

TRUCKDREAMIN

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I Backroads

Black rain fell on the glitterin tar, steamin where it lay an dissipatin heat haze shimmer from the burnin sun. I hunkered down inside me trucksuit. I were lookin for somewhere to shelter from the storm, me old bones achin from all the roadin I done, when I seen the flyer wreck roadside. Old Crow come on up behind me like always, made me feel sick to see him. Its bad when your omen of illness an despair follers you aroun, but I seen him all the time an he seen me with that look in his white eye said, 'I *know* you, boy.'

'I know you, too, an I aint been a boy for a long time.' I werent gunna let him rattle me. 'Time we stop meetin like this.'

'Thats as may be, but we still gotta figger out who takes what from this wreck.'

'I doan want nothin from this wreck.' I eyed the rottin corpses within. They laid in a shattered an burned-out shell. The flyer were light, a city model, not built for the storms we got in the backroads.

'Oh I think youll take what you can get, all right, just like me. We is one an the same, Jon Ra.' He coughed a dry rasp.

'Theres where your wrong. I aint the same as you nor never will be.' I fingered me blade, cheap steel what wouldnt hold an edge no matter how much sharpenin I given it.

'Lissen, I aint after their stash. Just the meats from their bodies.' He hopped closer an *ark arrrrrrked*.

'Best you be movin on now.' Mention of stash got me innerested. Stash could be sold for cash what I needed if I were ever gunna get off the road.

I stood up straight an showed him the blade.

'Ha ha, I knowed you was just like me. We'll be seein each other again.'

'You doan scare me,' I said. It werent quite true, but he flown off anyways.

Left me with the wreck an them two rotted bodies. Ive killed

before but I dont have much stomach for lootin corpses. I reached in past grinnin deaths heads an grasped that old tote bag full of crank. It made me heart sing, a sad an lonely song. I werent no crow, but I were old an needed peace from the road.

Time I first seen Old Crow, Id just turn fourteen an come off me first truckride. Didnt have a link maker an fancy wave gear back then, that were in the days before I knowed much about truckin, tho I thought I did. There werent no riders cab that first ride, nor truckdream to smooth me way, just a frantic dash an grab an forty hours in the grip of me speed spike, facin road blur an cold air outside of a Remmingford. I were unsteady on me feet once I come off, still gettin use to ground again, when I wandered into a roadside shanty town.

Old Crow were there outside a grog shop, slurpin whisky from a plastic cup. He wore a coat made from shredded trucktyre an his hair was black an shiny.

‘Come over here, boy,’ he said. ‘Ill buy you a whisky.’ I were too young to know better so I went over there an he put a whisky in front of me which I downed for I were thirsty.

‘Thats the way.’ He gave me another what I downed also. ‘Say, you seen that girl over there?’ He pointed to a girl across the dirt street, she were lookin at me. She were drinkin too. ‘Yair,’ I said. ‘I seen her.’

‘Well, she would be a nice warm body to share the night with, doan you think?’

‘Yes she would, Id like that very much. I just been on me first truckride.’

‘Thats a fine thing. Its somethin to mark the passin of.’

‘Yes you is right, Ill go an say hello.’

I went over to the girl an we talked, an pretty soon I were horny an she were horny too so we found a place to lie down on a mattress in one of the shanties. I kissed her face an she yielded. So then I took off her clothes an stripped me coverall an it were clumsy an messy an somethin dark winged up from deep down where the dreams come, only it werent a dream. It were somethin what come up thru me but werent parta me, an there were blood on the mattress, blood soakin thru to the dirt floor of the shack.

I ran outta there with me tote bag an me spike, an I seen Old Crow, he were legless on the ground. He looked in me eyes an I knowed we was tied together on the roadin.

Two trucks sat linkin a wave in the lot of the desert truckstop where I come to offload the crank from the flyer wreck. Id rode a lot of trucks since that first time I seen Old Crow an all I wanted were to be done with him an the backroads. That looted crank were a ticket out.

The two trucks was new models, but custom indie, not like company machines, they had style. They was freestylin faster

than thought, fatter than t-bones, ampin patches between em an buildin a wavy vibe. I shook a link outta the air an tuned in. Id seen trucks doin more an more of that stuff lately. The patches we traded with em was a new thing. Got em stoned or somethin, an then they built waves they could share. I shivered inside me suit. The wave they made were pitch an yaw, buildin an keenin like whalesong, with the beat rockin throb of a diesel blowin sooty smoke, tho I never seen a diesel cept in truckdream.

