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steal your face

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In Jessica's prized southern corner apartment on the 100th floor of the Spike, a half-kilometer up in the air, one floor right above Cyzk's in fact, Scott steps up to the family room side of the kitchen counter and bumps his hip into Gilroy's while quietly saying to him, "I'm amazed you're able to walk, dude."

Gilroy huffs a laugh, "You wish!"

Jessica was pouring her coffee on the kitchen side and says to the two of them, "And on a Monday night."

"With our schedules ya gotta get it in when you can, sugar!"

Jessica rolls her eyes then, "Oh! Guns wants to talk to you."

"Three weeks, we keep missing each other. Is it important?"

She shakes her head, "Naw, just whenever! It's a little thing so when you get a chance go see her, okay?"

He shrugs, "I got that fire mission in a few hours, and I don't know what their plans are for me afterwards."

"Like she said, it's no biggie, so when you get back is good!"

Angela has entered the room and bumps into Gilroy with her hip like her father just did, "Mornin' hot stuff!"

Gilroy picks her up and, "How's the new school, Little Klicks?"

"Laurel Springs' zoom-room sucks laggy fat ass, but It'll do!"

Gilroy recoils, saying, "Oh my! You go brush those teeth, girl! Like to kill some'un with that stanky breath!"

Angela caterwauls in his face going, "Muaaa-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

He puts the giggling Angela down while Seth steps in asking, "Hey Dave! What dead people music you pickin' for today's mission?"

Gilroy waggles his finger at him, "You can't touch this!"

Angela starts dancing as Seth wonders, "What?"

"Dooo do-da do, dooo-dooo! You can't touch this!" Angela's hip-hop moves are pretty damned solid for a six year old, so after a few seconds of her vocalizing the music she high-fives Gilroy and gruffs, "Break it down!" Gilroy joins in with her, "Its Hammer time!"

Angela chose the song with Gilroy that weekend, they were practicing the video's dance moves for hours, and with her now doing the sideways crab-dance, Jessica laughs, "The fuck is that?"

Angela and Gilroy both point at Jessica, "You can't touch this!"

With those two continuing to laugh and dance, Seth asks Jessica, "Do...you have a point of reference as to what they're doing?"

Jessica hands him a glass of milk, saying, "The song is ancient and the artist is long dead. Hell, I just blew in last night and I heard they were at this all weekend."

"Ya, they were."

With Gilroy launching the video via the N2 on the wall-sized monitor behind them, Angela calls out to Jessica, "Come-on, sista!"

"Aaaaaaah, that's a no."

"Have some fun, Red Love!"

"I'm gonna have some breakfast! Yours is on the counter."

Jessica hands Seth an egg-in-the-hole, Léon style, who asks, "Wha', Léon just popped in—made 'em and boogied?"

She smiles, "No, he showed me how he makes 'em!"

Seth jiggles the plate around and notices that the yoke is soft, "Civilized too! Well, if I must."

As the two head to an island counter in the kitchen, attached to a six-burner stovetop, they hear Angela singing, "*I can't remember all the words but my breath is really stanky, yeeea!*"

Seth and Jessica are amused by that, and with them sitting down, Seth takes a bite and goes, "Holy shit! This is nuts on, Léon!"

"Thanks!" While digging in, watching Gilroy and Angela laugh and dance, Jessica looks at Seth and says, "They're really bonding."

"Please, don't ask if there is anything we can do."

"Yea, you keep evading that question."

Seth looks at her, thinks hard about it, then nods his head, "Okay, if you insist on asking then we'll talk about it tonight, deal?"

"We're supposed to be working together here, but I got this weird gut feeling that I'm part of why you are avoiding the topic."

"Very perceptive, but I think I got a paradox workaround, so we'll talk tonight." After another bite, and the other two giggling and dancing, Seth announces, "Father's going to get shot up today."

Jessica grits her teeth then asks, "Can we stop it?"

With wide eyes, Seth says, "Yes, but we're not."

Jessica huffs and snarls at him, "Why...not?"

"If you must know, his injuries will brick him for three years, but if this event doesn't happen today then tomorrow...he will die!" Seth holds both hands up like a scale, "Which do you prefer?"

