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a dual-wielded fuck you

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The drive up the Church Key into New Sydney has always been a short but pleasant trip. Taking this route always reminds Maria of the 2 freeway in Glendale California and how Earths superhighways from the past are slowly fading from sight. The crumbling overpass supports and trusses standing like Stonehenge monuments to culture and industries long past.

It's strange to see cars and roads in the old movies and how people operate them hands-on and yet are basically stuck to that road. With vehicles today floating around like they do people have this sense of freedom that they can go anywhere they want—which is total bunk because if you stray from the preordained flight-paths by just an inch then 'ka-ching' comes your ticket. The last time someone on Sapphire switched off their autopilot and tooled around just 'cause ended up with over thirty citations and their operating license revoked for five years. Only three groups on the Scab can do that with impunity and they are the police, emergency services, and the SA.

Many cities still have paved roads but for how little they are used they've become glorified bike paths anymore. Vehicles with wheels, sans the autopilot, are still around but they are looked upon as an anachronism and unsafe. You can still get a driver's license but the rules of the road, roads without traffic lights or posted signs, are difficult to master or negotiate without a neuronet interface.

Many places, like New Sydney, don't call them cars anymore. The locals here, whose slang is rooted in Australian etymology, call them by a 'chop-up' of the manufacturers name or by the generic *glider* for high end sedans or *barge* for underperforming family sized vehicles. The word *Jetson* has been the patois *de jour* for the small

sport and subcompact models, but *Cessna* has recently come into vogue for the low-end versions of those vehicle types.

The long stretch of airborne freeway up the peninsula to the city is the only time Maria can get away with piloting her glider by hand. With the HUD taking the entire windscreen, manual flight is pretty much like an archaic video game where the goal is to stay within the parameters of the segmented tunnel on display that has the feel of an old school vector graphic...because it is.

The autopilot display has the pretty graphical interface. The sole purpose of the different projections is to dissuade operators from actually operating. Both give you the exact same information and capability but the cludgy array in manual mode offers little by way of confidence to the user and many 'oh shit' feelings to the passengers.

Maria loves piloting her glider by hand whenever she can but she finds off-ramping to be problematic because she almost always misses her exit. At the last second she switches over to autopilot and the glider suddenly jinks down hard and 'jake-brakes' all along the off-ramp pathway giving Maria the delightful satisfaction of over-taxing the automated systems of the glider by bringing it to a shuddering stop at the foot of the ramp—and the rewarding *ding* of a citation dropping into the vehicle's in-box that will add itself to the hundred and fifty or so she has accumulated on her logon.

It was just a quick turn and two kilometers to the daycare center where they have been evaluating the first batch of clones over the last month. The panicked email from the director of the program from last week resulted in their meeting about the test results of the evaluations being pushed up by eight weeks.

After Maria signs in and starts for the back conference room the director and his staff catch her in the hallway. From the look on his face they're not even going to get back to that room with the comfortable chairs and oodles of coffee and danish she had delivered for this meeting. From right here they're gonna jump right in.

Maria asks the director with a way too personable and pleasant voice, "Hey, Sergeant Billingsley, how's it shakin'?"

"Thank you for coming, Marshal." He says with a panic.

Maria looks over the three staffers he has with him and sees the worried look on their faces, "It's okay, Sergeant, let's see what we have to work with."

Billingsley shakes his head, "I don't know about that. After you hear what we gotta say you may either want to gas me and the staff, or the product and start over."

Maria puts her hands out with some reassuring calmness, "Let's start with what's going right, shall we?"

Billingsley huffs, trying to clear his head, all the while pointing to his left towards the Omega clones and saying, "Okay, they are."

Just then Nicole steps up behind Maria and asks, "Where are we now? What'd I miss?"

Maria glances at Nicole then then back at the director, "Hey Chief! Now, Sergeant, tell me something good."

Billingsley puts his hand out to shake Nicole's, "You're the donor! Wow, it's a pleasure to meet you! These little girls are coming around and they are awesome! You should be proud."

Maria urges him on, "Let's hear it?"

"Aside from the foster parent reports, which are all positive, I have never worked with such advanced children in all my life. They are like, testing off the scale!"

"An example?"

"They're three, right? We're already testing them with word problems that would stump your average seven year old. The way we're goin' we're gonna to run out of material in a couple of weeks because we did not plan for this."

Nicole smiles with an almost conceited air, "They're my girls!"

Billingsley frowns with his brow, "This is beyond smart. There is something else going on around here. If one of them masters something they ALL have it down pat. It's surreal." He then gestures to himself, "It's like WE are the test subjects! Not them."

Maria and Nicole look into the room and see the first batch of twelve little red-head girls, all identical except for their hair and mode of dress, all playing and chatting together as if they were of one mind.

