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doppler kittens

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Jacob just shakes his head to himself, "Standing room only."

Every two years Jacob conducts his military history lecture series which consists of seven classes of twelve, ninety-minute lectures. These accredited courses give the attendees twenty-eight credits if they attend all 7,560 minutes of it. The first time Jacob gave these elective courses he had maybe thirty in the class but now the auditorium before him has 1,200 seats filled to the gills with another 130 troopers hanging out in back. Jacob has always wondered why the class has become so popular but, when brought to his attention by Maria, it is their avowed profession.

*Weapons and Warfare in Media and Entertainment* is the first of the series and is so damned fun because for twelve lectures Jacob pokes fun at movies and neuronet interactives and how they get it wrong. He also points out where they get it right, which is rare, but when he's done everybody's most cherished action-adventure, scifi and gaming memory of their youth has been so comically lamb-basted that they universally want to stay for the other six classes. *Supply Chain and Logistics* being the last of the series, which is a wrist-slashing bore, but Jacob does manage to make it interesting even though it's not exactly a fun subject. He usually retains more than 90% of the students that start from the first day which is another rarity.

"Okay, everyone, a few things to get out of the way before we get started today." Jacob lifts the lectern and carries it to the side of the stage while saying, "Paula, please stand."

Paula, in the front row, stands as Jacob sets the Lectern down then motions for her to turn around, "Rumors are flying and yes, this is Paula Herrero, of Familia Cubanaza, so ya'll can stop yur whisperin'

about it, okay? This is Marshal Ramirez's niece and she'll be going to Que Ball next month to start training. That cycle will be attached to the Thirty-Six."

There is a quick round of applause and whoops with one guy a few rows back giving a bad impersonation of, what's best described as, Adolphia's 'cubanaza' war cry. With that Paula give him the two finger death-ray gesture which was good for a laugh.

Jacob adds, "On behalf of everyone here, welcome aboard." He then calls out, "Will one Oscar Peña, please rise."

In the middle of the seats, towards the back, Peña stands and Jacob points at him for a second, "That's the one that got away! He should have been one-ninety-seven, but here he's sittin' all smug an' shit! For those who do not know four years ago Oscar here was the Marine Lieutenant who shot down Kati Conners and stayed one step ahead of me hightailin' it out of New York. So, son, how do you like boomin' and zoomin' in the Thunderbolt?"

Peña thinks about it for a second, "I do miss the Bulldog, you gotta admit the style points are off the chart, but since I've strapped on the Thunderbolt I believe that fucker is pure sidewindin' evil!"

"Have you seen Conners since you came on board?"

"I fly with her regularly, actually."

Conners has her own flight group now, and Jacob keeps up with her on the by and by, but what she hasn't mentioned is that she cougared this young man right into the sack. Jacob thinks it's funny how things worked out but he can't let on that he knows.

"Well, glad you could make it and say hi to Kati for me." Jacob has a sample of every weapon he talks about and he pulls a gladius from the stack, "Yesterday we started off with swords and, yes, if you haven't guessed, I would take the rapier over the katana, but today we continue with the *Gladius Hispaniensis*."

Jacob spins the gladius in the air, "As I mentioned, about half of all swords are dedicated to the thrusty-stabby attack. Most of those have dull axe-like edges but are still pretty wicked when hitting edge on, but that's edge on only in a situational application—not normal use. Remember, swingin' means exposed and that's especially true with the gladius. Some of 'em cleave well enough which imparts a lot of shock to the target, but it's not the go-to dismemberment resolution tool as shown in movies and in gaming! That's fantasy bullshit."

Jacob smiles big, "Awhile back I was watching an old gladiator movie and this guy had two of these in hand and he sliced off the head of the guy he was fighting with one swipe and I go *what!*" Jacob then

gives an exaggerated startled expression while throwing his free hand out, “Whoa! Wait a God damned minute! In what plane of existence is *that* possible because it ain’t this one!”

Jacob shakes his head, “For most people it would take some serious effort, like maybe three or more whacks, to take a head off with one of these, so here’s some un-reality check for ya!” Jacob thumbs back at the screen behind him, “Here’s that clip and a few more impossibly stylish gladius decapitations for the lulz!”