"Stopping tomorrow a possibility?"

"There is nothing we can do to stop tomorrow. A platoon is going to get wiped out at Ninety-Five Tau with a megaton level nuke, they have a bunch of 'em buried as booby-traps, so if our father goes tomorrow both he and Peña's flights will be wiped out alongside them. Either way the platoon is forfeit so, what will it be, sis?"

Jessica shakes her head saying, "You can fuck off."

Seth nods, "Well then, thank you for seeing it my way."

"Anything else? Feel free to add some mo-fucks to my day!"

He thinks for a second then adds, "He's going to lose Glados, but next year Michelle will slither into that vacancy where she'll remain permanently. Father always had a strong penchant for athletic types, but Sasha opened the door for Guns, and she is gorgeous."

Jessica blinks and says, "That's the best damned news I've heard come out of your mouth in a long fricken time!"

"Yes, that tidbit is definitely a silver lining."

"Any more good news you can share?"

"Well, what I can tell you is that we've got two more siblings on the way. One will be new, and the other will be revealed! Both are a few years out so, not to sound like a broken record, but—"

"That's all you can say, right?"

"Ding-ding-a-ling!"

Jessica stares at him for a few seconds then says, "I'm gonna go see Samantha this weekend. Care to tag along?"

"If I must?" Seth then fights to suppress a huge smile as he throws out, "Feel free to twist my arm!"

Jessica points at him and is about to say something snarky, where she has a change of heart and asks, "Is Samantha good for me? You know, spending time with her like I've been?"

"First off, I won't be going with you. It's not time yet, and I also have a play-date with Peanuts I wanna keep! Second, lighten the fuck up and have some fun without overthinking shit!" Seth leans in to emphasize, "Sam is nuts about you, not in the turning of screws to you relationship type nuts, but friends with benefits nuts, follow?"

Jessica shrugs and nods, "We are having fun."

"Exactly, so have fun and stop overthinking it!" He points at her, "For all intents and purposes, Josav is behind you. For purely practical reasons he needs to get married and, even though he loves you more than anyone else, you are not in the running."

Jessica had to ask, "Cloé?"

Seth wasn't expecting that, so he thinks about it and says, "Look at it this way, you'll always be welcome to their bed!"

"Does everything lead to sex with you?"

"I am Jacob's son." Jessica gives him a scowl so he smiles, "Putting things in perspective, you're twenty-two years old and so far you've only sacked three people in your life. With Samantha, well, she is gonna open up your world so—run with it! Have fun for once."

With Jacob stepping through the door into the apartment, Gilroy waves to him as Angela hops into his arms, so Jessica says, "Carlos asked me to do a fight scene with Cloé for DiVAS."

"I know you didn't commit to it yet... Look, your social creds are gonna skyrocket if you do it, so do it! You are the most drooled over person in media next to Victoria, and since we know Carlos you realize this was unavoidable. So, my advice, don't disappoint Monique and the family, and bow to the fucking inevitable!"

Jessica rolls her eyes and, "I despise acting."

"You don't get it, they want you to be yourself!"

"Seriously, I'm an aloof asshole to most everyone!"

"Exactly!" Seth takes a bite while Jacob steps up to them, "Look, sis, you are really a great person, but the public doesn't know you. All they see is a walking vortex of KMA-titude!"

"KMA-what?"

"Another Mariaism."

Jacob says to her, "It's only one shoot per season, hon."

After Jacob gives her a kiss, Jessica goes, "They're saying it's for comic relief." Jessica points to herself, "Do I look like comic relief? And how did you get involved?"

Jacob shrugs, "Carlos' director saw you with the Jabberwocky last week, you know, that video going around, and it blew his stack how cool you were under pressure."

Seth says, "You didn't flinch!"

Jessica sighs, "You know I had everything under control."

Jacob points out, "Nobody knows that."

"Anyway, Drake has seen me before!"

Seth informs her, "Cloé told him you could fight for real."

Jessica's shoulders sag, "Oh, that's why."

Jacob asks, "So, ya gonna do it? It'll be fun!"

Seth adds, "They don't have a name for the character yet."

