

116

not exactly a pickle surprise

DATE: 2323ce-APRIL-22-SUNDAY**TIME: 00:23zulu (local 27:27mst)**

Babette sighs, "*Tu me manques.*"

Ninety minutes have passed without them saying an actual word to each other. There was a lot of heavy breathing, a few grunts, then the occasional crying out by her to punctuate a heated moment, but words were not exchanged until just now.

Many have tried to have a relationship like theirs but it is simply not sustainable. A few months at best for most, but nine and a half years is totally unheard of. Pacing was key for Jacob and Babs, sometimes they were many months apart, one time by as much as twenty-five while he was recuperating at Monique's—because pinching exclusive tunnel-time on a secure wormhole was next to impossible with the war hogging every byte of their bandwidth.

Then with Michelle maneuvering herself into a prime position to "volunteer" for Jessica's Mission Oversight flights into Los Angeles, this made it easy-breezy for Guns to slither on into Jacob's bed when there was so many hours to kill between their meetings...

And compiling drop simulations gave them ample downtime!

Now, everybody has something on the side to pass the time, be it live or digital or dead it does not matter, but where Michelle didn't mind Maria or Asajj in the slightest, Babs was something altogether different! See, Guns kept in touch with her old gunnery instructor for the Warthog, that'd be Bud, and she knew about Babette and Jacob for years, but when Michelle actually met Babs, well, curiosity ended up getting the better of her—and they became regular too! Small world, yes, but Shelly can partial sum on the fly where most people suck at it.

Point being, Jacob also sucks at basic math, "Missed you too."

Babs nods slightly, and then slips out of bed with a smug grin.

In the kitchen she pops a bottle of wine, pours two glasses, and stepping back in she hands one to Jacob, "It's been too long."

Jacob ponders that while Babs slips back into bed with him, "How you greeted me at the door, that was one for the books!"

Babs leans against Jacob while saying, "*Mon loup*, what choice did we have? When you walked in I...*jette mes vêtements!*"

Having just sipped from the glass of wine she handed him, Jacob grins big, "Yea, in seconds."

She swirls her free hand in the air, "Like a trebuchet!"

He chuckles, "Nothing needed to be said."

"*Oui!*" Babs sips from her wine and then takes a deep breath, "Sorry 'bout December last."

"No, that's okay! Didn't know you and Shell were a thing."

"Our impromptu tryst with your betrothed, she wanted to surprise you!" Babs then wonders, "Did it make a mess of things?"

"Surprisingly, no."

"I haven't heard from her?"

"She's kinda spread thin. You will."

"With your vanilla sensibilities, what was your take away?"

Jacob nods with wide eyes, "Surprisingly, fun."

"*Bon à savoir*, your performance was...one for the books!"

Jacob smiles at that, "Not my cup of tea, but for Michelle—"

She cuts him off, "What about your cup of tea?"

He thinks about it, "Not to say you an' I were getting stale, but a change of pace...this change of pace has a high replay value."

"Like you've said, arms and legs in the coaster are optional!"

Jacob nods slightly as he huffs a little laugh at that, but then a thought crosses his mind, so he dares to ask, "Bud said the last time you and he spent any time together was last New Year's?"

"At Jay's, on the beach!" She waggles his head and tries a lame imitation of the Field Marshal, "Like, cowabunga, dood!"

And then it dawns on him, so with tight lips he says to her, "Hands and feet inside the coaster is optional, makes me wonder where you picked up on that...Aroha Mai?" He looks at Babs and adds, "Me thinks you can drop the façade now?"

"ah." Babs quietly nods, then says, "Guess I've been outted."

Having confirmed it, Jacob looks away, "You got careless."

"We've been careless before, but this time you were listening. Then again, in our defense, an' you have to admit, we never lied."

He looks at her, "A woman would say you lied."

"*Vraie*, however an omission does not a lie make!"

Jacob almost laughs, "That's a guy talking!"

"No, that is us maintaining cerebral objectivity."

"Us? In this instance I'd agree with a women's point of view."

"How convenient of you!" Babs then protests with wide eyes, "But, you never asked, *mon bon Monsieur!*"

"I wondered at times but, okay, in your defense, I didn't ask."

She gives a conceited, "*Ça alors, quod erat demonstrandum!*"

Jacob snorts, "You can knock off the accent you know."

Babs now speaks with Bud's vocal patterns, but two octaves higher, "It's not that simple." She turns towards him and, "Your early months with my aunt was all her, but with so few wolves and otters available here in the Garden, and myself green as green can be of my aunt's popularity here, we came up with an arrangement. When Babs had to go back I sprang for a family member chip and, after copying my core instance onto it I then uploaded her. Not as an avatar, but a fully integrated wrap to maintain her demeanor." Babs' unique French accent takes over, "Where *moi* happens to be in the driver's seat!"