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Stone Garden, the ghost host world for the troopers of the Steel Annex, is so idyllically tranquil that it really goes against the residents’ grain. Everywhere you turn is pastoral, or charming, or picturesque beyond comprehension. The people *living* here lived their life with a spirit for challenge, but with no challenge or purpose all they do is party and fuck. When you think about it...that’s not a bad deal! However, to actually live it...it gets old real fast.

It’s now 10:56zulu and when Jacob visits this place he usually materializes about a half a block from Sophia’s home. When he crosses over to this world he usually pops in to see Sophia for a quick visit before he calls on Babette, Bud Sheatz’s aunt from Vegas<sup>3</sup> who’s been at the Garden somewhat semi-permanently ever since she met Jacob. Visiting one ghost host world from another is not that unusual, but to green-card it here at the Garden from a place like Vegas<sup>3</sup> is.

When Maria told Jacob to expand his horizons he didn’t think she meant for him to start something up with a dead person. It’s not unheard of but at least it’s not the N2 interactive porn or personal A.I. “ChiP” that he just can’t seem to get into. Everyone else does, pretty much without exception, but Jacob is that exception. Babette is a construct, yes, but a true to life and free-willed compilation like Bud and Sophia—not a lifelike automaton whose purpose is to service ones expectations. He’s also been tapping Glados on the sly, the prototype SYLN-b for the Spike, which is out of character for Jacob but they have a history and are weirdly attracted to each other. Go fig...

He’s also tearing it up with Sasha Demitri on the by and by, which is what Maria actually had in mind, but those visits are when she brings Alex to see Nikki, so when Alex gets his Sasha gets hers. Till now those visits have been every other month so he’s expecting to see her again in mid-January. Jacob does miss Cricket but it’s been seven months since she cut it off and it’s just as well. Saved him the trouble. Maria has been busy as all get out and that’s just as well too because the last time they were together back in May she surprised him by wanting to cuddle at the end and he didn’t know what got into her

exactly. Jacob would rather she keep her rancorous exterior on even keel just so he can retain some peace of mind. That love/hate yoyo at the end of their marriage was just awful and something he would not want to revisit.

Walking up to Sophia's home Jacob notices a handsome young man leaving, and while passing him on the sidewalk he cheerfully says to Jacob, "Hey, old guy!"

Jacob stops and looks back, watching the young buck head down the street with happy in his stride. He's sporting a stylish pencil beard along his jaw with an unruly shock of brown-flowing hair and Jacob mentally scratches his head wondering where he's seen this kid before? He remembers him from somewhere and brushes the thought off thinking it'll come to him one way or another.

It took Jacob a good year to work up the nerve to come visit Sophia after she died. She never had a real home growing up and the Annex was the first place she ever felt like she belonged—only to have it cut short by a freak accident on her first combat drop. This little house in the Garden is the very first place she could call 'a home' per se and she put a lot of effort in the décor. The entire inside is the same bone white for both the walls, ceilings and floors. The furniture is dark wood and black leather with dark wood carvings of Hindu and Asian gods and animals strategically placed along the walls and corners of the rooms. The exception is one wall with small Indonesian spirit carvings in the same white as the walls. Thirty-five of them hung up in a grid pattern, five high by seven across, these faces look like they are morphing out of the wall and the effect is both beautiful and spooky all in the same breath. It's very much like how Jacob has decorated his quarters on the Iron Maiden except that he opted for a collection of Batik masks but its uncanny how they think alike.

Jacob has visited enough that the formalities of knocking and answering have been done away with, so as he enters he calls out, "Hey, honey, you here?"

Which is a stupid question because Jacob tends to be punctual and Sophia makes a point to be here when he says he's going to stop by, so from the kitchen he hears her ask, "Coffee or a beer?"

"Beer, beer is good!"

Taking a seat on the couch Jacob notices that her two kittens, Tacg and Long, are again chasing each other for the umpteenth quintillion time and, honestly, these two never get old. That is they never age (forever at sixteen weeks) and Jacob never really tires of them. The creators of this model struck the right balance between cuddly, frolicsome and down-right ornery that they had to add a safe phrase of 'knock it off' in case they get out of hand. These two

creatures are a construct, but instead of being programs they have the personality of kittens imaged from real life animals. To themselves they are alive and wouldn't know any different. Pets in a ghost host world are taken very seriously, and those who choose to have pets are screened and scrutinized as if they were going to adopt a human child in the real world.

