"Because we must keep appearances, right?"

"This conversation never happened."

"The others don't know?"

"Not a clue."

01101001-01101011-01101111-01010111-01000001-01010010-01000100

Jessica's fastback drops into Second Hand and lands at the newest aerodrome facility called, Sky Cove. As part of the expansion of the operations here, this place is quickly becoming an actual city with nine fortress-like wards that are connected by a web of monorails and utility tunnels that link into the original SA facility, code named The Foliot, that has been built out into a ward now called the Bronx.

Only the far off Delta-Ward is not yet tied into this network.

The UK heir apparent is usually prohibited from flying with the sitting monarch but, since they're riding in a Razorback, these things are considered stupidly-reliable, even indestructible, so for the first time her two sisters, their husbands and two of their older children, ten and twelve, got to ride along with Victoria.

They disembark, and after the twenty minute orientation that instructs you on how not to die on this planet, they take a monorail to the Iko Festival Grounds and it's 5-star hotel.

The twenty-six from the fastback, that is the royals, their assistants, the RaSP security team, the two reporters and their camera

operators, along with Michelle, Brie and Jessica, had a blast sucking down wine and rubbing elbows with the Annex station commanders, as well as the current Xhemal leader, Chell, and eighteen of her staff.

Five juvenile Xhemal, Chell's own kids, hit it off big with the two children from Victoria's second sister but, in spite of the raptor youths being way overpowering, the human children ran circles around the Xhemal when playing football, or soccer as they call it here.

It's now been seven hours after everyone turned in and here we are, at the posh conference room by the lobby of the hotel. In this meeting we have the Annex station Chief, Billingsley, Chell and two of her Xhemal staffers sitting across from the Nefer Key representatives Luc, their new Tribune Aat, and an army commander, Alexi.

Jessica and Victoria enter the room with their coffee while Luc talks with overly-animated hand gestures, "You know what I'm getting at? We like your set up here as long as nothing escapes and chases after us bipedal entrées while we're crying out, 'oh nooo!' and the critters going 'nom-nom-nom' on our screaming corpses!"

Alexi laughs, adding, "You know, Jurassic Park!"

Chell shakes her head, asking, "Jurassic, what?"

Rubbing his eyes, Billingsley huffs a laughs, "I'm the only one here old enough to get that reference." He drops his hands and says, "Luc, the thing is that the critters on Second Hand don't break out! Here those critters are looking to break *in* and, because of the constant construction, that happens about two or three times per quarter."

"Hey Jess!" Luc waves to Jessica as she and Victoria take a seat at the table, so he continues with, "Okay, Chief, you mean to tell me it happens *that* often and nobody has died?"

Billingsley shakes his head, "No, we haven't lost anybody yet? Look, try as we might to stop the security breaches, they find a way. So far the science dweebs have tallied up over two hundred and twenty alpha level predator species, and God knows how many sub-species there are on this planet? The raptors, as a genus, are lower mid-tier alpha hunters, but the Xhemal are *the* Apex, top of the heap killers on Second Hand. They're not the biggest by a long shot, nor the fastest, but what they are is the smartest."

Aat points out, "That counts for a lot."

"Here it does! I can drop you guys in a field with a platoon of droids and the animals out there have no fear of them yet. Point is, in that sitch, they're gonna make a play for ya." Billingsley then thumbs over at Chell, "If I put these three in the field then, hungry or not, every meat eater will high tail it out of there and let you be."

Chell smiles big, "That's how the math works here."

Billingsley asks, "So, how 'bout a hundred of you to start?"

Luc wonders, "I was under the impression that you can handle up to three-thousand of our people at any given time?"

Billingsley turns towards Chell, "I'll let you deal with this one."

"Yeea." Chell nods, then, "We don't know how the local fauna will react to you." Luc shrugs, so Chell sniffs the air then elaborates, "Okay, let's make a comparison. Human beings would be a convenient morsel to the carnivores on Second Hand. Something to snack on, but nothing to write home about. Your scent, your...let me put it to you this way, I already know that, here, you'd be on the desert menu."

Luc rears back, "Whu?"

Aat is laughing, "Oh, my god!"

Alexi snorts, "You wanna eat...us?"

Chell puts her claws out and, "No, it's not that! Look, we import cows, Angus beef from Earth so, now we don't look at humans as food. I mean..." She looks at Jessica and asks, "I'm not getting this across right, am I?"

Jessica laughs, saying, "Chell, you're on a roll, babe!"

Luc motions for Chell to, "Keep going! I wanna hear this."

Chell shakes her head and, "I don't know how to walk this back but, hear me out, okay? Do...you have any prey or domesticated stock we could possibly, I dunno, maybe sample?"

Fighting the laughter, Luc says, "Yes...yes, Chell! I think we can maybe get you people hooked up there." He turns to Aat and Alexi while asking, "*Vache noire*?"

Aat asks Chell, "Fresh or dressed?"

Chell looks at her staff and one says, "Fresh would be good!"

Luc then points towards Victoria while asking Chell, "Can we squeeze them in for a sec, then get back to the fun?"

Chell throws her claws out, "Oh yes, please! Before I say something else stupid as fuck."

Jessica asks with a smile, "How ya doin', Chell?"

Chell blinks and, "Making a mess of things this morning."

Luc reassures Chell, "I'm having a blast here!" He turns to Victoria and, "When I was informed that I'd be meeting with *you* I was stunned. I was under the impression that you were apolitical?"