I took note of em, they was that good. One were black an purple, detailed with trickery what changed as how you looked on it, an I saw its name rendered in glyph, it said *Stormwater*. Other were red an white an done in retro, with detailin by human hands. Expensive mods, you wonder how it coulda afforded it, it had chrome smokestacks an blacked out sensor screens. It were called *Sinnerman* in scrollwork. They was doughty trucks, an if ever I met em on the road, Id be sure to hail a ride. I walked on in to the truckstop.

Thru the window I seen the dining room were river stone set in cement, scratched tabletops an bent legged chairs. Three riders also, two of em with shaved heads clean from the shower an eatin breakfast. Third had a blank face expression what you get when usin the link. I knowed him. His name were Damon, he were a good rider tho he were white as. Everyone looked over as I walked in but I just stared em in the eye, shiftin from one to the next.

‘How youse goin?’ I said.

The two of em what were eatin just went back to it, but Damon flashed into the here.

‘Yair, all right,’ he said.

I went over an sat down. ‘Lissen mate, I got some crank to offload. You buyin?’

He looked at me, eyes narrowin. ‘Maybe.’

‘I got moren a kilo to get rid of.’

‘Whered you come across it?’

‘Them as asks questions usually doan like the answers.’

‘Well thats not the best circumstances in which to offload crank, mate.’

‘Ill give you a taste.’ I took some crank an cut it on the table for him. It were the colour of dried blood.

‘Thats vile lookin gear.’ He took out his spike an helped himself, mixin up one handed.

‘Mate, its good crank.’

His jaws clenched as he shot up an he knowed it were good gear. I knowed it too, an I werent gunna let him talk me down too far but also I hadda get rid of it to keep ahead of Old Crow an buy me some peace from the backroads.

‘Ill give you five fifty for it,’ he said.

‘Seven hunnerd.’

‘Six.’

‘All right, Ill take your six.’

I handed over the crank, just as a blast ripped thru the truckstop, tore a hole right in the wall. For a second I seen bright sunshine outside an missile tracks in the air, then it were just dust an smoke. The other two riders got cut down by riverstone an tabletop shrapnel. Damon laid back in his seat. His head hung wrong, like his neck were broke. I rummaged his body for the six hunderd he owed, but before I found it another missile shrieked an boomed an I rolled for the door. Under it all I heard the sound of big rigs rumblin.

Outside five brumby trucks roaded under a dust cloud, an what they wanted with a shitcan truckstop, I didnt know. They was armoured an had launchers an hot fifties. I made out what I thought were their leader, the biggest, blackest, baddest mother of them all. It were a old eVolvo, ancient even, belchin black smoke thru the smokestack but I knowed it werent no diesel, it were just for show. It were flanked by two captains, one of em a green Harvester. Out in the lot, them two indie trucks swung aroun, loopin back to the road thru the smoke an fire. I moved outta there on me own two feet. I didnt wanna be anywhere near that place, but I couldnt get too far, I knowed it, an before I even made the road I heard gunfire rattlin.

More missiles trackin, one two three blasts an one of the indie trucks from the lot went screamin past me. I seen then that the big black brumby didnt want nothin with the truckstop, it wanted to steal a indie truck for its mob. It crashed into the blue one called Stormwater an drove it off the road. There was dust an chaos all aroun, but them brumbies soon had Stormwater in their midst.

I crawled on me belly into a drain beside the road. The ground shook with crumplin blasts from the truckstop an fire crackled in the air. I didnt have that looted crank no more, nor any chances of gettin outta the backroads anytime soon.

I laid in that drain an lissened to the brumbies movin aroun, they was probably scroungin parts an fuel from the blasted truckstop. Maybe they was lookin for me too or scoutin out for the other indie what escaped, coz I heard em thrummin up an down the roads. I laid there like a lizard till the sounds went away an the light faded.

Driftin an dreamin on me own sad thoughts of loss an square one, I remembered back down the road to the second time I seen Old Crow. It werent that long after I first seen him. Id just jumped a animal transport, it were better than clingin on outside, an a step up toward the riders cab, where all us youngsters dreamed of ridin but we didnt have nothin to trade with the trucks yet. I were settlin in among the sheeps for the night when I seen a spark light the crease of Old Crows face. He gurgled on a billy an lay back there in the dark in his coat made from shredded trucktyre an lined with rabbit skin. He had them white eyes an his hair were

white too, only I knowed itd been black once.

‘Wanna cone?’ he said.

‘No thanks, mate.’ I were mindful I seen Old Crow right before that winged thing what rose up outta me when I killed the girl.