Obviously, Sophia passed muster yet some don't.

Here they come again, and as Sophia steps out of the kitchen with a pair of beers she does so in an all too short and clinging silk peignoir. She might as well be wearing nothing at all and yet, with or without, both are acceptable modes of dress nowadays. If it were anybody else Jacob wouldn't give a damn but he turns his glance away in time to see the two kittens cheetah their way back into the living room and along the back of the couch.

Jacob couldn't resist as the little monsters race past his head, "Me-me-me-me-me-me-me-me-meow-meooow-meooow-meooow."

Sophie hands him a bottle with a perplexed look on her face, "What was that?"

He takes the bottle with a smile, "Doppler kittens."

She laughs as she drops into the Papazan chair across from him, "Ain't that the truth."

"Good thing I like cats." Jacob takes a sip and asks, "Who's the young stud I saw leaving?"

"You don't recognize him?"

"If I did I wouldn't ask."

"True?" Sophia grins as she avoids answering, "You can appreciate this, he accidentally stepped on Tacg last night, but cool thing with these guys they bounce back like squeak toys."

"Knowing Tacg I don't think he took kindly to that."

"Ya think?" She shakes her head, "Later, while we were at it, little-black Tacg came flying up between his legs and, claws and all, clamps down on his nuts!" Jacob laughs as Sophie claws and gnashes her teeth in the air, "I almost went into orbit when he leaps out of my bed with this cat hangin' between his legs!"

Jacob exclaims, "Aww, shit, poor bastard!"

With a sly smile, Sophie lifts one leg along the edge of the chair making her gown slide back—almost exposing herself, "Kissed it and made it all feel better too."

Jacob pleads, "Will you put some clothes on!"

Sophia laughs inside because the peignoir drives people crazy where if she were simply naked they wouldn't look twice, "Why?"

"Do I have to say it?"

"Do I make you uncomfortable? You sound like a prude if you ask me. Most people sittin' where you are would drop to their knees and offer their services, and I for one would be obliging."

At first Jacob found it troublesome coming to visit Sophia never having established a father-daughter relationship before she died. The two spent an entire year ogling and flirting from afar never knowing their actual connection and it is still fresh in both their minds. After the last three years this is something he can put behind them but for Sophia it seems to be coming to a head as of late.

Jacob protests, "You're my daughter."

"Was your daughter." Sophia motions to her surroundings, "To risk sounding like a closeted nihilist—here I am only in spirit."

Faced with this dilemma Jacob just shakes his head. In the ghost host worlds the concept of family ties still hold true, but with everybody being perfect physical specimens of humanity, at the Saint Augustine ideal of thirty-five, all of the real world conventions on lineage and barriers between father-daughter, sister-brother, mother and son tend to break down over time. It kind of creeps Jacob out that incest has become a non-issue in these afterlife realms just as case law made it a moot point in the digital aether of the neuronet.

Sophia and he never knew each other as father and daughter in real life, and realistically she *is* dead, but here she is sitting across from him feeling more alive than alive as they say. Where she has no hang up over a slight technicality, Jacob mentally wrestles with his latent desire for her. It really bugs him that he can actually see himself going there with Sophia in the exact same way he can *never* envision himself being physically intimate with Jessie.

In his mind that one is not possible in any universe.

Sophia, no matter how forward she can be, will not dissuade Jacob one iota, "I want to know you as my daughter. Period."

"Suit yourself." Sophie then huffs with a smile, "But, just to clear the air, 'cause it's gonna come up, it always does, I've already gotten to know you in that special...Oedipus sort of way. Regularly, in fact!" She swirls her finger in the air, "With the roles reversed and none of that messy tragedy nonsense of course."

"Of course." Jacob grunts, thinking it was maybe the files that were circulating with his encounters staring Maria or Nicole, and when it sinks in he points towards the street realizing who the young

stud was, “No! Ah, wha-why is he here?”

