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WARCAR APOCALYPSE

James Brighton

ZEN AND THE ART OF ANNIHILATING YOUR ENEMIES

Bax begrudgingly nudged his ride forward, trying to keep up. Such a nuisance having to put up with this furry, obstinate beast. So unlike the elegant yet hard curves of the beautiful machine. Its mere thousand pounds of organic matter so weak compared to the raw power of steel and circuitry.

But as he gazed forward he saw the one thing in life he had found beautiful apart from his love affair with the purely mechanical. The one reason strong enough to pull him away, if only for a few hours, from the love of his life.

Her liver chestnut mare's dark fur matched her own cascade of brunette hair, the sun ricocheting off it playfully as it bounced and bobbed in time with the horse's trot, streaming down along her back to brush the tip of her turquoise-studded cowgirl belt, and it was clear she felt as natural on a horse as he did leaning back into a leather-cushioned seat as she spurred the beast on with the heels of her calfskin boots. She and her steed moved gracefully, as one, making him jealous as he eyed the brute thing between his legs that seemed to tolerate his presence about as much as he tolerated its.

She was trotting towards a thick grove of subalpine firs, up ahead and to the left. The trail they were riding overlooked on its right what was probably one of the clearest, bluest lakes remaining in what was left of Normerica. And dead ahead loomed what gave this part of Mont-Dakota its erstwhile name—a wall of majestic peaks, large patches of icy white snow splattered along their

steel-grey surface.

“Come on,” Sherry urged him on, looking back. “We’re almost there.”

By some miracle of fate, he finally got his pinto filly to move forward. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Bax didn’t look like the typical big sky Mont-Dakotan. He lacked the cowboy hat and boots that so enchantingly adorned Sherry. And there was that wild, far-off look in his eye, as if any time he was not behind a steering wheel part of him was off burning rubber somewhere, perhaps on some great highway in the sky. But now was different. There was only one thing that could take his mind off his beloved machine, and he was looking straight ahead at her.

Finally, they reached the grove, and she mercifully decided to give him a break. They tethered their horses and entered the grove on foot, walking along a narrow path lined with conifers, pinecones and twigs crunching underfoot. They were all alone in this forest, with only the sound of the woodland, and of rushing water somewhere in the distance.

Most people who hadn’t been killed off by the war were too busy surviving to enjoy what beautiful shrines of nature, like this one, remained. But they were young and carefree. They both had plenty of life ahead of them—they weren’t jaded like the rest of the republic.

She took his hand and led him through the forest. She had been here before, riding on these trails many times, and knew this place. The only trails he knew were asphalt.

Wow, this is going better than I expected, he thought, as he felt the moist touch of her palm, her fingers interlacing his. From the way she wasn’t speaking, from the way she just stole furtive glances at him, showing him a smile he had never seen

before.

When they arrived where she was leading them, Sherry found a nice spot and set her hat on a nearby branch. Somewhere a stream burbled along nearby, filling the forest with its soothing melody. She batted her eyes bashfully at Bax. Those flushed cheeks, lightly dusted with freckles, the gentle contour of that jaw, the pout of those lips, intoxicated him, drawing him in.

She began undoing the snaps on her cowgirl shirt.

Bax watched with bated breath as she removed the shirt, exposing smooth pink skin, graceful, supple breasts tucked into a pink bra. She smiled invitingly.

That was when he realized.

Oh fuck. What the hell am I doing here?

Bax suddenly punched himself as hard as he could.

Sherry's smile disappeared as she looked at him in astonishment. "Bax?!"

He punched himself again.

Nothing.

Fuck!

He looked around, frantic. He clutched the trunk of a nearby tree and then slammed his head into it as hard as he could.

"Bax! What's the matter with you!?"

Shit!

Nothing was working. Blood drizzled down his face, as he stood on wobbly feet, trying to maintain his footing. Suddenly, he remembered something. He reached into his pocket and pulled it out. Yes, here it is.

As he held up the fountain pen, Sherry just stood there, flabbergasted, looking at him as if he had just lost all his marbles. With a crazy glint in his eye, he

tossed the cap aside to reveal a long, gleaming silver nib.

Then he stabbed it hard into his temple.

As a seemingly never-ending amount of blood sprayed out onto the tree, onto the pink and blue plaid cowgirl shirt hanging on it, onto her bra and her beautiful cleavage and face, Sherry screamed.

And then disappeared midscream.

Gone, in a puff of vapor, as if she had never existed.

Along with the trees, the blood, the babbling of the stream...

The entire forest had vanished.

He was parked at a charging station in his Silver Cheetah.