He cackled an took another toke, blowin out smoke. ‘Ah thats better,’ he said. ‘Doan you know, boy, when someone offers you somethin, its polite to take it?’

‘I doan wanna smoke right now,’ I said. ‘Im not feelin the best.’ It were true, seein him again like that made me queasy, I were shakin.

‘I got some medicine for yer.’ He reached into his tote bag an pulled out a spike.

‘I dunno mate, really, I doan feel so good.’

‘You wanna try this brew, boy, believe me, its the cure for what ails you.’

‘Oh, an you know what ails me?’

‘I seen you with that girl. I know you is runnin. Im runnin meself. Folk like us gotta stick together.’

‘I aint folk like you.’

He laughed at that. ‘I see you is a fine young man with much roadin ahead. But you an me is partners now. You gotta learn to take whats offered an do what needs doin.’

‘Ill do what needs doin. Im not scared.’ An whether it were outta fear or somethin else, I took that spike as offered. It musta been loaded with truckdream coz it hit home an I slept black sleep with no winged things, it were warm ocean rush an smooth waves thru the night, sigh of wheels on tarmac an a truckin lightshow goin off in me brain. It were wonderful an terrible an if I werent already lost to meself on the path of roadin, I were from then on.

When I woke there werent no truckdream no more, there were fever. Bad memories of bloodslick hands an the smile I cut in the girl. I sweated an shivered an when I looked at me arm I seen poison blood had took hold. That spike musta shot moren truckdream. Me flesh burned, yeller ooze comin from the hole in me arm, an I laid in the muck an piss in the animal trailer. We was still movin but there werent no Old Crow. I knowed I hadda get outta there but we was rollin at speed. There werent hardly any room for a rider, the trailer were packed tight with sheeps. I sweated as the fever took hold an the pain lanced into me shoulder an down me side. I couldnt feel me fingers no more an the hand swelled up. I slept some times an waked some times. I were smeared with shit. The sheeps bleated an pushed in on me. There were no more smooth truckdream, only darkness an badness down from where the black winged thing come an took me for a instant that time, a little rip an then there were blood on me hands an behind me eyes.

The truck started to slow as it rode up a hill, an I took me chance. I got near the hatch, keepin the sheeps away with bellowin an kickin. I threw meyself out an the road bit deep with iron teeth

what tore at me flesh an I rolled over an over. When I waked, the feverd gone, but things was never the same for me.

II Midden Dump

Them brumbies searched the country aroun the torched truckstop. I didnt move from the drain where I hid while they tried to catch up with me, or maybe it were the bad things I done tryin to catch me. I were lyin in that ditch, thinkin on the times I seen Old Crow an the times ahead of me now, wonderin what the best way thru were. I couldnt go backwards, you cant crawl back into mothers belly, tho many try. I knowed me way were forward, like always. I crawled outta me hidey hole. It were night. The stars was shinin down on me an the moon looked like a big old spud in the sky. I seen glowin fires from the burnin truckstop back thru the trees where the cash an me whole ticket out was burned up ash. But I just put me back to it all an headed out on to the road.

Pretty soon I come to a crossroads where I seen a truck parked off by the side. It were the one from the truckstop, the retro style one, red an white, called Sinnerman. It were shimmerin in the moonlight, gleamin chrome an lyin like a snake with its scales all newly hatched. Me breath caught a little to see it there, it were a thing of beauty, an then me brain started tickin, what were it doin there, so glimmerinly? I didnt have to wait too long for a answer, coz it spun a connect an hit me with its wave. It hooked me right away, it suckered me with a tasty vibe, an then it sent words along the link.

'You are Jon Ra.' It were a statement, a fact. Me brain went tick tick tick. It knowed me, that werent no surprise, I were knowed in the backroads. But it were *waitin* for me.

'Yes its me,' I toggled back, alone in me head once its wave washed away.

'I need your help,' it said. Now that were somethin I aint never heard no truck say to me nor I aint never said it to no truck neither. It doan work like that in the backroads. It work by bribin an cheatin an lyin.

'Thats innerestin,' I said. 'Whaddaya need *my* help for?'

'I lost my friend Stormwater in the raid. I need help to get it back from the brumby mob.'

Well that were another thing I aint never heard before. Friend? Id seen trucks make waves together but I never seen em formin attachments with each other. There werent many contracts what could support two indies, let alone a mob. Maybe thats why some time they went rogue.

'I doan unnerstand. You is a powerful truck, Im just meat. I aint carryin nothin you can use. I got burned in the raid same as you.'

'I must take down the Brumby King. You have roaded long and you know the ways of truck wrangling. I need a rider for this trip.'