Jacob knew they had a ‘digi-clone’ of him, floating around somewhere, working with Sandoval to develop and perfect the cutting edge ‘ghost droid’ and the ‘ghost drone’ concepts—which is now a reality and in full production. Good thing too because the residents in the Garden have been whining for something to do.

When Bud ‘Kno’ Sheatz got his air-to-air kill in New York City, Sandoval got a crazy light-bulb of an idea. Why not make an offer to the hundred-thousand troopers who have crossed-over to the Garden the opportunity to cross-back over to the real world and do it again? Not in the support role, like Bud was when he got his kill, but as the primary operator in a robotic JACC designed for them. She thought that maybe she would get some modicum of interest but when the survey’s went out the response she got was a resounding 100% e.g. *do-want!, how soon?, sign me up!, gimme-gimme-gimme!*

Jacob has previewed the tech and it is impressive. The droid is oddly thinner than the current JACC fighting suit and with no life-support systems needed the logistical train necessary to keep troopers alive and fighting can be cut back dramatically. If a droid becomes combat ineffective or destroyed outright then it’s no biggie. The ‘ghost’ can simply respawn in another one and get back into the fight. The most revolutionary COD-N2 interface, in the comfort of your living room, has become an honest to God warfighting system in real life.

You just have to join and then die for the privilege.

“They had to put him somewhere! This is as good as any?” Sophia then laughs, “And, you’ll love this, for some time they’ve been calling him Paleo-Jake! He’s really impressed the shit out of our handlers, even for being twenty-eight.”

Jacob thinks, “If he’s that young—”

Sophia finishes his thought for him, “Yes, it was before he met my mom.”

With some relief Jacob says, “That’s good to know.”

“What difference does that make?”

“I dunno, it just does, but do you really have to go there?”

“Ah, d’uh, you got this killer rep!” Sophia tugs her peignoir, “Look, most boy-toys, all they want to do is to squeeze as many kicks outta ya as they can. That’s okay but you, the Paleo you, damn! The boy takes his time and makes me see-saw on the brink, and that’s the torture I like! I’m bettin’ you’re at the top of your game now.”

“You’ll never know, so knock it off.”

"M'kay, but not with Paleo."

"Wouldn't expect you too. Just keep it out of my face."

"Deal..." Sophia chuckles, "It just breaks my heart that my daddy doesn't like the boy I'm bringing home."

Jacob wags his finger at her, almost laughing at that last remark, then, "Your handlers? That sounds you-inclusive, plural."

Sophia shrugs, "Good thing too, since *all* of us on this side of the great-mystery are involved our opt-out rate has dropped to zero. For training the last few months we've been running daily recon out of the Spike and, for proof of concept, Bud, Paleo and I were on Earth shadowing Marshal Ramirez last week and, as strange as this sounds, Paleo thinks he may remember her."

"Roll-backs are not clean. What lingers can be suppressed to a point. As long as nobody tells him shit it will remain a gut feeling."

"Well, I'm not sayin' nothin'."

Jacob takes a swig from his beer and asks, "I'm curious, when Paleo is not a walking divining rod, looking for action, what does he do with himself?"

Sophia was genuinely surprised by the question, "Funny you should ask. He's been writing a childrens book."

Jacob's astonished reaction to that was not unexpected, and the long seconds it took him to dig into his memory just to come up with the title stressed his brain, "The Fiddler...and..." Sophia mouths the words with him as he says it, "The...Hourglass?"

"Yes! That's it!" Sophia then adds, "I loved how Ms Buttons warned Mr. Grylli not to dance on the twig while it was raining. What a fuckin' dork!"

*The Fiddler and the Hourglass* was a little story Jacob pulled out of thin air when his pre-school brother and sister watched a black widow spider capture a cricket. The story was about how the cricket played for the spider and they became good friends, but one day he got careless and was caught in her web where she defied her nature by releasing him. That's when times were good—when he told them the story it was cold and wet and Ms Buttons couldn't deny the needs of her babies when Mr. Grylli carelessly got caught when times were bad. The moral being there's a limit to forgiving stupid.

Jacob is both elated and disappointed, "I never got around to doing that. I really wanted too!"

From over his shoulder he hears his own voice speak up, "Well, consider yourself having gotten around to it."



“Aw crap!” Jacob snorts as he looks up at Paleo who is standing and leaning against the door jamb to the room.