Jacob and Jessica look at each other and go, "Red Hell."

Seth grins big, "That's what I was thinking!"

With Angela crab-dancing into the kitchen, Gilroy cuts off the video, saying, "I think they had enough, honey!"

Scott has stepped in and pats her on the butt, "Eat and go shower. Hop to it because it's Ojai, then Monique's, *then* it's Tucson!"

Gilroy asks, "What's in Ojai?"

"Her school. I gotta log into One-Klick from their offices to hit the tacnet comin' here. She's getting a dedicated wormhole."

With Angela grabbing her food, "*It'll be less glitchy, yeeea!*"

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This morning, Jacob and Gilroy rode on a CXi-commuter flight out to Gore Point. Called the Yard Flight, it's a perma-guppy HWG99f identical to those used for flights out to Second Hand, that does a round trip thrice a day between the Church Key and U-Ey. For the CXi the nebula in and around the red dwarf, One-Eighty, is code named The Yard, and the orbital tracks around the brown dwarf, Gore Point, is referred to as The Floor. Here on The Floor, here we have all of these Trung platforms under construction, yes, but in geostationary orbit a quarter-million robots just mounted the dome and dish side shells to the hub of a new station, Hipo-6. Slated to be christened, Belle Starr,

the ship is a block 2 of the much smaller Augustus Class battle stations and is identical to both the Carrie Nation and Mata Hari.

Stations that could actually fight if the need arises.

Also in geostationary orbit are the three massive SA stations, the Lizzie Bordon, Annie Oakley and Mae West. Each one is having a four-kilometer wide habitation ring installed around the hubs between the dish and dome sides. This addition will accommodate the staff and labs of the CXi, as well as civilian visitors, and this reconfiguration also comes with a station rebranding from the Caligula Class under the SA to a much less controversial Titus Class for the CXi.

They were dropped off on the Annie Oakley and launched with the RRF team that was waiting for them.

The RRF teams from the Oakley, as well as the Mae West, blow into the low orbital tracks around the planet Yunga, that orbits the Rainbow Serpent star known as Wagyl. The RRF teams are lures to pull forces away from the Juat region—where Gilroy is to sneak in and launch his attack.

Yunga is set back by 3au from Wagyl. Only a million-two live and work on the outer periphery of HIP-17900, occupying twelve dwarf planets and moons with Yunga being the center of it all. Just a tidbit larger than Titan, the entire surface is covered in water-filled craters, with dozens of seas about the size of the Great Lakes interspaced between, but no oceans to speak of.

Actual soil is not that common here so short grasses dominate the landscape, and where the dirt is abundant, there are tall ferns that grow to the size of trees. The strangest thing is that there are eight cities with about 100,000 people each, and anywhere from two or three thousand kilometers between each city, and if someone was in reasonably good shape, and get supply drops, they could hike around the entire planet if they knew how to navigate the torn landscape between all the craters and seas. The water is still potable, but the residents have altered the atmosphere to make it breathable leaving them with an oxygen problem—there's too much of it.

Find something that is dry enough to set alight and it will go up in flames as if it were a bomb. Point being, if you light a cigarette here the thing will flare up and burn out inside a half-minute.

Gilroy's pilot hugs the tortured surface of the planet, weaving in and around the mountains and ridges formed by all the impacts from long ago. The city of Juat, in the region sporting the same name, is the location for the main airbase and supply depot for the CDF.

The Warthog for today's mission is configured with two missile farm pods loaded completely with the shorter-intermediate Centipede

missile called the Millipede. For this shoot the pilot has to hold the HWG in a suspended 60° roll while floating in the air, rock-steady behind a small mountain, and this is so that when the missiles fire they will not launch up before they drop back down to hug the ground. Here the Millipedes will be firing out, straight into a nap of the earth flight profile thus avoiding that huge 'lookie here' loop normally seen during a Missile Farm launch—and in practice it worked beautifully!

Unfortunately, for today, this juicy target is actually a trap...