Jacob grasps that, "No wonder you never broke character."

"*Oui!*" Then with Bud's voice, "Here I'm an FO. The only time I am Bud is when we're staging or on a mission." Babs' voice returns, "With this revelation, I pray we do not lose what we have."

Jacob thinks about it and asks pointedly, "Sophia, Maggie and Paleo? I know you've been...involved with them, so to speak."

Babs nods, "Among others. It's a small yet intimate clique."

"I'll bet." Jacob ponders this, then, "What happened here stays here, and Michelle must never know I know. That's part one."

"Oh, most assuredly!" Jacob sits there and doesn't elaborate on part two, so to prod him along she asks, "*Deuxième partie?*"

Jacob bodily turns to Babette, and as his eyes stab into hers, "You never want to be Bud again, I take it."

Babs answers, "*Non-non-non, plus jamais!*"

"I want to hear it from Bud."

Bud speaks, "Never again, we've merged completely and..."
As Babs, "It's so seamless I don't even know who Bud was anymore?"

Jacob's shakes his head with understanding, "Then, my friend, I never want to hear from *you* again." Babs rears back slightly as Jacob lays it out, "On July second, Rho Tau, whose voice I hear booting up as my co-pilot will tell me everything I need to know."

Bud as Babs realizes, "I'll...have to requalify for everything!"

"You have just a smidge over two months." Jacob stands and softly caresses her face with a hand, "Let's see what you're made of?"

And he vanishes from sight...

01000110-01001111-01001110-01010011-01001001

"Not what I expected."

Here in Jessica's prime southern corner apartment, on floor 100 of the Spike, she and Maria have decoupled from Stone Garden where Jessica had them linked into Jacob and Babette's encounter.

Jessica blinks, and, "That's two of us."

Maria shrugs, "I was hoping for something, ya know, funnier!"

Jessica's face scrunches up with, "You mean slapstick?"

Maria laughs, "I wasn't expecting him to leap out of the bed, shrieking, 'holy shit, I've been munching on your ass!' but, sumthin' a little bit more animated? Am'I right?"

"That...yea, that would have been hilarious!"

"Thank you for seeing it my way, love, but I guess it looks like your father has changed for the better!"

"Father hasn't changed one iota."

"No?" Maria points at her, "If it wasn't for Diego, Michal, the Herrero's and Paula, then I believe we'd'uv gotten a livelier reaction!"

Jessica thinks about it, "Okay, I'll give you that, but this here was a banana smoothie instead of the pumpkin-spice latte we wanted!"

Maria points to her own head, "You got access, did he know?"

"No, but in the back of his mind he did suspect something was *maybe* amiss? Suspicious even? Father avoided the question because he needed this diversion a lot more than rocking a boat."

Maria kids, "And I thought he was a man of principle!"

Jessica wonders, "Would you risk blowing this up, seriously?"

"No, I wouldn't!" Maria then begrudgingly admits, "With what we just sat through, truth be told, I'd be goin' way far out of my way to not rock that boat! Satisfied?"

"Yea, it was a hell of a show, an' he did give 'er a way back!"

"Uh-uh, that's an almost impossible task he gave Babs."

"I beg to differ, that should be a cakewalk!"

"The regimen takes from three to four months to get through, all because of the heavy queue. She's got two. He knew exactly what he was asking of her."

"Which was what?"

"How bad do you want it?"

"Uuuh, maybe you can help her?"

"I'm over here now. Only if I'm asked."

Jessica points to herself, "I'm asking."

"For her or your father?"

Jessica ponders, "I'll have to get back to ya on that one."

"By the way, how 'r you and Sammi getting along?"

"We're good?"

"Do you do your mental whack-a-vooodoo shit on 'er?"

"In the sack, that's about it." Jessica then picks up on Maria's thoughts, so her shoulders sag as she elaborates, "Since you insist, I model it after my father's junk and technique, okay? She loses her shit whenever I do it to her and...it's pretty cool!"

"Without the benefit of the N2."

"Yea, wha'?"

"That'll put a whole new twist on scissors."

Jessica's face scrunches up, "Really? You had to go there?"

Maria throws her hands out, "I gotta be me!"

Jessica shakes her head, "Stick with what ya know!"

"Every intention too!" Maria laughs, then asks, "By the way, have you given Samael any second thoughts?"

"Not after I talked to Seth." Maria gives a confused look, so Jessica elaborates, "He showed me the alternatives going forward and I realize that Sammi uncomplicates my life."

"How so?"

"Guys being controlling assholes?"

"When is a guy being a guy not an asshole!"

"You have a really distorted view of the world." Maria grins big while gesturing to herself, so Jessica goes, "Seth pointed out that actual tough and confident guys are chill and easy going where weak fucks are prying and controlling—and women like us, specifically you and me, we have a hard time spotting the sheep in wolves clothing."