Paleo nods his head, “How do you two know each other?”

Sophia says to Paleo, “Don’t ask!”

“Okay, then riddle me this...” Paleo swirls his hand in the air, “I got this dilemma I call the three decade paradox. Follow?”

Jacob stresses, “I know this age was carefully selected.”

Paleo crosses his arms, “They’ve taken heroic measures to keep what you are away from me and...one look at you and I realize I’ve been given the gift of *new born baby duck*. Tell me I’m wrong?”

“Didn’t realize I was that smart at twenty-eight.”

“Could’ve fooled me? I thought I was dumb as fuck!”

Jacob laughs, “Well, from where I’m sitting I’m jealous as fuck!” He stands and adds, “Let me get outta here but before I do let’s establish some ground rules, okay? When you find out what happened to me, which is soon, it’s gonna be academic for you. Keep in mind that is *my* life, *my* shit and *my* burden to deal with. From where you are going forward have fun with it because it *is* a gift. Deal?”

Paleo nods big in agreement, “Deal!”

Jacob turns to Sophia, “Let me talk to him for a minute and he’ll be back to put a smile on that face! Cool beans?”

Sophia gestures away, “I can always use my toes curled.”

As they step out front Paleo asks, “I take it Sophia is—”

Jacob cuts him off, “Not *your* daughter, got that? My sole concern is her well-being and you make her happy. You’re doing a great job so keep it up! Capiche?”

Paleo scowls, “Best thing that ever happened to me.”

Jacob adds, “Since Maggie—”

Paleo cuts him off, “I don’t want to talk about her.”

Jacob leans in, “Well we’re gonna. It broke my heart when she died, but it was devastating when she opted out. For me it’s now a distant whisper in the past but for you it’s raw as hell.”

Paleo almost snarls, “Point being?”

Jacob thumbs behind him towards Sophia’s home, “If you promise to keep those toes curled then I have another gift for you.”

Hope and confusion envelops Paleo, “Okay, you’re on.”

"For all opt-outs we reserve the right to defib 'em at least two more times and all of them are going to be asked if they want to get in on Sandoval's droid program."

"Can I be there?" Paleo says poker faced.

"I'll make sure of that, but it gets one better. I just found out a few weeks ago, from Sandoval, that Maggie wanted to be revived once I crossed over..." Jacob gestures big, "And here you are!"

Paleo asks, "Why are you doing this?"

"I have a thirty-five year baggage train behind me with too many commitments and spread way too thin. That's my stupid ass excuse. Truth is this is my gift to me when I needed it the most."

"I didn't know I was a righteously cool guy!"

"Could've fooled me. I thought I was dumb as fuck?" As Paleo laughs, Jacob thumbs behind him, "Again, hurt her and there's nowhere to hide from me, motherfucker. Got that?"

Paleo throws his hands out with a big smile, "No! No, I got this! A genuine *Deus ex temporal*-reset I'm good to go with."

Jacob returns the smile, "Glad we can see eye to eye, son."

Jacob steps past him and after a few feet out he turns and goes, "Oh! One more thing. Good news and bad news."

Paleo shrugs, "Okay, bad."

"I don't know how to say this but, Jordan died a long time ago. She hemorrhaged out during childbirth."

"Oh..." Paleo suddenly realizes there is only one reason that Jacob would bring this up, "Boy or girl?"

"Both!" Paleo is surprised by that, so Jacob adds, "Peter and Jordan Junior, and they just turned forty. Thought you should know because you'll get to meet them and...grandkids. Josav, Connie and little Mini-Monique!"

"Wow."

"And you should know, for your edification, Peter is now a Lieutenant Colonel with the Marine Corps *and*, one other thing, I shot him in combat when he was a lieutenant-lieutenant a few years back. That was when we didn't know each other."

"Really!?" Paleo asks making a shooting-gun motion.

"Ya...ya I'll bring him to see you in a couple of weeks when the dust settles. We're good. He an' I are real cool!"

Then it dawns on Paleo, "Then Zoot was Jordan's father."

“Yup!”

“There was a lot of speculation about that.” Paleo then asks, “How’s Zoot? Any word from him?” Jacob kinda looks around with a guilty look so Paleo follows with, “So, you shot him too?” Jacob nods yes and Paleo asks, “And it was fatal.”