Sinnerman needed a rider, maybe, but I didnt need this trip. I were just tryin to keep ahead of Old Crow, but sometimes the roadin shows you the way to go. 'Its dangerous work,' I said, 'goin after big black brumbies like the one you call King.'

'There is a reward for anyone who can catch the Brumby King. I will give you the money in return for Stormwater's freedom, if you truck with me.'

That pricked me ears. Maybe this were the roll of the dice I were lookin for, the big score to buy me way free an leave Old Crow behind. But I also knowed that Sinnerman were playin me, it hit me with its wave an then filled me head fulla thoughts of trucks an Brumby Kings an reward.

'Thats all well an good, Sinnerman. But you still aint said why you need me to help you. It doan make no difference to me his Brumby Kings made off with yer mate.'

'Are you going to keep roading until you rust and fall into the ground? Because I have seen your future. You have been running so long you forget what you are.'

It chilled me to hear a truck sayin them things out loud like that. It were a truth I knowed in me bones, but I didnt like the sound of it. I hadda get back some footing.

After a while I said, 'Maybe you do have the right of it. But maybe you need me moren I need you. So lets enter this agreement like gennlemen. Ill road with you, an help catch the Brumby King for the reward youll share. But if theres treachery, Ill bail, Ill steal your truckmind into me substrate quicker than death, an thatll be the end of the road for you. I know a lot a tricks.'

'That is why I need your help.'

So we sealed the deal there in the moonlight an I climbed into the warm console glow of Sinnermans riders cab. It smelled like home in there, a mix of sweat an person stink an another kinda funk what I cant describe, but it were somethin what grew in from the road. Solvents an machine oil an mollycules set loose from the heat of the petaflop donk. I settled in on the soft riders seat an took the IV off the dripmount, like I always did once I sealed a deal. It werent like in the old days of ridin, now I had somethin to trade. I slid the spike into me arm as Sinnerman cranked the chem feed from its alkaloid synth an there was truckdreams what I dont remember no more, but they was good, there werent no blood nor no black wings an we went on our roadin together.

Truckdreamin were a warm familiar feelin, an I were mellow an sad, thinking on how Id more roadin behind than in front. Sittin in Sinnermans cab led me back down the trail to the third time I seen Old Crow.

It were a different place, in the mountains. Summer sun didnt make much way thru thick cloud an it were cold an rainin. I seen the thin wisp of smoke first, an then I left the road on a track. The smoke were comin from a humpy, it were a sheet of rusty roofin

iron over a row of stones. Old Crow sat in front, only it werent the same man. Same trucktyre coat but it were a younger man, smaller, with pale watery eyes. When he seen me he called me over. He knowed who I were, all right, an I knowed him, too.

'You wanna share my fire?' he said.

'Well seein as how you shot me fulla poison last time we met, no, I doan think so. You can keep your smoke, an your fire too.' I eyed the rabbit cookin over that fire an seen the rows of rabbit skins dryin on racks.

'Now that is a shame coz I got this meat an I doan know what to do with it all. Might have to feed it to the ferrets.' He nodded his head at a cage inside the humpy.

I knowed I shoulda kept me mouth shut, taken his food an walked away but I couldnt help meself. 'Whaddaya do with them ferrets?'

'I use em to catch rabbits. Got em trained to come when I whistle. I send em down rabbit holes an they scare the rabbits up into me traps.' His eyes lowered then. 'Only sometimes theres babies down there an the ferrets doan come back when I whistle. I have to wait till next day an then try. Sometimes they is so full they cant get outta the rabbit hole.'

'Oh I see,' I said, rememberin how me old man gutted rabbits with a flick of his wrist, an wishin I hadnt been so curious about the ferrets.

Night were comin on in the mountains an Old Crow had more to tell. 'If a ferret gets a taste for babies, I hafta kill it, coz it wont come when I whistle no more. Just like if theres any baby rabbits left. I put em away.' His eye flashed. 'Its a kindness.'

I didnt say nothin, but I ate some rabbit an sat by the fire. When the dark come he went into his humpy, an I started wonderin on the black thing what winged up inside the night I killed that girl. Whats to do when your bad omen keeps follerin you aroun like that? The only thing is to make peace an share food an fire with it an shelter from the storm. But I couldnt sleep there, with Old Crow in the humpy an them ferrets hiss in an bitin an scratchin. I crept back down the road an got on me way.