With Jacob and his flight of four Thunderbirds, having pulled away from the diversionary attack, they are now starting to lap around Juat in a wide 180-kilometer orbit to cover Gilroy. They anticipated a counterattack from incoming fighters, but when the mission sequence started what they didn't expect is for three pair of F51d, Djinn fighters to appear out of nowhere from deep inside this perimeter.

After just twenty-two missiles are launched against the base, the Djinn pop out from hiding and high tail it for Gilroy, and with the two closest already at ideal Centipede range they perform a missile dump as Gilroy laughs on freq, ["Maybe this was a bad idea!"]

Jacob calls out, ["Oh, no shit! Get out of there!"]

Gilroy has already called the attack off and, now racing away, their pilot announces, ["Guys, we are E3-outty!"]

With the two closest Djinn pressing down hard, the Millipedes that Gilroy has launched against the target he now redirects against the Djinn and the twenty Centipedes they fired that are hot on his tail. After the cursory missile for missile tradeoff the remaining Millipedes now force those Djinn to break off—but they cannot get away.

The debris from the two destroyed Djinn now rains down on the coast next to a 50-kilometer wide water filled crater.

At this point, Gilroy's ship is going way too fast to launch their Millipedes vertically, and too low in altitude to deploy from the ventral launchers from underneath the ship so, with the next two Djinn closing from behind, only one fires all ten of their missiles and immediately zoom-climbs high to track Gilroy for them.

It took twelve seconds for that string of missiles to catch up, and with the HWG stinger defense guns knocking the first eight down, the ninth missile grazes the hull and blows up one-hundred meters away but, instead of the standard warhead and mini-missile config, this thing has a 1kt warhead.

One thousand tons of explosive force flips Gilroy's ship over on its side, and before it could right itself the tenth missile blows up close enough to slam the HWG into the ground—on its back. The next

Djinn pumps three 1kt tipped missiles into its soft underbelly.

Jacob's nostrils flare out as he tears-ass after those two Djinn, "Ouchie, hang back five-klicks and don't crowd me."

00110100-01010111-01001001-01010111

One could say Laurel Springs is exclusive, as well as pricy, but it is a rare thing for a student to show up to their offices. When most everyone registered happens to be a somebody, active in film, N2 or music industries, then nobody is special however, when a new student is coming from some off world digs then that's a rarity indeed.

Jessica has borrowed Staff-Sergeant, Francis "Frank" Zamboni for today, who now flies exclusively for Maria. He lands her babyback just outside the school's offices here in Ojai, California, taking up most of the parking lot. Problem is that a police officer just so happened to be sitting across the street in a patrol floater. The cop was incensed by them landing there, threatening to impound the ship on the spot, but while Scott was inside setting up the link to One-Klick the Chief of Police gets on the radio and shouts, *'What part of diplomatic immunity and Laissez-Passer do you NOT understand!'*

So much for making his quota...

It took twice the time to fly subsonic-VFR from Ojai, around Castaic then southeast towards Monique's chateau, than it did to do a suborbital-parabolic from over the Angeles National Forest into Tucson which was six times the distance.

At 10:45 local, landing at the Herrero's Arizona facility, right next to the Pima Air and Space Museum, here in Tucson, people that were coming to the museum are now flocking to the babyback where Zamboni gets a kick showing the thing off. With Monique heading out to their climate-controlled storage facility with Lucia, over a mile to the east, we have Scott, Angela, Jessica and Seth now waiting out back behind the garage.

As Scott and Jessica are sitting at a picnic table, watching Angela inspect a junk pile thirty meters past that, Adolphina steps up beside Seth who was waiting for her, "You know, little dude, now that you mentioned it, I didn't realize the difference in you behind closed doors—not doing your autistic shtick."

With the octodroid cameras far enough away, Seth says with minimal mouth movement, "Yes, an' now you can't unsee it." He looks up at her, "Did you fetch the price I predicted?"

She shakes her head in amazement, "The guy wasn't gonna budge, so when I drew a line in the sand he gave it up!"

"And if I didn't say anything you wouldn't have gotten that."

Adolphina looks down at Seth, asking, "What doesn't register in my brain is you risking exposure through me? Like, why?"

"I know that, from your many contacts, you've heard of the Alter of Chains. Am I right, Aunt Dolfi?"