“Ya, didn’t want to do that but...it’s the job!”

Paleo shakes his head in wonderment, “Just curious, but is there anything else that involves me?”

Jacob knows of one last thing and while starting to nod yes he says, “Nooo, come to think that pretty much covers it.”

Paleo dares to suggest, “And it gets weird from there.”

Jacob huffs, “Ho’boy, does it ever.”

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Babette Dubois, Bud Sheatz’s great aunt from the South of France, broke the mold and opted for the garishness of Vegas<sup>3</sup> over the stale vaingloriousness of *le Tour Eiffel*. That place is too damned Parisian and snooty for her taste even though by all appearances she should fit right in. Glance at Nicole and Babette when put side by side and off-hand you would assume they were twins, but where Nicole is provocatively hard and cut Babette is sensuously lithe and soft—and so much so that with her hair done up and the right dress if it wasn’t for the chaotic cyclone of freckles all over her face and body you would swear that Jessica Rabbit herself genie-blinked into reality. Then in a blind-silhouette comparison between Babette from Agde to Monique, originally from Marseille, the similarities in their heavy accents, speech, walk and mannerisms are so remarkable that you’d bet the farm that *they* were sisters. Imagine the jaw-drop unmasking that one.

When Jacob met Babette, against his better judgment, he ignored the little voice in his head saying, *warning Will Robinson*. This woman is undamaged goods, too damned perfect to walk away from, and in his mind this is a ride he has to see to the end. With or without Babette he’d have given Maggie to Paleo simply because it would have been the right thing to do. Babette just made it easy.

Jacob has been here so many times over the last few months that the formalities of knocking on Bud’s door have been done away with as well, and every time Jacob steps through that door he half expects to find a big empty because Bud is rarely there and he thinks this is the day where Babette finally tires of him, “Hey, Babs!”

Just then Jacob hears a cork pop, “*Oui!*”

After a half-minute of hearing Babette tinkering around and pouring wine into glasses she steps from the kitchen without a stitch of clothes on, and where most people naked are old hat—with Babette it's a game of connect the dots with your eyes, "Jacques! My, you're early. I was hoping for the wine to breathe before you showed."

Jacob has closed the distance between them and, with their lips hovering only a centimeter apart, this almost-kiss lingers. It's the anticipation that especially kills her. With their lips almost touching they can feel one another's breath which takes Babette's breath away.

Nicking a glass of wine from her Jacob pulls back with a little groan. Licking her teeth, Babette is clearly panting which clues him in on how much that affected her.

After a few seconds she gulps, "Why don't you just take me?"

Jacob ponders, "I wonder about that sometimes."

She protests, "*Mon ange, je prie*, stop being the gentleman!"

Jacob gets his wits back, and with a clear head, "I hear ya, Babs, but with my luck the day I burst through that door and throw down on you is probably gonna be the day you aren't in the mood."

Babette is surprised, "*Pardon!* If you do not try then how are we to find out?" Babette then pouts, "*Je t'aime!*"

Wow, she said it, thinks Jacob with his poker face intact. He then feigns getting a call and puts a hand out, "Aaaarrgh! Give me a second. They won't leave me alone."

Jacob hops up and steps outside for some air while wondering what to do. Some women like to act out being raped on the by and by and Jacob can't stand that. Trying to find out what their expectations are is like pulling teeth because not knowing those expectations is a formula for disaster. Then Jacob realizes that that's not what Babette wants. She wants what she wants forced on her. It's not like she's going to fight it, it's just that she doesn't want the option. Then to top that off she's asking for it followed with an all too sweet, '*I love you.*' Jacob hasn't heard anybody say these words to him in so long that it's like kryptonite to his sense of chivalry and decorum.

He looks up to the sky and says, "Okay, fuck it!"

Jacob steps back through the door and faces off with Babette who is now standing. She looks up and before she could say anything Jacob pushes her back into the wall behind her with a thud. Not with a violence, but just enough umph to get her attention.

With wide-eyed surprise, Babette goes, "*Monsieur!*"

Jacob has admin rights in the Garden, and as he closes the

distance between them his hand sweeps across his body and his clothes drop off just in time for his flesh to press into hers.