Truckdreamin an Old Crow dont mix too good, so I were awake in the dawn light when Sinnerman said we was comin up on the Midden Dump road. I popped the hatch an stuck me head out. Traffic goin both ways an sideways, it were truly a meetin of roads. People an machines come from all over for the chance of findin somethin useful in the trash what got carted there from the gigacities. It were a place them brumbies would definitely feel at home, theyd go there to trade an scavenge parts. On that road was all colours an creeds -- people an spent robos an drones too, they was flapplin aroun in the air like the crows lookin for machine meat, which is what you found at the dump if you got lucky. All the garbage were drawn there an I wondered what the

folks expected to do with that trash but this were the end of the world, there was buyers an sellers for everythin.

The shacks an hovels started gettin thicker the closer we got, an soon the mountain of Midden Dump filled earth an sky. We was comin up on the centre of things, there werent no tall buildins nor nothin but still it were a city. The trucks dumped an turned aroun, an people an machines crawled over each other to be the first to get at each load of putrid stinkin poisonous shit what got pumped out the arse of civilisation. But even shit gotta turn to dirt sometime, an there is little tiny animals as what lives within it an makes their whole life outta shit. So it were with the Midden Dump.

Well, we had come as far as we could, Sinnerman were too big to go down the narrow alleys an it didnt have no drone to telly into. Anyways, I wanted to get out an walk aroun on me own two legs. I said, 'You wait here, Ill see what I can find out about the brumby mob.'

'Ten four. But I'm not stopping here. I'll meet you on the other side.' It held its hatch open an I limped out. I watched Sinnerman drive off an me heart sorta skipped to see it, it were the tidiest truck Id knowed. Made me proud to be roadin with it. I realised I felt somethin for Sinnerman, we needed each other an Id never knowed that feelin before. It were a strange feelin. But I were on me own then an wonderin how best to start lookin for this brumby gang. The dump were a big place, but also the brumbies would thrive there. I watched for anythin they might like in the way of spare parts or whatever. That were not so easy neither, coz the brumbies like other trucks would of tellied into robo bodies to do stuff what were too delicate for a big truck body to do.

I passed some dump people, they wore rags an their flesh were grey, hair fallin out. They was crouched down an scratchin in the side of that mountain of trash, diggin white clay from the ground. Men an women both was twistin the clay into little balls an puttin it into their mouths an into slings they had aroun their skinny bodies what was ravaged from hunger, they was feedin themselves with dirt. Crows flied aroun em, their time werent far off.

After a while I seen a white shed an inside were a white woman. She had clothes what actually fit, pants an a shirt like army folks wore only she werent army but she had that straight back cast about her. She wore glasses an her grey hair tied in a pony tail.

Shufflin past like I were a dump dweller, I found meself a spot where I could see an not be seen. There was bodies of dirt eaters on a slab inside the shed, they was skin stretched over bone. I eyed a robo drone in there with the doctor, a small heavy tread vehicle with a tray back piled with bodies. Looked like they was doin some negotiatin, currency changin hands, so I shook a link outta the air an tried to tune to their wave.

'... rotted faster than previously.'

'I've said all along they won't last more than a month,' the doctor said.

'Just keep the supply up.'

'Dead flesh is what the dump grows. There'll be no shortage to harvest.'

'I'll be back at the end of the week.' The drone broke the connection an headed out into the street. I pinged a check thru the link an there were a truckmind tellied into that drone. I sniffed out the truck waitin outside the dump to the north an waghered it were a brumby tho what itd want with bodies of dead dirt eaters, I didnt know. That werent no kind of spare parts for a machine.

I sent Sinnerman a wave to keep its mind out for another truck an then I went on in to the shed. There was medical supplies everywhere, that woman were still doctorin all right. I walked right up to her.

'Hey,' I said. I thought of what I could say to rattle her, get her talkin about brumbies.

She looked at me like she seen me for what I were an it werent a nice feelin. 'Who are you?'

'I is a rider from the backroads.'

'You're a long way from home.'

'Im roadin after brumby trucks.'

'I'm a doctor, not a mech.'

'Well I seen you with that drone just now an I wanna know what a doctor is doin sellin bodies to brumbies.'

Her face darkened an I knowed I hit a spot, it were a brumby drone she were dealin with for sure. 'That's a bold line of questionin from one such as you.'

'It doan seem right, is all. You is a healer. Spose ta be, anyways.'

'There's not much I can do for the dirt eaters. Geophagia, it's called. They believe the white clay they consume has magical power, and I suppose in a way it does because their bodies do not rot when they die. It contains a preservative that wards off necrosis for a time, keeps the myelin sheathing of their nerves in tact. With the money I get I buy medicine to help the living.'

