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echo park slice an' dice

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"Penche pendeja!" Maria hisses into the face of Wanda...

Maria has no idea what came over her, outside her aunt's home here in Echo Park, but with her husband of three hours at her feet, gasping and clawing at his throat, something clicks inside her. Maria kicks Wanda in the crotch, snatches her straight razor back from her ex-lover, and then spins around inside her flannel shirt that two local gang-bangers from Crazys were holding onto. Slipping out of the shirt, with her own blood squirting out from her neck, she slits both of their throats, then swipes the blade out at her cousin, Junior, where the razor slashes him across his face and gouges his right eye.

With Junior pulling back and cussing up a storm, and the two bangers gurgling as they die, she grabs her own throat to tamp off the bleeding while she stomps Wanda in the back of the head, driving her face into the ground. Looking at her now dead husband lying there, she whips the razor around Wanda's neck which gives an eerie shlorp when she pulls the blade and it wedges in her spine.

Leaving the straight razor behind, Maria throws herself into her floater and takes off. A sedan glider pulls up to Junior, who jumps in and they tear ass after her. Maria zig-zags her way onto Bellevue and shoots west, and when she runs into Glendale Boulevard she leads them south towards downtown Los Angeles.

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"Pinky Pie, who'da gavacho?"

It's been five days and Maria is in a hospital gown, pulling an IV cart along with her, at the top of One-Klick with a beer in hand.

She pulls up to a pool table in the staging room where Maggie Prather just made the break, taking solids, but before Maggie can make her next shot she looks at Maria, "Should you be drinking that?"

Maria laughs, "It's always time for *cervesa!*"

While Maria chugs half the bottle down, Maggie squints at her, "You know you should be taking it easy!"

Maria comes up for air, "After five days on my back I needed to stretch my legs. Been pissing that milky EMT shit for two, and now they're pumping the real stuff in me."

"You shouldn't be drinking."

Maria starts to wobble as the beer hits her fast, so she leans in and holds onto the table while sizing Jacob up, "Who's the white boy, hu? The way you two were goin' at it last night says the honkey sure can fuck, but...can he fight?"

With her knees buckling, Jacob catches her and guides her to a soft chair, careful not to pull her IV hooked up to a unit of whole blood, so he asks her, "What happened to you?"

Maria laughs, drunkenly, "Words happened then...well, you could say it was a Friday night Echo Park slice an' dice!"

As Jacob checks Maria's eyes, Maggie has contacted the medical staff, saying, "She's up here. Bring a gurney for her!"

Maria blinks and, "*Ey chihua*, That brew hit hard."

Jacob takes the bottle from her, "No shit!"

Maria asks him, "So, can ya'll fight?"

Jacob lies, "Dunno, never tried?"

Maria looks to Maggie, "Pinky, you need to throw 'im back!"

Maggie has stepped up, "You need to get some shuteye!"

"I wanna watch you throw him off the building, aaaaaah!" Maria looks at her wrist then laughs again, "Aaaaaaah! It's a long fall." She points at him, "I bet'chya *el caca de pollio* will bounce off the pavement like squeak toy! Ya-all wanna take that bet, Pinky?"

Maggie squats in front of her to check her out, while saying, "Naw, I'll think I'll keep the white boy. For now, anyway."

"It's like guys who can dance...guys who can dance can't fuck for shit, so best throw useless back or you be sorry!"

An Asian medical tech has stepped up, "Wha'd she have?"

Jacob hands her the bottle, "This."

The tech laughs, "With what we've pumped into this skinny little thing here, that's half a bottle too much!"

Maria looks up at her and, "E'y, it's my Chink-quita banana! You gonna spank me for being a bad girl?"

"I don't think we'll go that far."

She laughs and says, "My vote is for you to rethink that? You're kinda hot an' I might like it!"

The tech shakes her head, "Jesus, she's fucked up. What'd our *chica* do to keep her on site?"

Maggie stands and, "Some gang bangers killed her husband so she killed them back. I'm thinkin' maybe she has a future with us?" She turns to Jacob, "By the way, can you fight?"

Jacob lies again, "Never had too."

Maggie smiles at him, "Well, I can vouch for you on escape and evasion! You got that down pat."

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Now, here we are two-weeks short of two-years later, and at a far off table on the wet deck of the *Marauder*, SA15, we have Jacob, Maria and Cricket Washington sitting and gazing outside at the jungle moon orbiting the sixth planet of kappa-Orion, Saiph6B. They are waiting for their Company commander, Robert Jackson, to show and they didn't have long to wait.

Bob steps up and sets four shot glasses down in a row. He pops open a full bottle of rye whiskey and fills each of them. He picks up his glass and they all do the same.

Bob gives the toast, "To the platoon."

The three quietly say "oorah" and they all down their shots.

Bob refills the glasses and takes the seat at the end beside Cricket to watch the moon as it slides past the window.

Cricket talks first, "What's the deal, Bob. You called it."

Bob nods, then stands and pulls his chair between them and the view outside, sits and, "Sorry to say, this meeting here is mostly business and me saying *audios*."

Maria wonders, "What gives?"

Bob shrugs, "For those spectacular cluster fuck ups last week, they're splitting up my company and promoting me. I'm in command of the First of the Third."

Maria gives a snarky grin, "You're in Mook, I'm sorry, dude."

Bob nods, "Thanks for the sympathies."

"Don' mention it!"

Cricket asks, "What about our dumb asses?"

Bob clears his throat, "I'm getting you three off ship until your orders come down. That'll be in four weeks, so tomorrow you guys will go to the Kilosphere. I got rooms for you there. On the Church Key you'll be attached to my exec, Kevin Vossler."

