

THE DRIVER

by Donnamaie E. White

Marcia waited for the iris doors of the car bay to open, then slid the sleek black car slowly forward, its long pointed nose centered on the opening and then on the long road beyond. It felt good to be back in the driver's seat after her enforced time off. Not that whirlpool baths and hot food and soft beds were all that bad.

Drivers, after all, had privileges.

But, the air was stuffy, the halls crowded, and no city had a zoo. The animals had been left outside to fend for themselves, and thousands, probably more, had died. Whole species had vanished, plants had died and the ecology of the world had been forever altered. Marcia had watched it, listened and wept for it as a child.

Then she had found a way to be outside.

She had a good, long 500 mile run, down to Jackson, through the remains of Yellowstone. She loved this leg of her coast to coast route, loved to see the empty spaces, the few animals, the remaining trees. But most of all, she loved the wildness of the geysers and the mud pools and the knowledge that few of the outsiders could survive here.

Outsiders were a constant problem for the drivers.

Mack was silent. He was always sulky in the beginning of a run. Something about the refueling and program dumping bothered him. She had written special programs that protected his thoughts, saved his soul between runs, kept him alive. He still acted violated, like a virgin forced to submit before she was ready.

He was also aware of the outsiders.

Angry at what they could not share, the filtered air, the protected food supplies, the medical help and all else the bubble domes offered to those who had made it within, they tried to stop the intercity cars.

The results were not often pretty, for the sentient cars could protect themselves.

Marcia had never had to test that feature, the blades that could whip forward and spin, obliterating anything in their path. There were lasers, there were bombs, and there were guns, somewhere in the sleek nose. The cars carried death to those who would stop them.

Yet, the cars could be stopped.

Last week there had been a driver, one who stopped to render aid to children, outsider children. The car had seen its driver killed and it had blown itself up, taking its load and everyone within a ten-

mile radius with it. She had seen the road closure, read the cold report.

Her car had filled in the rest. Mack was not happy about it. He knew all the cars. He could not have been more aware if he had still been living.

A driver was not allowed indefinite time in her car. Her time was closely watched and monitored. That the cars were all male was only one reason.

Marcia had actually known the man whose brain controlled the sleek machine she drove between the bubble domes, but that was unusual. Most cars were indifferent. Marcia had never told anyone about the relationship, and Mack had kept his own silence.

The engine purred as she revved it up to cruising speed. Mack knew she would not talk, not now. She would watch the road, watch the mountains, and watch the lake. He knew she wanted to stop, to taste the water, to feel the unfiltered air. He knew she could still remember.

So did he.

They came up too fast for her to speak a command and Mack was not interested in stopping. The people, dozens of them, standing in the road, blocking her, or trying. Bullets clanged off the car's

impervious skin. Rocks flew into the windscreen, harmlessly bouncing off.

Marcia watched in horror as Mack unfolded the blades and whipped a path through them, uncaring as he sped her away to safety. The blood and body parts splattered on the long airfoil windows whipped away in the rush of cleaner fluid and air. The blades spun themselves clean and retracted. Marcia fought the retching urge as she gripped the wheel, too scared to comment, to horrified to steer. Mack had taken control.

“Are you recovering?” The car’s voice was soft and deep. She had spent hours fixing it to be what it had been.

“I don’t know. Mack, those were children. And women!” Her voice was high, her horror too fresh for her to regain control.

“They were like the others. Like the ones who killed Pacience.”

“I ... understand. My God! Mack! What do they want that they would do this? To their own children?”

“Terrorists have often raised their children to believe in death for the motherland. Have even taken pride in that particular barbarism.”

“What motherland? What do they want?”

“I think I know. They live all over here, in the mountains and the valleys. They have food and water. The air, I know I haven’t told

you," he sounded regretful. "I don't filter it anymore. The water is fine, not great, but better than anything we drink."

"If it's all that great, why do they attack us?"

"They want to come in. Or, they want you to come out. Either way, they want a change. There have been attempts to kill them. Even when they were not on the road."

"How do you know all this?"

"I monitored the driver's death. I heard the comments they made when they killed her. There have been other incidents. Nobody talks about them. I was hoping it wouldn't get to us. I'm sorry." His voice was a whisper.

"How many other things have you hid from me, Mack?"

"Nothing. Nothing important. "

"That sounds ominous," she took the control off auto.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to give that impression. It really isn't."

"Mack!" She knew from his voice, that catch he still had, another software gift, that there was something else.

"This is the last run."

Marcia felt cold.

"What do you mean? And, no games!"

She shivered. Driving was everything. It was freedom. It was escape. It was all she had ever trained to do. The view from the driver's seat was suddenly barren of beauty.

"They have decided to shut down the cars. The helicopters have been finished. They know the air is breathable now. They can open the domes. They will fly between the cities."

"Who will fly?"

