

24

chanson de geste

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Jacob didn't ask for this one. Up till now he has spent his career quietly reviled by a knowing few, but recently that hatred has blistered to the surface and under the microscope of a gleeful press who was looking for anything malleably scandalous. *Id est...*

What was supposed to be a simple expression of gratitude has snowballed into a multi-million signature petition and a political slug-fest in the courts. Jacob did write a public letter in an attempt to put an end to the controversy, but the children rescued by the Annex just a few years before would not be silenced.

Nor were the children of the Earth, and they made up the bulk of the petitioners.

Orderu Uśmiechu, the Order of the Smile, is officially apolitical however, in spite of continued obscurity, in the international arena it has become a most coveted award indeed. Rarely does a nomination cause concern but naming the whole of the now Steel Annex Deputation, with Jacob Graves expressly identified as the Knight recipient, was way beyond controversial. At the United Nations it was more like hitting a hornet's nest, and in many a minds eye, with the General Assembly in particular, they might as well have nominated Sepp Dietrich and all of the Waffen-SS for this badge of *cheer and joy*.

In court it was discovered that the UN did hold some undue influence over the orders Laureates, and since it was verified that the nomination at-issue was solely a grassroots effort by children alone, the court found on behalf of the petitioners.

For the first time Jacob has finally taken the time to ponder all this, and to the bark of a herald, "Sluchajcie! Sluchajcie! Sluchajcie!" he quietly thinks to himself, *why you meddlin' bitch*.

Nikki, number Twenty-Nine that is, the one the Annex rescued from the Queens facility, transmits into Jacob's mind with a snicker, <"Bitches, plural, it was a group effort...">

Jacob does well containing the rage-fit building up inside as Nikki gleefully tells him the full extent of the conspiracy.

Like Nikki-8, Fifty-Two's de facto front-man with the Annex, Nikki-29 happens to perform most of the functionary tasks for their collective. Standing beside Jacob, along with du Condé, Nicole and Cricket, this Nikki is just one of 2,800 children on the stage and lining the walls of the auditorium—each of them representing a unique genome of the clones rescued only four years before.

The image of all these children, saved from a fate worse than death, has quite a sobering affect on those attending the ceremony. Everybody knows what the SA did that day, *à la Représailles de Paladin*, and how Jacob spearheaded that effort, but now all of the rotten things said or written about him fails to ring true as they hear first hand how he has taken a personal interest in their development and wellbeing since. The rescue mission, in and of itself, warranted the award, but what Jacob has done for these children afterwards has left no doubt as to his worthiness.

In the eyes of these children he has become "Papa J" and in another first that's a handle he can be proud of.

To the sensibilities of those from the Annex the ceremony in progress is torturously gay yet mercifully quick. Between the rose and lemon juice, without the aid of a decent vodka, they get an alert over the tacnet about the situation turning sour out at upsilon-Taurus. Yes, it's Jacob's command that is deeply involved in the action but it's also obvious that there is nothing they can do from here except hope for the best and enjoy the post ceremony entertainment.

As beautiful as it is, breathtaking in actuality, the second movement of Gorecki's third symphony has never been considered an uplifting experience but, much to everyone's surprise, with the children on stage in-chorus it actually manages to become just that! Even though this interpretation is not as haunting it inevitably tugs at one's heart strings nonetheless.

At least Ewa is less gay this time around.

As part of a settlement, to bypass the appeals process that is, a suggestion offered by one Alex Demitri, the precocious twelve year old who started the petition, was a limited, one-time alteration to the Ewa medal. This was jumped on by the Congress of Laureates, thinking it would delegitimize the proceedings here today, but it blew back in their faces when (in SA black and red) the award was more

than well received.

Ewa, the smiley face symbol of the order, went from cloyingly saccharin-sweet to wicked-cool with a simple pallet swap.