Jacob asks, "Isn't he training for that cage fight?"

"Yea, it's a Taiji thing. See what you can do to help him out."

Maria asks, "Aaand that's it?"

"Yep! You three get light duty until your orders come down."

Cricket asks, "Do you know what those orders are gonna be?"

Bob nods, yes, as he sets another shot glass out, "Yea, I do."

Maria urges him to, "Then spit it out, homie!"

As Bob pours that glass, and topping the others off, he goes, "Naw, I'll let this guy do that."

The Division Commander, Jason Kay, pulls a seat around from the next table and plops into it, so Cricket says, "Hey, Biggest-Six!"

"It's Jay on the wet deck, Cricket." Jason takes his glass and holds it up, "We're gonna toast to Bob, and you wanna know why?" The three shrug so Jason smiles, "Well, Bob got saddled with a fuck up that we in command fucked up, and when he was the voice of reason, trying to prevent us from trying to unfuck the fuck up that he was not responsible for in the first fuckin' place, well...things fucked up again anyway. Sorry, Bob, you're getting the Battalion slot."

Bob huffs a laugh, "You can fuck the promotion, Sir."

Jason laughs and says, "Here's to Bob!" Knocking the shots back, Jason motions for Bob to refill the glasses, "Now, listening to Bob, we're gonna be sending you three away for awhile. All of you will be coming back, but let's see what we can do for you first." Bob looks over at Cricket and smiles big, "So, first up, Cricket, you're going to be attached to Paper Cuts for the time being."

Cricket is suspicious, saying, "Shit serious?"

"Well, you're smart, engaging, personable, sexy, so they're asking for you in the Media and Public Relations group!"

Cricket is laughing, "You gotta be fucking me dirty!"

Bob smiles at that, "No, I was shoppin' you around and they wanted to grab you up! I don't rightly know what you'll be doin' for 'em, but they want ya, so have fun with it! It's gonna be stateside, New York or Los Angeles? I don't know which." He points to Maria and, "Now, Ramirez, about you."

Maria asks, "What about me?"

"Remember that testing Bob sent you to, two months ago?"

"Ya, that was some dumb-ass shit. What about it?"

"You tested high, like one-sixty-eight high."

Maria bursts out a laugh, "Wha', I'm a fucking idiot!"

"No, you're not!" Jason takes a sip from his shot glass then looks her in the eye, "No, you are not."

"So, if I'm such a brain-case what the fuck then?"

"Harvard Law is what the fuck." Jason then jabs a finger at her to shut her up, "An' before you say shit, Ramirez, when you get to talking you run circles around everybody so, honestly, your aptitude points in that direction and none of us can think of a better idea."

Bob chimes in, "I think it'll be a good fit."

Maria shakes her head, "Puttin' my ass through law school?"

Jason smiles, "Everybody has to have a side job!"

Maria shrugs, "Sure, why the fuck not?"

"Your first year will be on campus and that starts in August. Until then you'll be attached to our Wallace affiliate."

She wonders, "YanZhuGu?"

"For the time being, but corporate law is not our thing in the Annex, so I suggested to them that they farm you out to Blackstone."

"Okay, Jay, why Blackstone?"

"You'll learn both mission and tactical planning from the PMC side of the house but..." He then thumbs out the window, "They happen to be working the Saiph contract here! What I wanna know is if they had anything to do with your platoon gettin' scrapped."

Maria suppresses her smile, "Sure, I can poke around for ya, an' if I can fuck these guys over I will. You know I will."

Jason puts a hand out, "Don't stick your neck out, do you hear me? I just want you to report to me what you find out about their involvement, okay? Nothing else, just that."

Maria mumbles, "Okay, I'll play nice."

"Why do I get the feeling I'm gonna regret this?"

"Ya just gotta trust me, boss man."

Jason rolls his eyes and now turns to square off with Jacob, "Now, as for you...you're a problem...you're a problem on so many motherfucking levels, dude."

Jacob's eyes stab at him, "Then don't do me any favors, Jay."

"You don't get it, we had you pegged all wrong...even me."

"Well then, I got ya guys snowed twice over!"

"This entire time, from boot to advanced training and now in the field, you have slacked the fuck off, this entire time you barely squeaked by. Only Bob kept you in service when the rest of us wanted to ninety-nine your ass..." Jacob glances at Bob for a second as Jason continues, "Going over the file from last week Bob showed us how you zagged instead of zigged. How you thumbed your nose at our training and did things your way. We put twenty of our best troopers in the sims and they all died in minutes but...here you are!"

"Sorry to disappoint ya, Jay."

"You warned them, even shouted at them to drop *before* they fired. These aren't lucky guesses, there is some innate clarity or Spidey sense, or some Jedi mind-fuckery goin' on in that head."

"If you say so...so what shit plans you got for me?"

We're rethinking our training and we're sending you to C3 to run sims. Lots of sims. We're gonna see what you can really do!"

Jacob just stares at him, "Tell me there's more to this."

"Yea, that's your side job. You're goin' to flight school."

Jacob shrugs, "Word is everybody has to learn to fly the new Razorback. I heard you really have to work hard at crashin' the thing."

"No, I'm puttin' you in a Thunderbolt..." As Jacob's blinks in disbelief, Jason points out, "I pulled every string to get you in fighter training, so it's time for you to fly or die, son! If you want to drive the Thunderbolt, you're going to have to apply yourself."

"Only the top dweeb super-troopers get this!"

Jason thumbs between Bob and himself, "Yea, our asses are on the line putting you in a forty-seven. Prove us right."