'Shoulden you be helpin the dirt eaters while they is still alive?' I pressed home me point, wheedlin for stray info.

'There's nothing I can do for them. They do get some nutritional benefit from the clay but not enough to sustain them. I think they are done with living, in any case.'

'But you is helpin brumby trucks what doan care who they kill to get what they want.'

'You're just they same as they are, rider, preying on anyone weaker than you.'

That gave me pause. 'Im just doin what I can to find peace from the road.'

She shot me a look over the top of her glasses. 'I think it unlikely that you will ever find peace.'

I left that silence hangin there an she kept lookin, lookin thru me like she knowed me secret, seen the blood behind me eyes an Old Crow at me hind. Me face flushed, I couldnt help it.

I were gunna say, 'Fair enuff,' but then I seen Old Crow outta the corner of me eye. He hopped up on the slab where the bodies was, an I turned an ran from that white shed what were full of death, not healin.

III Mountainside

I couldnt wait to put that place behind me, but the stench of dead dirt eater clung to me clothes. I lost the warm part of me a long time ago an just then I felt its loss yawnin, an maybe thats what gave the black winged thing room to rise up that time, or maybe the creature had been in me all along an drove out the warmth. I didnt know, but I were glad when I seen Sinnerman again on the road out to the north. It sat there with its mighty beatin engine hummin with tech, it made me glad I were teamed with it. I crawled back inside the riders cab an laid out for Sinnerman what I had seen.

Sinnerman tracked that brumby truck from the dump an were roaded west, follerin it on the scanner, rollin thru forest an trees then out past the dyin farms an the old grain silos which now the food come from unnerneath the gigacities. The farms let go to twisty roads, an Sinnerman took the bends like a racer. It were gunnin faster an faster now to find Stormwater. We took the mountain way at each turn, an when we hit the snowline we hadda slow down some. It were hard goin, Sinnerman ground down gears an then put out studs on its tread, an the hummin of tyre on road changed its sound to a scratchy growl. The road got steeper an steeper, there was no trees no more, just snow an ice an rocks.

Sinnerman were determined, it were single-minded in its roadin. It burned up so much fuel, an all for Stormwater. I didnt quite unnerstand it, but it touched me.

'What is it about Stormwater that makes you road thru so much hardship to find?' I asked.

'I dont know the answer,' it said, 'but we were meched in the same shop and whenever the roading brought us together, we would wave links. When the brumbies attacked, we were building a shared vibe, mixing pieces of ourselves together. With Stormwater gone, it feels like a piece of me is missing.'

'Oh I see,' I said, tho to tell the truth I aint never known them feelins meself.

I thought on that as I watched the road play out in frontve us, it were still gettin steeper, there was no trees no more, just snow an ice an rocks. This were a place for a ambush, a steep road with deep valley on one side an blank mountain on the other. The road ran up the side of that mountain, an bad weather hung down low

all aroun us. I didnt like the look of it, but there werent no turnin back. Then I seen a black shape in frontve us, it were the brumby from the dump. It held the mountain road ahead. There werent no way aroun it, we was gunna hafta face it down.

Outta the ice an winds an swirlin whirls of snow I seen two four six headlights shinin thru an a spatterin of redeye runnin lights what marked out three truck shapes in the murk. The brumby from the dump were joined by two others what musta come out from the lair to make a stand.

We roaded closer to where them three stood across the road. They could of held back twenny or a hunnerd from that mountain pass. I seen their black armoured bodies an I recognised the shape of the Brumby Kings two captains from the raid on the truckstop. I suddenly wondered why theyd be formin up without even testin us out first.

'You got any history with this brumby gang, Sinnerman?' Like it werent somethin I shoulda checked out earlier, but I never thought there might be more to the story than what Sinnerman tole me.

There werent no answer from Sinnerman, coz it were havin some trouble keepin its road in the snow, tyres slippin as it ground closer. Crazy bursts of static hissed over the link, I couldnt foller it but Sinnerman were talkin to the brumbies. Sinnerman were sellin me out, I felt it then.

'Whats goin on?' I said.

The chatter were still cracklin across the waves, but Sinnerman answered in voice. 'They offered me a trade. You for Stormwater.'

'I thort you was straight up,' I said.

'I had no choice.'

I didnt say nothin. The feelins I had for Sinnerman was swirlin like the snowstorm outside. I hated it for crossin me, an the way it done it. But I were gunna go down fightin, an somewhere in the back of me dim mind I hadda notion I might still be able to wrangle that Brumby King for meself.

'Fuck you, Sinnerman,' I said.