Sitting between Nicole and Nikki, Jacob is currently struggling with three things. First is sitting between Nicole and Nikki. They're holding hands and making a good show of it but he would rather be strangling both of them about now. It's true that Nicole likes a good gasp on the by-and-by, but Jacob wonders what her reaction would be if he were choking her in earnest. Oh, to dream...

Second is Jacob's new vision of hell—which is sitting between Nicole and Nikki while a troupe from the Mazowsze tradition of folk dancers do their thang. Their smiles and spinning and bouncy-bouncy already makes him want to slice his wrists along the radius. Yes, admittedly their performance is quite superb, but Jacob has had more than enough *cheer and joy* for one day. Oh, the humanity...

Lastly, while all of the above is chuggin' right along, Jacob fights to keep a straight face and swallow the primordial shriek ready to burst from his lungs as he responds to Maria, yet again, cluing him in after the fact, <"Oh, fucken' hell!">

Over the neuronet, Maria's voice snaps and crackles as it pops from one wormhole to the next, <"Christ, dude, we needed to change your image!">

Jacob adds, <"And start some shit!">

<"Yes, well, when opportunities present.">

<"With the stone, I got two birds to give ya.">

Maria chuckles, <"That's very cliché of you Jake, but yes. It worked out way better than we expected. And, you did play your part rather well I might add.">

Jacob snarls in his head, <"My God, I'm tired of being a pawn in your machinations.">

Maria laughs, <"Hey now! That's a mighty big word for you to be using, don'cha think? It might hurt *yur widdal bwain!*">

<"Fuck you.">

<"Ooooooh-hoo-hoo, don't tease! I could use a kick in the ass."> Then after a short pause, <"Answer me this, would you have gone along with our little intrigue had you known?">

<"This is all about that Alpha shit. Hell no!">

<"There's your answer, sweetheart! And...">

Jacob waits a few seconds then asks, <"And?">

<"A communiqué from the Iron Maiden. Give me a sec.">
 Maria clears her throat, <"Alright, Jerry nailed a cruiser near 69-Tau and he has a bead on a second one. He's asking for orders.">

Jacob points out, <"He doesn't want to do it.">

<"It's his prerogative! He should make the choice.">

Jacob protests, <"Killing thousands in a single shot does not make for a good afternoon. His choice would be to leave.">

<"Then he should leave..."> Maria asks, <"Then, maybe not? Okay, Mr. Crystal Ball, what do you think he should do?">

<"What *you* think he should do. Look, if he bugs out the fight is on, guaranteed. If Jerry puts this one in the bag then maybe the Co-op will back the fuck off. What do *you* want to have happen?">

<"I want a little more time.">

<"We only get six months. Maybe nine, tops.">

<"That's enough.">

There is a silence that Jacob breaks with a little insight, <"Here's something for you to gnaw on. If Kiplinger contacts Bob about this then he's blowing smoke up our ass. If he calls *you* then he will be serious about hittin' the breaks.">

<"Sure about that?">

<"Come on, you know Kip!">

<"He's the only decent one of the bunch.">

<"I'm worried about him.">

Maria snorts, <"Concern for the enemy? That's a twist.">

<"He's good people.">

Maria then hurries, <"Look, the silverbacks are arguing in C3, and I need to get out there before we run out of time.">

<"Have fun.">

Introspectively, Maria sags under the weight of her decision, <"You know, Jake, I was hoping to end my career playing solder rather than doing it for real again. And, now, in this capacity. This job is a shit job.">

Jacob sighs as the connection is broken. Talking to Maria has again smoothed over his hackles. Surprisingly, her sarcasm and sense of humor, insulting as it is, has a calming effect on him. So much so that Nicole and Nikki get to live another day. *Oh well*, thinks Jacob as the dancers wrap up their performance.