Victoria was in the middle of a sip of coffee, so she pulls back and smacks her lips, then, "Yes, in the public's eye the Royal Family *is* apolitical. Without question we have no voice out there but, behind closed doors, we carry the voice of neutrality. Makes us useful!"

Luc asks for clarity, "You don't take sides, hu?"

"What use would be of us if we did?"

"Then let's hear that voice."

"Today, under the table, our voice carries for both the United States President, Mofid, as well as our Prime Minister, Edwards."

Victoria gestures to Jessica who says, "I'm here representing the Steel Annex as well as the City of New Sydney, on Sapphire."

Victoria continues, "Your current plan is to join the FIS as an observer mission to start and, in turn, thumbing your nose at the UN. However, as for the UN-GA, their trousers are up in knots over that but the perma-members to the Security Council are behind you."

Jessica adds, "They're loving every minute of this."

Luc points out, "But they're complaining about it."

Victoria notes, "It's all for show. The problem here, you see, is that you want a physical presence on Earth but, because of how our interstate treaties are worded, without a seat at the General Assembly none of the members would be in the position to offer you the grounds for an actual physical embassy."

"Okay." Luc points to himself, "Luc is not happy about that."

Victoria cracks a smile, "We think we have a work around."

Jessica speaks up, "We anticipated this last month and that's why we pushed back on some of the locations you wanted for your embassy. That's why we insisted on the City of New Sydney locale."

Luc thinks about it then, "New Sydney? City of New Sydney? I recall the discussion. I believe that nuance may be afoot?"

"You guessed it! The City of New Sydney is not a part of the larger metropolitan New Sydney, nor is it under the jurisdiction of Sapphire. It happens to be an enclave, a territorial municipality apart from, but under the yoke and jurisdiction of the City of London."

Luc points at Victoria, "That's where you live!"

Victoria shrugs, "Not exactly, the same nuanced difference that holds true on Sapphire applies there as well. The City of London is not part of Greater London. By acts, *in inceptum*, it is an English territorial lieutenantancy that enjoys a special status of semi-autonomy and, since we are behind closed doors, we will admit here that it has

historically been a pip-squeak, pin-prick of an annoyance to the crown! Not because we are compelled to petition the Lord Mayor of the City for permission to enter...we do...it's just that this entity benefits from many unmerited privileges and regulatory exemptions, however..." Victoria points up into the air, "Today is the payout for all parties being faithful to insufferably long-in-the-tooth and stale traditions."

Jessica playfully mocks Victoria, "But, that's your job."

Victoria rolls her eyes, "Thank you for reminding me, doll."

Jessica smiles as she says to Luc, "Here's the squeal, the Annex owns a tower in The City of London that they've leased out to the City of New Sydney who has leased half of the floors back to us, follow?" Luc nods, yes, so she throws out, "So, we're gonna sub-lease two floors to you, with access to the landing on top of the building. We'll also add a small ground floor reception nook, throw in your own personal elevator, and there you have it! Y'all got yourself a bona fide consulate!"

Luc frowns and takes a stab at it, "The consulate would be a satellite to the embassy in New Sydney, right?" Jessica nods, yes, so Luc throws out, "The complex lease an' sublease arrangements are all to complicate...frustrate litigation, right?"

"Exactly!"

Victoria adds, "There is an old Scottish saying, possession is eleven points in the law when there are but twelve." She nods towards Aat, "Ambassador, the Annex will cloak and dagger your people in, you throw up a shingle and, as Red Love here would say, blammo!"

Jessica asks Victoria, "RaSP?"

"No, SAS, we're not taking chances."

Jessica says to them, "Like on the Church Key, there you will have ghost droids..." She nods towards Victoria, "Her guys, and we'll be throwing in one of our clones, named Ruth. Half of one floor will be the consulate and the rest will be apartments. Your commute at worst will only be fifteen feet vertically. We'll also get you hooked up with Leon Green to work out the décor so, sound good?"

Luc looks to Aat and Alexi who nod big, with Alexi saying, "Since it'll be my digs it sounds perfect to me!"

Victoria then says to Luc, "The word is, you have a ninety-two percent positive rating so far in the minds of the public which, I might add, are stonking good numbers. Better than mine! We'll continue to work with you and look for opportunities to improve on those ratings, but we can't mollycoddle you. Be aware that every little moment on the street matters and the only time you can be yourself, falling out of

character, is behind closed doors in your flat."

Aat smiles, "We've been practicing on our poker faces."

"Your mugs are surprisingly expressive! We done here?"

Both Luc and Chell nod, yes, and as Jessica and Victoria stand to leave, Victoria suggests to Luc, "If you have the time, dear sir, you should consider joining us here for a day or two? And, you'd have to admit, the photo opportunities out there would be legendary!"

Luc's eyebrows rise, "That it would!"

After Luc and Victoria have taken a minute to go over her schedule, Billingsley says to Jessica, "Sorry to hear 'bout your mom."

Jessica goes, "Thanks...how are the A-n-O's doing?"

"The Omegas are fantastic, but the Alphas are why I'm here!"

Jessica laughs, "I heard they can be a bit of a handful."

It is here that, Alexi turns to Chell and her staff and, not so quietly she asks, "I gotta know...how would you do it?"

Chell wonders, "Do what?"

"Eat me! Like bar-b-que, or broasted, or fricasseed, how?"

All conversations have stopped for this...

Chell simply closes her eyes and shakes her head, and the one next to her nods whole-heartedly, as the Xhemal at the end of the table volunteers, "Sushi?"

000001011010