"That's shit from the rumor-mill, *mijo*."

"Ya, if you say so...however, I beg to differ."

"You're kidding! You tellin' me you're the Alter?"

"I haven't told you anything! Jump to your own conclusions." Seth looks up at her and smiles, "I'll deny it but...you've proven that you can keep a secret or two. Fact is, you keep many-many secrets." He nudges her in the hip, "Like you running that blond boy away from Hermosa like you did." He grins, "I think the words you used were, quote, '*I be cuttin' yo piñche huevos off, si comprende!*'"

Adolphina grits her teeth, "I never told anybody!"

"Yea, and the boy skipped town the very next day!"

She frowns, "And we haven't seen him since."

"Nor will you ever! So...thank you for doing that for me."

Adolphina recoils slightly, "What do you mean by, for me?"

"You know how lover's spats go, they have words, shit gets out of hand and sometimes someone will get the shiv!"

"Hermosa? Are you shitting me!"

"No, Hermosa would have been doing the shiving. Now she has a long and happy life ahead of her, and *not* in jail for murder-two. That would have been a blemish your show would not have recovered from so...everybody wins!"

"Why *are* you telling me this?"

"You'll see why in just a quick minute."

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At the picnic table, Scott is looking at Jessica in total disbelief, "You mean she wants to sponsor a car, tell me that's it!"

Jessica cringes slightly, "She wants to drive the thing."

Scott is shocked, "Top fuel? Ah, did she forget she's ninety!"

With wide eyes, Jessica adds, "There's no age limitation and she's got great bone density, and reflexes like a cat!"

"She's fucking ninety! What's she thinking?" Scott throws his hands up, "Oh, that's right...she isn't! Somehow someone is gonna have to knock some sense into these people!"

Jessica thrusts a finger at him, "Monique is going to do what Monique is going to do, and you just have ta live with it!"

"Drag racing?"

"Jordan is gonna do it too."

Scott rolls his eyes, "Well then, nuts...it runs in the family!"

Jessica blurts out a laugh, "Yea, get used to it!"

"She has more money than sense!"

Jessica shrugs, "About time you accept that?"

"Jesus!" Scott points at his ear, "Okay, I gotta take this."

By the junk pile, Angela has a PVC pipe sticking out of the ground with a rock balanced on top, and in her hand is an iron pipe that she's going to t-ball it out of the yard with. As if she is stepping up to the plate, Angela is smiling and waving to her imaginary fans, while announcing as if she were Vin Scully, "Now batting first up for the Los Angeles Dodgers, Sian Diego!"

Angela hisses in her cupped hand the sound of the crowd, waves to them, and taps the imaginary home plate with the pipe. She takes a huge swing and misses the rock, "First pitch we have a breaking ball, swing and a miss for strike one."

She sets up for the next pitch and checks swing followed by, "Next pitch, fast ball got past the plate for strike two."

This whole time an octodroid camera has been following her, filming everything, and as she kicks herself for missing that pitch, she points her pipe out to right field, "Sian Diego is calling it, she's pointing her bat towards right field so let's see if she can collect on it!"

Now getting ready for the swing, behind her, Scott is shaking his head as Jessica grasps her face and cries out, "Nooo!"

Angela stops...she blinks as she hears Jessica sobbing, trying to catch her breath as she weeps, "No...not now!"

A blistering rage envelops little six year old Angela because she already knows what this has to be about—she's not stupid. She stands upright and her eyes squint as a vicious scowl deforms her otherwise pretty face. She slowly turns around, with pipe in hand, and starts to march towards them with fury swirling around her.

Jessica has panic in her eyes as Angela steps up to them, and Scott looks up to the sky, not knowing what to say to his daughter.

Angela knows what to say, "I lose my mother and...I was too young to remember her! I then lose my mom...just a few months ago and I have to bottle it up because...fuck'd if I know!" She points accusingly at Jessica, "You and Seth both act like you've been expecting that to happen so...fuck me!"

Scott says to her, "I'm sorry, honey."

Angela snarls, "Not David!"

"Babe, I am sorry."

She hits the picnic table with the pipe, shouting, "Not David!"