"They have pilots. They have been training them, secretly. They have not told any drivers. But I know. I know the control units in the choppers." He sounded proud.

"What are you going to do?" Cars no longer needed were put to death.

"I will think about it." He did not sound frightened.

"Are you certain this is the last run?" Would she be stuck in Jackson forever? It was a nice place to visit, but it had no library, no films, little to stimulate and only primitive computers.

"It is this run or the next. I am certain of that much. Your name was not on the first list."

"Did they know you were reading?" She had given him sensing capabilities more sophisticated than most domes had access to or comprehension of, as her off-road hobby was programming around the myriad strict rules.

“No. I am more sophisticated than anything they have. You saw to that.”

“So I have tried. It was never my intent to be against them. Never...” Not really. Or was she?

Marcia settled in, her thoughts confused at what this could mean. Her stomach felt clenched, like a fist, like a fighter must feel before entering the ring. The thoughts of living with no space, no trees, no animals, no lake. She had known she would be too old someday. Knew that she would have to stop, to give it up. But now?

Jackson was visible from the pass as she raced toward the iris she knew would be opening. The cars always called ahead. She had missed the Tetons, ignored the valley and the lakeshore at the south exit of Yellowstone.

The car nosed into his berth as the umbilical cables reached out to connect, one to drain his “memory” and one to refuel. Technicians raced to change tires, add oil, cleaning fluid, and check the myriad other details that a car driven at high speed in high elevations might require. They acted normal. They gave Marcia the deference due a driver as she exited the car and turned in the key that would allow the cargo to unload.

She glanced once at the cables and activity and then strode out as she would have been expected to, out to the driver’s rooms.

Drivers had private quarters, food allocations, even coffee. There were passes for the heated pools, the spas, and for entertainments. Bartenders gave them free drinks for the business that a driver brought in made it worth their effort and expense.

Marcia took an elevator and felt the eyes on her, the backing up as the crowd gave her the right of way. In her leather jumpsuit, insulation from the cold, and her heavy work boots, her leather gloves, she was immediately identifiable as one of “those”. She did not push it, but she was acutely aware of it this time. There was no change from other trips. No differences she could put her finger on.

The room was one she had had before. The terminal remained where she had left it, dusty but available. She logged in, checking that her account privilege was still in effect.

If she was no longer a driver, she would lose all this. She checked the mailbox she had secretly installed, a monitor on city activity programmed to record any transactions that mentioned drivers, Mack or herself. A subroutine gathered information on outsiders, road, accidents and tracked driver activity. A worm-check informed her that the monitor bug was still undetected. She downloaded to Mack while she read.

Messages were limited but focused on one overriding theme, the shutdown of the expensive drivers. Drivers were to be demoted,

turned out into the streets to forage, to survive as best they could. No mention of the promises of rewards for past service, and no mention of the disposal of the cars.

As she read through the list, she found the one item she feared. This *had* been her last trip. Tomorrow was her expulsion date. She had one night to rest, eat and enjoy her status. There were no other drivers in the city.

She sent a signal down to Mack. He was mysteriously still connected.

Room service was prompt and provided coffee, a rare treat, hot meat, cheese, milk and hot bread. There was no fruit, sorry. There were no vegetables, so sorry. The waitress was backing out the door with unusual quickness.

This, then, was confirmation.

And the last meal.

She left nothing on the tray. She reveled in the coffee. She drained the pot.

Marcia ate, and then showered. The water was lukewarm, not hot. There was no soap. There was no toothbrush. The towels were not as soft and the bed was lumpy. She forced herself to rest. It would be last secure night she would have.

The terminal beeped for attention, rousing her from a fitful doze. She read the message. Mack was fueled and had cargo! He was seeking information on it. She was not the driver!

Gathering her fanny-pack and a copy of the data, she left and walked slowly down the deserted hallway. She took the stairs, hurrying but trying not to seem to be. She opened the door to the car service bay.

Mack was unattached but the cables were not retracted. He had dumped them.

The iris door was grinding open, very slowly. Someone was manually opening the door!

Marcia slid under the wheel and Mack closed the door as a figure moved from the shadow and approached the car. The man was beautiful, a male driver! At least, he was dressed that way. He came to the passenger side and Mack let him in. She waited for an explanation.

“Hi.” He smiled, hesitant to do more.

“Hello. What are you doing in my car?” She stayed calm. Mack was strangely silent.

“Leaving. With you. For the outside. Unless you wish to become a street lady.” He looked at her with amusement.

“It has never been one of my goals.” She looked back.

Mack made a sound like a throat clearing.

Marcia started the car's engine and rolled forward.

"Mack? Are you with us?" She asked. Uncertainty in any situation was a new experience.

"I am here."

"You knew?"

"He is like you. He loves the things outside."

"Is this one of the..." She could not say outsider. Outsiders were violent beings bent on destruction. Outsiders sacrificed themselves and their children to interrupt the runs the cars made. Outsiders killed and tortured.