On stage they finish with a lethal dose of *Hej Sokoły* to round things out. With this song everybody sings and bounces around in chaotic celebration. The theme of the song doesn't exactly fit the proceedings here but it's such a popular folk tune that nobody seems to care. Upon reflection the one absurdity that comes to Jacob's mind is that, whoever chose it, maybe they were trying to implant a simple suggestion. That being: *die motherfucker, die!*

Jacob laughs inside, but when the singing and dancing peaks a beautiful young girl, armed with an accordion, steps onto the stage and adds to the madness. Thankfully it was hard to hear that evil contraption, but what didn't pass unnoticed was that they swapped the word *sokoły* out for *myszolów* in the chorus.

Maybe that message was not subliminal as he once thought?

The reception afterwards was the purest definition of irony in its most transcendental state. To start things off the receiving line is beyond uncomfortable because the attendees react to Jacob as if he were some kind of leper, or a pit bull, or a leperous pit bull. This is a man belonging to an organization they have an avowed loathing for, and he is their star performer, and here they are congratulating him, what they see as the embodiment of walking evil, on his good works.

If he were a smoldering char, with ashes dripping and sulfur fumes scorching the air, this man would be easier for most in line to accept. Evil must fit the part. What they are witness to is Jacob being tall, handsome, cheerful and engaging—not at all what they pictured in their minds. Not at all hard to warm up too, and begrudgingly so the waters are starting to lose their chill.

Where it turns around for Jacob is when one young lady takes his hand and can't look him in the eye. She's in tears. Jacob touches her chin lightly and speaks ever so softly, "Are you okay?"

She is taken aback and looks up.

Evil is not gentle, nor does it show genuine concern, and in an epiphany, thanks to Nikki, she realizes that this man is not evil. He is not a criminal nor is he a mass-murderer. He is a soldier. It's hard for some people to distinguish between the two, and many choose not too, but the young miss is astonished by this realization and she reaches up and gives Jacob a quick peck on the cheek.

Jacob thinks, *Wow, that was unexpected.*

The receiving line starts to roll up and when du Conde reaches Jacob he takes him by the shoulders and kisses both his cheeks, "Bravo!" du Conde then steps back, clasps his hands together and throw them out, "*Un autre chapitre à la Chanson de Geste!*"

That was also unexpected, and way over the top.

The beauty of the neuronet is that Jacob knew in real time when “hey falcons” became “hey buzzard” and he understood the outrageousness of du Conde’s statement. The comparison between the actions of the SA to the legendary Paladin of the Songs was totally asinine because there was nothing heroic about what the SA did. Justice was dished out that day—retribution, plain and simple. Yes, the protests out of the G.A. were loud and long, but with the final tally nobody could argue with results.

Nicole turns to Jacob and asks, “Platitude or banality?”

Jacob thinks about it, “Hum, tough call.”

du Conde objects with a smirk, “I take exception to that! You will accept the praise you get here today. It’s well deserved. I insist!”

Jacob smirks back, “All the other times you talk about me you talk smack about me. Why the change in tone?”

du Conde laughs, “Today we sing your praises. Tomorrow, well tomorrow I’ll be back to smacking your name around. Deal?”

Probing, Jacob asks, “Oh, so you know?”

du Conde give an almost comical wide-eyed response before he turns away, “By whatever do you mean?”

Jacob now knows that du Conde knows what’s happening out at epsilon-Taurus. Jacob also knows that he already knew it was going to happen. Jacob also knows that du Conde knows that they know that he knows—and he meant to let on.

As du Conde joins the reception Nicole transmits, <“He’s so transparent. It’s nauseating. I hate that fuckin’ snake in the grass.”>

<“He conveying a message.”>

Nicole grimaces, <“Ya, *look at me gloat!* That’s what that pompous ass is saying to us.”>

<“I’m not so sure about that. Ask yourself, what if our most vocal detractor was in-actuality...an ally?”>

<“Him!”> Nicole is startled and speaks out loud totally out of character, “That’s the dumbest shit I’ve ever heard!”

Jacob shrugs, “I’m just asking! That’s all.”

Nicole shakes her head, “Every time I think you’re smarter than the average bear you say something stupid as hell.” She then steps away, “I’m gonna hang out with du Conde. At least I know he has half a brain.”