Maria shakes her head and admits that, "Your father was one of the few tough and chill guys, and I fucked that up royally."

"Twice, an' ya wonder who the controlling assbat was?"

Maria huffs, "You are never gonna let me live that down."

"You never let up on 'im!" Jessica then suddenly remembers, "And, speaking of controlling jackasses, Seth said your ploy worked but the Nefers are gonna be taking their sweet time to evac Sasha."

"Those gray pricks take for-fucken-ever to do anything."

Jessica points out, "She'll never be coming back!"

Maria is surprised, and asks her, "Ever?"

"That bridge has been burned." With Maria giving a satisfied nod, and standing to leave, Jessica adds, "They're gonna make it look like an accident. Just like last time!"

Maria asks, "They're not gonna actually whack her are they?"

"No!" Jessica shakes her head, "No, she and Rachel will be switching jobs. Management is going to be Claudia's punishment."

"What does Rachel do?"

"I'm not sure?" Jessica then points to her hallway with the extra rooms, "You know, you can stay if you want, and we can do breakfast just like the old days!"

"Love to, but I'll have to take a rain check on that. Got the exec crew comin' by for lunch to go over the Arda drop." Maria then wonders, "Don't you and Scott got that shoot to go to tomorrow?"

Jessica stands to see her out, "And wrap party afterwards."

"Angela has gotten crazy popular." Maria then shifts gears, "Oh shit, before I forget, there's a video going out tomorrow through Carlos' media group with Angela on it."

"Scott told me, but 'e didn't say what it's about."

"He tossed it in my court all because it's her with that new retread chief from the USAF."

Jessica's face turns to dread, asking, "Wa'd she do this time?"

With tight lips Maria asks, "You really want to hear this?"

Jessica nods, "I didn't give a shit, but now I do!"

"On the thirtieth, I took the chief out to the mail run for DC, as Scott was walking Diego and Angela out to the trash run for LA."

"The day of her first regular season game!"

"Yea, that Friday!" Maria shifts her weight and gestures with, "So, here we are making introductions and the Chief, Zajic, asks her 'You're that Newt-Angela everyone is talking about!' Angela gets this look on her face, so she asks him, 'An' you that zoomie-chief everyone here is talkin' 'bout, right?' All this while she's scoping him out—"

Jessica wonders, "Maybe I don't what to hear this?"

"Oh, no, you are going to hear this!" Maria laughs and then continues with, "So, here she is, sizing the guy up and down, where she steps into his bubble and starts poking his belly through his shirt. Then, she starts patting his abs with the flat of her hand and shouts, 'Damn, Sian, you got to get in on this! Da guy 'as got a six-pack!'"

Jessica is trying not to laugh while asking, "There's more?"

"And here's where it gets good when Angie looks up at him and laughs, 'Gawd-damn you is a frickin hottie for a salt-n-pepper!' And while walking away she thumbs back at 'im while saying to Diego, 'I gotta wait me eight-years before I can git a bite of that!' And with those two heading for the ship, my guy is hanging on Scott, in tears, while laughing his guts out! Everyone was laughing their guts out."

Jessica is cross-armed face-palmed while trying to suppress her own laughter, "There's no end to this! Tell me I'm wrong."

Maria leans in, "Would you have her any other way?"

Jessica lifts her head and shakes it, *no*.

0111100-0101111-0111100

Maria's penthouse takes up all of the 366th floor of the Spike, at 1,832 meters up in the air, and where each of the three equilateral sides at the base of this building span 500 meters, up here, just four floors from the top, the three exterior walls are 45 meters wide. If this were New York City the footprint here would fetch thirty-million USD, easy, but this place is free digs for Marshal Ramirez.

Maria actually lives in a large upscale 6-bedroom at the end of a cul-de-sac in the City of New Sydney, but this penthouse is being held for her regardless, so she threw in a few personal items for

atmosphere and uses it for high-value VIPs like President Mofid.

About once a month Maria will entertain guests here but, as it is, it's usually empty so she stocks the place with products that she can rotate out to keep things fresh.

Jacob slips out of the bed in the master bedroom, steps into the living room and stops at the floor-to-ceiling windows to look out over New Sydney all of 120 kilometers to the north. After a minute of gormlessly staring at its distant glow, he huffs a breath then meanders into the kitchen. Stepping past a chef's island, he opens an overhead liquor cabinet to pull out a bottle of rye and a shot glass.

At just that moment, he hears someone clearing their throat.

Jacob doesn't have to look back, he knows who this is, so he pulls another shot glass out of the cabinet and turns towards the island, and where no one was sitting just twelve-seconds before here we have the soon to be fifteen-year-old, Seth, giving him a genuinely warm smile while saying, "Hello...father."