"Yes. He is from outside. But not one of the killers. I was not sure you would want this. We have been together a long time, but I am not what I once was. You need to be with others."

A tender, gentle man, a lover. Mack's "death" had been a nightmare. His "birth" into her car had been an error on some administrator's program she had not corrected.

"I know, Mack."

"This is for your own good." Mack sounded cajoling. Had she programmed that? She probably had. She had tried to give him back everything she could. Let him be as expressive as he needed. When had he jumped to secretive and independent thought? Did she mind?

She was on the road and Mack had aimed them back to Yellowstone.

“My name is Adam.” His voice was low, as Mack’s had been.

“Mine is Marcia. Where are we going?”

“Mack was a .. friend. A few years back. I have kept track. I came in when another friend drove in last week. I knew Mack was coming in. I did not want him destroyed.”

“Destroyed?”

“They are demolishing the cars. Loading them with bombs and sending them out to the latest outsider sightings. They do not discriminate between terrorists and the rest of us.”

Marcia shuddered. Bombs were very lethal ways to end a dispute. She hated them.

“Are the bombs on-board now?”

“Yes. But they are disarmed. Mack is very clever.”

“Are you certain?” She had no desire to be riding a ticking time bomb.

“Yes. My people have managed to stop several of the lethal cars. We hope to stop the rest. If you will help.”

He stated the last more as a question.

“Your people?”

“As you have guessed, I am now an outsider. I left sometime ago.” He let the statement hang without apology, without pride, without fear.

Marcia looked at him, for the first time. He was tall and dark, like her. Large and heavily lashed dark eyes, like hers. Like Mack’s had been.

“Were you a driver?”

“Yes. I couldn’t save my car. She had been my wife. They loaded her up and sent her out with a suicide driver when they “discovered” their error.

Another mistake. Another improper pairing. Or, was it a mistake? And when had they started using females for the cars, males for drivers? She had never encountered any.

He smiled at her confusion. “We were a unique pair. Not many knew about us. I took care that they did not know. But, somehow, someone discovered us, and terminated her.” He was not trying to hide the sudden bitterness in his voice.

Mack had been a programmer. His “death” was due to something he had done. He had never explained. Now he spoke up into the silence.

“I have been stopping these runs whenever I could. I couldn’t stop Luciel. She was the one blown up when the suicide driver was killed.”

Mack was “speaking” softly to Adam, apologizing for not knowing in time.

Marcia looked blindly out the window. Mack had taken on a life of his own. Her programming had been successful. Too successful? No. He had a right to live. They all did.

“What must I do?” she asked. The wheel felt so good in her hands, the scenery so much better than the bubble walls.

“You can disable the other cars. Disarm them. Mack knows that you break into the system, monitor it. You can do this. He cannot. I cannot. We are limited. You are the better programmer. Look at what you did for Mack.”

Indeed, she had created a monster? Or not? Where was she to go? What was she to do?

“And then?” What then? What use would she be?

“We are repopulating the area. We need those that can teach us the technical things. Mack has a special database load of agriculture, laws, religion, literature, and animal husbandry information. We have computers, you know. We have some programmers. We are not just hunters and farmers. We just needed

access to a database. We needed to access knowledge from the past, knowledge that the cities preserved. Fortunately, as we could not.

“We have our own cities. Underground for years, we are building on the surface now. Hundreds of towns and villages, and some larger, almost cities. We will repopulate the surface in time. There is a lot of room.”

He did not need to add that the aftermath of the disaster had reduced human populations to bare minimums on this continent, and less than that on others.

“I have always been told you were exactly that. Farmers I mean. And terrorists. People left outside for one reason or another who resented the cities. People who did not use technology.”

“Do you believe them? That all of us mean harm? That all of us intend to destroy the bubble cities? That all of us were shut out? That none of us *chose* to be outside?”

Marcia did not hesitate. She was outside. It was safe to be here. She could survive here. She could visit the lake. She could touch the trees. And she could program, because she alone knew the city systems backwards and forwards. She had grown up on the system, experimenting with it, pushing it, and hiding what she was doing. Always hiding.

“No longer.” She felt on the edge of a precipice.

“Good. Because we have need to those that can help us. And the terrorists will recede when there is no object of their hatred.”

“So one hopes.”

“We will have to pray that it’s true. You have seen them. They cannot be reasoned with. We have our own defenses, more humane than your car bombs.”

Marcie nodded. The images of the group on the highway had been graphic even if she had been untouched. She flashed on the whipping red blades. But Mack had saved her then. What was he doing to her now? She thought of the bomb.

“Mack, when should we begin a disable?”

As if in answer, Mack drove off the road, onto a cleared dirt track, and ran up to a clearing. Outsiders were gathered there, waiting. There was excitement in the group when the black car was first spotted. Then there was expectation. The group moved forward, smiling.

Marcia stepped slowly out to meet them.