"They even throw the problems back in the staffers face. The very first word problem we gave was...if Johnny had a five liter bucket and a two liter bucket, and his mom wanted three liters, what would Johnny do?" Billingsley then points to the one with huge golden locks, "And you know what that one said? She told my staff that Johnny should tell his mother to get her own damn water!"

Maria and Nicole look at him and laugh, with Nicole saying, "Seriously!"

"Oh ya, and it get's better! She asks if Johnny's mother is an invalid, so the staffer says yes. Then she asks if she needs it for something like dialysis? The staffer says, okay, yes." Billingsley then asks Maria and Nicole, "Did you know they still do dialysis?"

Both shake their head *no*.

Billingsley goes, "Neither did I, but I found out they do when waiting for a kidney replacement. Anyway, she then asks if Johnny likes his mother so the staffer asks why would that matter? And, you know what she said! If Johnny didn't like his mother then he could come back with two or one or no liters! What's she gonna do about it? She's an invalid!"

Both burst out laughing with Maria saying, "You're kidding!"

Billingsley shakes his head, "No! Now every question has a given parameter of conditions including Johnny's mother is an invalid who needs these exacting formulas resolved for medical reasons. The pivotal condition is that Johnny likes her for formula resolution."

Nicole now comments, "Oh, my God, I didn't know."

"Well, now ya know! This is what we've been dealing with, and it gets worse! Need three liters, right? Well she says that she'll take two liters to the mom first, then go back and pour two off twice and take one liter back for a second trip."

Maria says, "That doesn't make sense."

Billingsley says, "It's an answer isn't it?"

Maria says, "That'll take two trips."

"We didn't ask for most efficient, or least amount of trips. That was as much an acceptable answer as any other. She said we're expecting her to project herself onto Johnny so to take it easy on Johnny's three year old body she would carry them in two batches. You see the problem here? We are now forced to clarify the conditions so that we only get the answer we want which is basically resolution by elimination. It's infuriating! I feel like Waldo, the village idiot."

Both laugh and Maria asks, "What do you want us to do?"

Billingsley shrugs, "I dunno...how about you pack 'em off to collage! Let them fuck with academia and leaves us alone."

Maria asks, "But we didn't move the meeting up because of the Omegas, now did we?"

Billingsley laughs, "Ya, but ya did get an earful about them!" He points to Nicole, "You, you are an overachiever and you're an asshole about it, aren't you!"

Nicole puts her hands on her hips, "And what if I am?"

"It would explain a lot, but it doesn't fix my problem."

Maria assures him, "We'll sit down and figure something out." She points to the other room, "What about them?"

"Honestly? I don't know what to do with those things!"

"What do the placement families think?"

"Oh, well, they think they're sweet little boys. Caring and sympathetic and all, but their chief complaint is that they don't talk or cooperate for shit. Most of them have repeatedly cracked the parental guidance blocks to the web and that's a constant source of irritation for the families. They're like...the Aspergers poster boys from hell!"

Maria and Nicole look in on the twelve little boys chaotically playing in the room across from the Omega clones who are polar opposites. Most of the boys are doing their own thing and appear to rarely interact with each other.

Billingsley continues, "From our perspective they are the very definition of herding cats! They're slippery little fuckers, and refuse to look you in the eye or participate in testing like..." He throws his hands around thinking of an example and says, "Tic-tac-toe!"

Maria and Nicole go, "Hu?"

"We gave the placement parents a list of activities *not* to do with them and tic-tac-toe was at the top of the list." He emphasizes the following statement, "Tic-tac-toe is a zero sum game. That means that once you master it you will never lose, and once both parties master it NOBODY can ever win! Little kids at that age require a lot of tries at it before they stop focusing on what they're doing and start watching what the opponent does to block for the win or draw."

Billingsley then thumbs back at the girl from before, "You know, goldilocks there? She lost the first round and after thinking about it for almost a minute—she never lost another. And, let me tell ya, that doesn't happen. Ever!"

He then points to the room with the Alphas in it, "Those things, the first tic-tac-toe game we tried the creature took the pen and scribbled all over it and ran off laughing '*meega nala kweesta*' whatever the fuck that means! When they get going they sound like a pack of hyenas!"

Maria and Nicole look at each other and both say, "Seth?"

Billingsley, oblivious to what they just said, continues, "That's all they say! That and 'no!' And, they say that over and over!"

Nicole asks, "You know what that means?"

"No, clue me in!"

Maria takes this one, "It's like a duel-wielded fuck you with a cherry on top! A cartoon character said it on a movie once but nobody knows what it means. It's a kid thang."

"Well, whatever it is, I half expect any day now to walk in and see them throwing their shit everywhere like a troupe of chimpanzees. Hell, they might as well be. At this point it would be logical!"