With tears rolling down her cheeks, Jessica pleads with her, "Angel, I'm sorry but it happens."

Angela now starts to repeatedly smash the pipe into the table while shrieking over and over, "Not David!"

Scott times it right and snatches the pipe from her hand, at the same time Jessica grabs her and pulls her in close. Dropping the pipe, Scott sits and helps Jessica hold onto the squirming Angela as she continues to fight them and bellow, "NOT DAVID!"

Scott pleads, "Let it out, Lil' Klicks!"

Losing the struggle, Angela cries out, "I want my mom, back!" She then wildly shrieks, "You can't touch this!" Now collapsing in their arms, Angela bawls loudly—painfully.

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Adolphina and Seth are watching this scene play out, and as Angela's screaming fight is rendered into clutching sobs, Adolphina, with tears flowing, says out loud, "*A poco?*"

Seth, with a single tear running down his face, agrees, "Yup."

"I can't show this."

"Trust me, you will." Seth now looks up at her, "Do I need to steal your face to get this done? Like you just did to Skippy the Wonder Chimp? I can make you, but I'd rather you choose too."

"Okay, *mijo*, you give me a good reason an' I'll do it."

"Okay, Aunt Dolphi, I want my little sister to live."

"What do you mean by that?"

Seth nods, "It comes down to this...this moment. This is the very moment the people will fall in love with Angela. Also, two birds, this is the moment where people will see Jessica as human."

With Monique and Lucia pulling into the yard in a 1967 black GTO ragtop, Adolphina wonders, "I don't get it?"

"First, without the public seeing this they'll never know that those cold eyes on Jessie actually shed tears and, as for Angela, see, nobody thinks she's real. Everybody believes someone is writing all her lines. The kid has a mouth and attitude, and this proves it!"

"You said, Angela will live. What's does that mean?"

"It's simple, without the public seeing this, Angela will do the Alien movies then go back to real life. She'll join the CXi and red-shirt her way to a painful demise at twenty-six. If that path is taken I'll be helpless to stop it...she cannot know what I am."

"What happens if the public sees this?"

"They'll see Angela as the real deal! She'll have a celebrated career in film, and not because of her acting abilities, which will be marginal at best, but because of her intelligence, a one-eighty-nine IQ in fact, and that, well, that precocious mouth of hers!"

"That's a no shit!"

After a few seconds of watching Monique and Lucia step up to them and join the huddle around Angela, Seth says, "Go ahead, ask!" He looks up at her with a smile, "You know you want too."

She challenges him by asking, "Okay, if you know so much, how 'bout you tell me what's on my mind? If you nail it then I guarantee, my word as my bond, I will broadcast this."

"Deal!" Seth picks up the gauntlet, "You're in a shallow loop! Lots of lovers but you're left with a lonely bed."

"That's not what I was thinking of."

"That's because you were trying to trick me? I can see the outcome before giving you any response. You are not interested in money or success, you already got all that. Nope, you're interested in Kraft, jalapeño mac-n-cheesy love."

"You're a little bastard."

"Am I right, *mi tia*?"

"A deal is a deal. You get what—"

Seth cuts her off, "We want. We get what we want, Dolphi."

Adolphina asks, "How does this work out for me?"

"You know that idea you and Lucia were knocking around? Signing up three teams per season and give them the resources to build some mod on your dime?"

"Yea, and I was the one pushing back on it."

"I suggest you green light it."

"Seriously?"

"Aaaah, yea! Wanna fix your problem?" He then pokes her hip again, saying, "Do you remember the father-son team who were in Hollywood drivin' that Rat-Fink mod? You know the two I'm talking about, from last December?"

"They're from Nevada and they're on the alternate list."

"Well, best make sure they're on the *made the cut* list."

Adolphina's frowns, "Isn't the father a bit of a dweeb?"

"He's not *the one*, but just make sure they're chosen."

She then asks, "I'm gonna dare to ask one question."

"Yea, I was waiting for this. To answer your question, Jessica and I, we had oodles of time to acclimate to Nicole's death."

"If all this is true, then you could have stopped it!"

"Why yes, but the tragedy here is...that was an appointment our mother needed to keep."

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