The open mouthed delight in Babette's face urges Jacob on so he takes her arms and pulls them behind her back with a force. Controlling them with one hand the other reaches up to thread his fingers into her hair. Pulling her head to the side his teeth clamp down on her neck and with that she moans between gasps of air.

It's not like Jacob loses track of time as he works it but what clues him in that he's working it right is that her moans have now morphed into broken sobs. Jacob could kick himself for getting too into this so he lets go of her hands and hair and, as if she can read his mind, her arms drape around his neck so she can hold on while he picks her up and sets her on the arm of the couch.

"*Aaaah, mon Dieu!*" Babette tucks her face into the crook of his neck, and as her legs wrap around him she chirps an oh-so quiet little wish, "*Prends-moi maintenant!*"

Babette gets her wish as Jacob thrusts into her body—full to the hilt—and not expecting the abruptness of being impaled like this she whips her head around and locks her eyes on his. Crying out she grips tight as wave upon wave radiates through her body.

Wow, thinks Jacob, surprised to see that Babette has peaked so suddenly, and where the big five in his past, Maria, Nicole, Cricket, Monique and Maggie all could fly off the handle like this—Babette is something altogether different. She is expressive, responsive, vocal and the perfect hybrid between demanding and compliant, which is a tough juggling act in anyone's repertoire. Her frankness and honesty makes Jacob feel like he is up to the task and that there's no string attached or another shoe is about to fall—where he has to take his lumps with the love. What cinches this deal for him is where most women get lost in the cottony numbness as their core becomes a churning volcano ready to explode, cliché as that sounds, Babette, when she plateaus, almost always manages to lock her soft eyes onto Jacob's and gaze into his just enough to draw him in—making them one of the same flesh before those eyes roll back into her head at the point where she lets go.

Or, like today, when her will was taken from her.

Where he can lay waste to Maria and purposefully so, where he has allowed Nicole to ply her trade then turns the tables to service her and shore up her broken spirit by making her feel wanted if only for a fleeting moment, Babette's unique gift to Jacob is her unbridled deliverance into ecstasy—while bringing him along for the ride.

In Babette he finds a plenary equal.

Jacob holds on tight as her core goes into convulsions and her legs spasm uncontrollably however, as these tremors peak she doesn't pass out, oh no, she grabs his face and locks lips with his—playing a card she's been holding onto for just this very moment.

Jacob is talented at kissing, he's got 'skillz' you could say, and he's a master of self-control when it comes to these intimate encounters but his club foot, quietly hidden from all, is the unbreakable kiss with this level of intimacy and intensity thrown in for good measure. Babette thought she discovered that little secret, drew him in and snatches that control away from him...and as he falls apart, shuddering along with her, it's as if she shived him—but in a good way! The emotion Babette feels by this success, and the love she has for this man, overwhelms her and she explosively weeps in their embrace.

Jacob cradles her gently while she cries this out.

He was half-expecting Sasha to pull this very stunt but it was Babette who got there first, and where Sasha and Glados are simply diversions, okay—both hell of a diversion, he's convinced that nothing substantive will ever come of them. Babette, on the other hand, has managed to breach the impenetrable wall Jacob built around himself after losing Maggie decades ago and that realization bowls him over as if he were hit by a train, *Oh shit, I'm in love!*

As her sobs die off this perfect moment is made ever more so as she wistfully bleats, *"Il n'est rien de réel que le rêve et l'amour."*

Jacob tenders Babette the savoriest of kisses he could muster, but this longest of moments is abruptly shattered by an emergency text flashing in his visual cortex, "Babs, I have to go!"

She huffs big, twice, "Is everything alright?"

"No, it hit the fan." Jacob pulls back, "We're at war!"

Babette stands and urges him on, "Go-go-go-go! Just be safe my love. Please come back in one piece, whole, I beg you!"

Jacob gets another text, "Oh shit, they can't find Bud!"

"I know where he is!" She urges him to go, "Poof, be gone!"

Jacob kisses her quick and says, "Love you!"

"Au revior!" And as he vanishes from sight Babette whispers to herself with surprise, *"Mon Dieu, il a dit qu'il!"*