Jacob warns her jokingly, "Don't shiv him!"

Mockingly, Nicole throws her hands out but with less exaggeration than du Conde, "By whatever do you mean?"

Jacob thinks for a minute and looks down at Nikki who is still standing beside him, "So, what do you know?"

Tight lipped, Nikki rolls her eyes, "By whatever to you mean?"

"Look kid, my bullshit-o-meter is like...pegged! The two of you spend time with that fuck-wit every month, now that he's your advocate. So, tell me, what gives?"

Nikki's coy façade drops, "You are smarter than the average bear. I have to give you credit."

"Then what are you saying?"

Nikki drops the hint, "Nooothing."

From deep in the clue bag, Jacob is annoyed, "Oookay."

Nikki smiles and takes Jacob by the hand, "Here, I want you to meet someone I've been spending quality time with."

Crossing through the reception, the waters now tepid, Nikki fills him in on Alex Demitri and his mother, "Just so you know, Alex's intelligence is off the scale but he keeps his feet on the ground. So not the narcissist and that's a plus. His stepmother is Ukrainian, his father Italian, and both are very European but they live in Austin—"

Jacob asks, "Texas?"

Nikki recalls, "His mother put it this way, 'In Italy employees are artisans, in the States they're employees.'"

Jacob nods, "She's gotta point."

"Look, his father is bloody rich and he would shamelessly overindulge his son if he could but, surprisingly, Alex doesn't take advantage until things like this come along."

Jacob interjects, "That's why you tapped him."

"Obviously, and it wasn't hard to do..."

Jacob comments flatly, "Dare I ask."

Nikki then adds, "And, just so you know, it was his mother who chose *Hej Sokoly* and changed the lyrics to honor you."

"I was wondering about that."

"Thought you would notice, and she's dying to meet you."

Jacob simpers, "Ya, I bet, Sold American."

"Hu?" And when Jacob waves Nikki off in a *don't ask* sort of way, she just shrugs and makes the introductions, "Jacob, meet Alex."

That twelve year old boy is now a handsome fifteen year-old who takes Jacob's hand with a firm shake, "Pleased to finally meet you Mr. Graves."

"It's Jacob."

"Okay, Jacob, my mother, Sasha."

"My pleasure," Jacob takes his mothers hand and he suddenly thinks he recognizes her from somewhere, "You seem familiar? Have I met you before?"

"No, Mr. Graves. I mean, Jacob! But, I do get that a lot."

Jacob is instantly taken by Sasha's heavy Slavic accent which, to him, seems out of place with how she looks, "I can't place it. Where have I seen you before?"

Sasha flat out tells him, "Try, Claudia Willoughby?"

"Oh ya! President Willoughby was smokin' hot!"

Jacob's embarrassment for that outburst was cut short by Sasha's approving grin, "Thank you, yes!"

Alex nudges Nikki in the arm, "Think they'll get a long?"

Nikki disagrees in jest, "Naw, never happen."

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It's pushing midnight and Jacob deserves to feel cheap, and he does, but for once he's okay with it. Even though he's had a lot of lovers in his lifetime, his count pales in comparison to the average Joe to who sex is as common as a simple hand shake with the variety of partners in any given year analogous to a fist full of trail-mix. Jacob has no compulsion to jump into bed with just anyone that comes along but the encouragement from Maria, earlier that night, made it clear to him that he was the door prize and was expected to perform.

So, like the circus seal that he is, perform he did but less out of obligation and more out of genuine gratitude.

Jacob prefers women with more athletic features and Sasha doesn't exactly fit that bill of fare. Voluptuous, buxom, with a slender waist and a *Willoughby* strut, Sasha turned out to be an amazing woman for Jacob to be with. He has not experienced anything close to this night since he was shagging Monique Ribot decades before. On reflection, being with Sasha makes him want to go back and sample that after almost forty years just to refresh his memory.