Maria notices that all of the little boys have stopped dead in their tracks. One of them is now standing at the one way mirror and appears to be looking at his own reflection. Suddenly, his gaze slowly turns towards Maria and he locks his eyes on hers.

Nicole thinks about this and, "That...is a little spooky."

Maria replies, "Ya think?"

Maria steps six feet to one side and after a few seconds the child's gaze slowly turns to where she is now standing—and again with the eye lock. Maria then steps up and squats close to the glass and seconds later the child's eyes lower and stares directly into hers.

Billingsley quietly says, "That's impossible."

Maria looks back at Billingsley and says, "I'd have to agree with you, but here we are."

Nicole urges, "Why not go in and see what he wants?"

Billingsley motions to the door, "Be my guest!"

Maria slips through the door and all of the Alphas remain where they are except the one at the mirror. He turns towards her and they meet half way.

Looking at her tummy he takes his finger and spins it around where her naval would be while saying, "Yes, I can."

With that finger he pokes her tummy ever so slightly and pulls his hand back. He then looks at his hand and slowly counts his fingers to make sure they are all there.

Maria thinks that there is no way that this child can know what that means so she asks, "What are you doing?"

The child continues to examine his hand and says, "Pinsetting. It ain't belly flops in the clouds if that's what you're asking."

Maria's eyes squint wondering where she heard that before. She squats down and the little boy looks up and he starts to examine Maria's eyes with a soft intensity.

Maria asks with trepidation, "Do you have something for me? Is there something you want to say."

The child smiles, "Haven't I said enough?"

"Maybe not?"

And with a bigger smile, "A toast!"

Drawing her in close he wraps his arms around her neck, and at the same time the other eleven little boys have pulled in for a group hug. They surround and envelop Maria from the shoulders down, like a huddle, but with a gentle and almost sad reverence.

The child then whispers in her ear, "And here's to me!"

After a few poignant seconds the others peel off, leaving the first child, who whispered in her ear, caressing her face and looking in her eyes with a knowing and radiant gleam in his. He then reaches up and kisses her lips ever so lightly.

Now, as he slowly turns and pulls away, Maria could swear she heard him say under his breath, "Love you."

Maria can't breathe.

Of all of the impossible scenarios she could have imagined stepping into this room with these children—this wasn't it.

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Maria does not know how she got back into the hallway.

From Maria's point of view it looks like Nicole and Billingsley are yelling at her but after a few gulps of air her hearing comes back to life and she realizes they weren't yelling at all. They were, however, repeatedly asking her if she were okay or not pretty damned loud.

Maria did not know how to respond. In almost a panic she looks over the boys—then back at Nicole and Billingsley—then back at the boys in the room. This is not okay but...maybe it is?

With some urgency, Nicole's voice cuts through the confusion, "Maria! Maria, what happened in there?"

Maria's eyes look crazy as hell but her voice is calm and focused as she turns to Sergeant Billingsley, "No more testing."

"Hu?" Billingsley is confused, "What do we do then?"

"I dunno! Bring them toys, games, sports, give them on-line access even, but don't test them. Don't push their buttons." Maria looks at the boys in the room wondering where to go from here. "They've been playing you."

"I don't get it?"

"Have they been driving you crazy?"

"Ya, and?"

Maria looks at Billingsley as if he were the village idiot, "Then they win! Don't play their game!"

Nicole asks, "What's going on here?"

Maria looks at the boys then back at Nicole, "I'm gonna find out! That's what I'm gonna do."

Maria suddenly races down the hall but before she blows through the door she shouts back, "Record everything! Everything!"

She hops in her glider and pulls onto the street with a bump, and after recovering from a slight drift a *ding* hits the in-box.

While speeding away from the freeway, towards the coast, Maria connects to the spike, "Vossler! You there?"

From the spike Vossler radios back, ["Got ya five-by-five, Ramirez. What's your hurry?"]

"What makes you think I'm in a hurry?"

["Let's say I got a feeling. Oh, no, make it a hunch!"]

"Waddya got hot on short notice?"

Maria can hear the sarcasm in his sing-song voice, ["Well, we have the lorry at the dock if that's what you're looking for."]

Maria snarls, "Something with a little more zoom to it."

["I got a Razor standing by for a mail-run. You can take that and I can queue another up to replace it. Will that do?"]

Maria's glider boosts for altitude as it leaps over oncoming traffic and hurtles itself over the coast. As it 'machs-up' going feet-wet she can hear the now annoying *ding-ding-ding* hit the in-box.

"Have the pit crew drop my JACC in it. I'm comin' in hot."

["I can see that. Need a shot-gun for this run?"]

"No, I'm good solo. Fill ya in when I get back."

["Now I know the rest of the story kinda fill in?"]

"Ooooh ya! Get ready for an ear-full, Voss."

["Ooooh no. Maybe you should keep it to yourself."]

"Too late, *mon chérie!*"

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