I reached for me tote bag an the release on the riders hatch, but Sinnerman hit the locks with a thunk. I still had the screens, tho, what showed me the outside. One of them brumbies, a green Harvester with a snowplow, rumbled forward. The others held the pass.

Inside the cab, Sinnerman tried to pin me down with a flailin grapple what sprung outta the floor at me feet. I had me hand in me tote bag, reachin for that slab of substrate what held all me code patches an viral messengers. I shuffled thru the link an slotted home a tag to crank the substrate. I hadda get close enuff to Sinnermans petaflop donk for the wave to transmit. The grapple latched onto me arm, an I squirmed to get free, holdin the

substrate out in fronta me as I switched the wave over.

Everythin stopped dead. The locks released. The grapple fell to the floor. Sinnerman were shut outta its own truckbody behind a viral storm. Thru the substrate, I waved a innerface with the truckbody an felt the power surge as I pumped the juice thru me fuel-line veins. Me vision whited out an widened so as I could see all aroun. I stretched meself.

We pushed forward. Movin as one. I were rusty at this caper, it took a lotta me to do it. Somethin at the edge of me thoughts blurred an I felt recoil through the truckbody as Sinnermans weapon systems opened up. It were all I could do to focus on movin the wheels thru the innerface. But Sinnerman werent givin up on Stormwater, it were still fightin thru the viral storm to get to the weapons systems. The missles beeped lock an I felt a blast an seen smokin ruins where them two brumby captains use to be. I knowed then that Sinnerman were packin fierce weapons, an it were gunna blast through whatever stood in the way of Stormwater, no matter who was in the drivin seat.

Through the smoke an storm come the Brumby King, dressed in armour platin an bristlin with glistenin missiles an chain gun. It were at least twenny year old, I seen then, I didnt know how it kept up, it musta renewed its soft wares from scratch three times over, but that truck were the baddest, meanest lookin thing Id came across an I didnt know how I were gunna get close enuff to wrangle its truckmind. The air filled with missile tracks an smoke an a rain of sparks from the fifties. The ground shifted up unnerneath us as another blast ripped the guts outta a blue brumby, things werent goin so well for em even tho there were only one truck standin against em.

A blast from the Brumby King slew us sideways an we stalled against a jack-knifed brumby wedged in the mountain pass. Sinnerman kept pumpin them missiles into the brumbies. They werent expectin such harsh treatment so deep in their own turf, they was flaylin aroun an skiddin on the ice, but then I seen the Brumby King pushin the burnin green Harvester with the snowplow in frontve it. It turned head on an connected with us, there were a crunch an a wild hiss in comin from the Kings donk as it rolled Sinnermans truckbody back down the hill.

Sinnermans engine caught. I pushed back, blarin squeal of rubber on road an roarin engine. Sinnerman were still workin weapons thru the viral storm, an it spat thousands a micro-drones which was repelled from our own wheels, but they shot forward an slipped up the King. The Brumby King skidded sideways with a creak an a groan, an Sinnerman punched it thru with a spike what sprung from a housin unnerneath the cab. There were a horrible screech as gears stripped metal flesh deep in the Kings heart, an it howled for traction to get off that spike but it couldnt.

Snow turn black where the Brumby King ran out its fluids

onto the ground. Whole thing only took about two minutes an then it were over. The two brumbies what was left was freed from the King but they didnt know what to do, theyd been slaved. There was bursts to an fro on the link, so much scatter I couldnt tell where it were comin from. Sinnerman were done for, it burned itself out tryin to beat the viral attack. The riders cab filled up with smoke. I couldnt see nothin, I groped for the hatch release what I pulled, an scampered outta there like a three-legged rabbit. Cold air an ice blew in me face, swirlin snowblind an wailin wind. The ground hit me.

Drones an little brumby skaters spun aroun, some was empty since their truckmind were dead, others still respondin to standin orders, they was there but there werent no one home. Sinnerman were wrecked, its axel broke. Maybe with heavy salvage somethin could be done, but I didnt think so. I crawled over to where the King lay dyin, an copied across its truckmind into me substrate. Itd make a tasty prize, but I knowed my roadin werent done yet.

I limped out an left that carnage of smoulderin trucks behind. Me trucksuit werent nowhere near warm enuff for the weather, I wouldnt last long unless I could find some shelter an warmth. So I struggled thru the snow, follerin the brumbies tracks back to their lair. Somethin in me bones tole me to go, I hadda find a way to get off the mountain. I figgered thered may be somethin in that lair what I could use, an I were curious about . I were shiverin like I had the fever, I hadda stop meself from cryin out. It werent long before I found a cave in the side of the mountain, an looked down a long dark tunnel. I didnt wanna go in, but I knowed I had to. Stormwater mighta been still alive down there, an may be I could rig a fix to get back to the backroads. Anyway, it were warm welcome air what blowed up the tunnel.