Spooning Sasha, their bodies melded into one another, Jacob is more than a little blown away by how she has made everything better today. After meeting her, Sasha ran the gauntlet for him at the reception, so much so that by the end most of the attendees were accepting—if not downright friendly towards him.

Then there was dinner with the kids, Nicole, Cricket and, of all people, du Conde who invited himself. To everyone's surprise the guy was actually likable, funny and, this pains Jacob to think, a blast to have around. To the extent that after Nikki and Alex took off, and one drink too many, he, Nicole and Cricket decide to go clubbing leaving Jacob and Sasha to themselves.

This was one of those rare, perfect moments in Jacob's life.

Now that he thinks about it his time with Maria and Nicole always had some underlining conflict where their interactions were more like the block, parry and thrust right out of an *Épée* melee. Yes, intimacy and sex was always spot-on-target with these two but for quite some time Jacob realizes that he and Maria ruined a perfectly good relationship by getting married and, as much as it pains him to no end, Nicole was beyond repair. Thinking back, Jacob always had a fondness for Monique but he was simply on the books to service her. What little they had was small-talk superficial with the true depth of their emotional connection being left unexplored. Cricket, his regular lover nowadays, is accommodating and undemanding, and just kind of there. Jacob enjoys the time he spends with her because she's fun in bed but a friend with benefits doesn't exactly qualify as a love interest on Jacob's tally-sheet. Then there was Maggie...

Yes, ol' Maggie was Jacob's ticket to happiness but that was short lived to be sure. It hurt to the point that he long ago blocked all tacnet file retrievals of her unless he chose to mine it himself, which he has yet to do, and actual memories of Maggie have faded to a faint whisper that anymore brings a fond smile inside. No longer the welling of tears, a fifth of Scotch and a gun barrel between the teeth.

Jacob wonders why these "perfect moments" only come from absolute strangers like Sasha? Jacob wonders why all his relationships eventually develop some underlining case-of-the-ass for him? Even Cricket has proven to be a virtuoso in passive-aggressive aloofness and that has made him want to cut it off with her more times than he can count. Maria says it's because he's too good of a man to start with. Too giving of himself and too willing to listen, and way too much about *them*. According to Maria most women secretly desire an alpha bad-boy to become that way for them—because of them. Like Maria admits they resent Jacob because he is naturally that way and didn't have to be molded into the role. For most woman it's a bone kill.

That's some fucked-up logic, Jacob reasons as Sasha sighs big, "Thank you for curling my toes."

Jacob grinds into her slightly, "Actually, it's my pleasure."

"Aaaah..." Sasha is clearly affected by Jacob working it, her back arches slightly as she puts her hand on his thigh getting him to knock it off, "Yes, we'll have to do this again soon."

Jacob gives her little pecks on the nape of her neck, "M'kay."

Sasha snickers, "Veery soon!"

After a minute of lightly stroking her flank with the back of his fingertips, Jacob asks, "Sasha, I'm curious."

"Curious away." She says with a smile.

Jacob clears his throat, "Not to pry, but did Nikki tell you anything about herself or her situation?"

Her smile fades, "Probably more than you want me to know."

"I was afraid of that."

"You don't seem too worried about Nikki trying to escape."

"Why? I know right where she is and what she's doing."

Sasha snorts a suppressed laugh, "Ya, my son!"

Jacob ponders, "Escape, interesting choice of words. How much do you know about Nikki? What has she told you?"

Sasha avoids that question with her own, "You think they're that dangerous?"

"Beyond comprehension if left unchecked."

"Jacob..." Sasha's flexibility is almost surreal as her upper torso twists and she looks back, reaching up to caress Jacob's face, "Would you really hurt them?"

Jacob looks her in the eye, "Not my choice. It's all hers."

She nods, "I hope it never comes to that."

"That's two of us."

Sasha, looking for honesty in his eyes and finding it, gives it up and kisses Jacob deeply. In no time at all they are melting into one another's arms.

Much to her delight *very soon* comes earlier than expected.