Jacob just now realizes that he is standing there buck-naked, and just as he is about to react with some embarrassment, like he's supposed too, Seth offers him a robe, "Sorry 'bout the intrusion."

"Thanks." Jacob sets the bottle and glasses down, takes the robe and dons it while saying, "I guess it's important?"

"It's more of a timeliness issue rather than importance? The next available...moment for me to reach out is all of five weeks away so you'll be getting me now."

Jacob pours them both a shot while saying, "I know you can't turn it off but...well, it'd be nice to have a little privacy?"

"You are constantly streaming in my head, and I can ignore or block it out most of the time, but tonight was an exception!"

Jacob pushes a shot to him, "Tonight was an eye opener."

Seth smirks, "Not exactly a pickle surprise but...yea!"

"And you've known about this for...what, ever?"

Seth raises his shot and, "Purdy much!"

They slam these shots back, and as Jacob pours them another Seth goes on to say, "This is pretty good, but I'd rather have a soda."

Jacob snorts a little laugh, "That stuff is bad for you."

Seth points to the rye and, "And this isn't?"

"In good company." Jacob mutters, then, "You know all about me but I know dick about you, and I have always wondered—"

Seth throws out, "How I've meddled in your life?"

"Purdy much!" Jacob then asks, "Michelle?"

"Little bit?" Seth flashes pinched fingers for just a second, "Not pulling strings but clearing away...artifacts."

"Should I be thanking you for that?"

"You and Michelle is all you and Michelle! Well actually, it was all Michelle's doing." Seth then announces, "Where my future wife and I have a direct...unitized trajectory."

"She already knows?"

"Sure 'nuff does!"

"Who is she?"

Seth stares at him then, "It's funny how many sons get all jealous and shit of their father—'cause he can get a leg over on their mother when she's out of their puberty addled reach. Well, big daddy, that never was the case for me because, quite frankly, our Nicole was too much of a psychotropic wreck for my discernable palate."

Jacob laughs big with, "Thank you for clearing the air!"

"You're welcome!" And with Jacob pulling it together, Seth goes on to say, "But seriously...to stand in your shadow? For a normal son, of you specifically, that would be a soul crushing experience."

"Seriously!"

"You don't get it, father. Everyone, I mean every guy out there would give their right-nut and twenty years off the top of their life to be you for just one, three-day weekend!"

"Seriously."

"You..." He leans in with, "You are the super-daemonic sigma male of alpha-males. It is hysterical how they all fantasize being you! The women you've been with, the power they think you wield, cutting to the chase, in their eyes you are a walkin'-n-talkin' demigod."

Jacob deflates, "seriously."

"ooh, to stand in your shadow." Seth sits back while saying, "Rest be assured, father, that I'll be spending my entire life hidden by *my own* shadow, totally unencumbered by yours."

Jacob nods, "Hidden in plain sight."

Seth nods in like, "Exactly where I'm supposed to be."

"I wanted better for you."

"You don't get it, any other path would be fatally disastrous."

"Okay...okay." Jacob nods with understanding because this is telling him to drop it, where he then asks, "So, who is this lucky gal?"

Seth leers, "Really wanna know?"

"I wouldn't be asking!"

"A one...Lilith."

Jacob wonders, "de Prima?" Seth taps his nose with his finger so Jacob goes, "Holy shit, now *I'm* jealous! How does that happen?"

"Uuuuh, I've known about her since I was five, and she just found out about us three months ago, the day you got hitched!"

Jacob's face scrunches slightly, "She wants this?"

"Oh yea, after I showed her what's what, and it is surreal as hell to watch this come to fruition but, first, let's chat 'bout business!"

"Rho Tau?"

"How'd ya guess!"

Jacob huffs, "I dunno, intuition?"

Seth nods and, "Even with the best troops, kit and doctrine, defense has this weird tendency of becoming a losing proposition."

Jacob exhales big, "Mordor."

"Things...unseen are going to go ass-up for Montaña."

Jacob points out, "Who is a fantastic field commander!"

"That he is, but this doesn't change the fact that—"

Jacob throws out, "Doctrine will get us in a jam."

Seth chuckles, "Papa-J, is on a roll!"

"So, what's the plan?"

"There is no plan, there can't be one!" Seth then stresses, "Look, what I see is set in stone, an' even though it's all based upon potentiality for once I can't fiddle with that. So, what we're doin' here, *mi padre*..." He points to Jacob's lap, "Is rearranging those stones."

"It's confusing 'cause you...don't want me to shift resources."

"I know this gives you no comfort but you're at your best when you shoot from the hip so, no, there'll be no plan. All I can say is that you'll stick the landing an' turn it around—if you let your peeps do their job and you focus on you!"