I crept along the wall, slinkin silent like I learned to do. First I felt like a ferret, creepin in to scare up the baby rabbits. But the longer I went on down that black hole, the more I realised I werent no ferret. If anything, I were the rabbit. I thought on how me skin would look, hanged on a rack outside Old Crows humpy. Still, there werent nothin to do but keep goin on.

Dark wings snapped across in front of me face an I near shat meself. I ducked an looked to where they swooshed away, thinkin it were a crow, but what would a crow be doin in a cave? Were it a brumby drone? Soon I seen soft light leakin thru the darkness ahead. The tunnel opened up into a cavern, it were lit by glowin orbs in the walls what made the little tracklins of water sparkle like snailtrails.

All aroun lay the Brumby Kings spoils, truckbodies on blocks an donks up on hoists, warm air to keep everything movin nice like it should. Mech decks under lights took up the main space, an over against one wall were a pile of spent fuel cells. Some kinda bastard hybrid mech drone what the brumbies telled for repairs

slumped behind the decks, fine grapplin feelers slinked all over the controls. I seen Stormwater, blueblack in the low light. I checked its stats thru the link, an at first it looked gutted empty. But when I seen closer, I found a tiny truckmind in there. Something what bore the stamp of Sinnerman as well as Stormwater, I logged it against their tag files.

I ditched the Brumby King from me substrate. It were takin up too much room, an things had gone beyond that now. I ported the Sinnerstorm truckmind an it started growin straightaway, extractin itself, takin what it could and bringin info back. I got a shock. It were vibin out waves in all directions, lookin for trucks to chat to.

Then I seen a shape behind the mech decks an I turned, it were dump-dwellers. Ten of em, laid out on pallets on the ground. There was wires an decks an substrates all connected to lines in the dirt eaters heads. Them brumbies were usin the dirt eaters to learn, an to renew their own soft wares. They needed somethin to work the mech decks, twistin tiny knobs with its fingers an hands. Somethin about the way them bodies was preserved by the white clay what they ate at the dump, it made em not rot so fast. The brumbies had the freshest laid out, they was usin the humans brains as a map for growin brumby truckminds what could be slaved an droned, but with the knowin where a body were in space an able to work on little stuff what took fine skills.

I seen them grey, shrunken bodies, mens and womens both, they was in half-life, hooked up an growin templates for brumby drones. When they was alive, their lives was nothin but finding dirt to eat an rollin it in their fingers. An then in death they doan even get no rest, they is still made to give more. I hefted a rock. I knew it hadda be done. Me stomach churned. It were not somethin I relished. I smashed their skulls, one by one. I couldnt of left em there like that.

Behind me I heard a noise.

‘What you doin there, Old Crow?’

‘I mighta ast you the same question.’

‘An I might not answer your question, neither.’ I hooked me tote bag over me shoulder.

‘Ha ha. Doan mind me, I is just some old bloke whos been follerin you aroun. Or maybe its you whos been follerin me all this time, waitin for the chance ta come up on me like this.’

‘I aint follerin you. Yore like me fucken shadow, I cant shake ya.’

‘I already tole you, we is rollin on the same road. Whos to say which side of the face casts the shadow?’

‘I say. You bribed brumby trucks to bring me here.’

‘That’s as may be, but why dont you try this coat an see how it fits?’

‘Im not puttin that filthy thing on. I aint no crow.’

He took off the coat. Unnerneath, he were just a skinny old man in dirty rags. 'Take it,' he said.

I flicked me blade, it come outta me belt like it wanted to. It went snickerty snick, an I made a slice across Old Crows old man chicken neck. After the pain he caused me, it seemed almost a load off me mind. Blood bubbled an he grinned as he fell to his knees, one hand clenched up holdin out the coat. I sorta larfed, but choked it off an stepped back as he rocked to the ground. In his dyin eyes I seen that black winged thing risin up to claim its prize.

I couldnt stand to watch. I left Old Crow to his dyin, an set off back up to the top of the cave mouth. It were a long, cold walk back down the mountain. Maybe I could rig something from the wreckage of Sinnerman an Stormwater, an mech that new truckmind across. But when I reached the cave mouth, I knowed Id of froze before dawn, wearin just me trucksuit. I went back down in to the lair. I didnt have no choice. I were gunna hafta put on that trucktyre coat. Jes till I found me next ride.

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