And gripped firmly in his hand was not a fountain pen, but a device known as a NIB—a six-inch rod of silicon and gallium housed in a thin chromium sheath, the business end tucked neatly into the skulljack located on his right temple.

The soft glow of instruments faintly illuminated the interior of the vehicle, which, from the multitude of buttons and switches spread out all around him, could easily be mistaken for the cockpit of a fighter craft, were it not for the two black leather bucket seats and console in the middle. Outside, in the stillness of the night, the incessant buzzing of the run-down fluorescent lamps in the parking lot provided more sound than light.

But even over the buzzing, he could still hear it.

The beating of his cargo from within the temperature-controlled titanium strongbox strapped into the seat next to him with an X-shaped safety harness identical to his.

Bax pulled the chromium rod out of his head and

tossed the expensive little gadget aside. A NIB, or Neural Invasion Breaker, acted as the last physical barrier in the case of a malicious cerebral takeover. A pricey, but indispensable little piece of kit for someone like him.

He squinted through the windshield. Across the pump from him, something shimmered almost imperceptibly in the night air.

“Cheetah, switch to thermal imaging.”

No reply.

Shit! Did they get her, too?

Bax tapped a few buttons on a touchscreen on the dash. Instantly, the color scheme of everything visible through the windshield became cold and inverted. Blues, purples, and greens dominated the landscape. But not a single speck of red or orange to be seen. Fuck. But he knew he had seen something. He squinted harder.

Ah, there you are. See? I’m not going crazy just yet!

Barely distinguishable, he could make out the faint outlines of three invisible shapes, otherwise blending in completely with the dark brush and starless Western Republics night.

Three large shapes.

Large, sleek shapes.

He revved the engines.

Mother.

He revved them again.

Fucker.

Another rev, bellowing to the sky.

Godammed mother fuckers *mindhacked* me!

And that was my last NIB!

Now he was pissed.

Instantly, he gunned it. The squealing of tires

added to the roar of his engine as he tore through the parking lot and out onto the deserted highway. Suddenly muzzleflashes lit up the front of the three invisible shapes, as they started after him, but he was now moving so fast that none of their rounds reached him. Besides, he had brand-new ruballoy tires. A few buzzing gnats weren't nearly enough to stop him.

The road ahead alternated between patches of pitch black in front of deserted buildings with a street light here and there desperately trying to turn on but only succeeding in coughing up a sickly shower of sparks, and brightly lit up sections in front of the still functional casinos, their opulent arrays of neon signs radiating like oases of light in the desert of darkness.

He glanced down at the radar screen on the dash. Nothing.

Of course. Anybody rolling with that tech wouldn't forget to bring along a radar jammer.

Suddenly a female voice, one that was somehow always soothing, even in the heat of battle, with its warm, melodious timbre, filled the cab. "Sorry, they got me too. Almost all of me, anyways. That's why I keep a backup on the BIOS. I was just able to restore all my systems now."

Thank god for hard-coded ones and zeros. What would I do without her?

"Great, just in time to change all windows to thermal," Bax ordered.

"Done."

He looked in the rear-view mirror. Shit. Only when their muzzles flashed did he have any clue as to the location of his pursuers. "And to explain to me why the fuck our thermal's not working!"

"They're using some kind of chameleon wraps."

“Chameleon wraps? But I thought those only worked at a standstill.”

“Correct, thermop polycarb is unsuitable with rapid background changes, especially in the infrared spectrum, making it ineffective against thermal imaging. It looks like they’re using a new technology which is capable of mimicking the subvisible wavelengths of their environment and emitting them at a rapid pace.”

Multispectral rapid-movement camouflage? Son of a... This just wasn’t Bax’s day.

Cheetah’s feminine voice continued. “While we’re talking about the enemy, their leader has a heat-seeking missile. He’s getting a lock on you now.”

“Wonderful,” Bax grunted.

Fuck. Bax groaned inwardly as they raced down the main Wendover highway heading east towards the republic line. He had thought he was home free. The desto was less than two hours away, but he had been driving all night. He had thought it safe to stop for a little five minute rest, so he wouldn’t go off the road from exhaustion.

But he had little time for regret as the telltale heat-seeking missile shot out from one of the invisible forms. It flew hundreds of miles per hour directly towards Cheetah.

“I suggest using the—”

“Okay, do it already!”

A small hatch on the rear bumper of Cheetah’s mega-polish silver exterior opened and a super-heated decoy missile flew out, passing the enemy’s heatseeker in the opposite direction.

The heatseeker ignored the decoy and continued on its course, gaining on them.

“As I was about to say, you have to wait until the last moment.”

“Which is now! Do it!”

The heatseeker was closing rapidly. Bax’s palms sweated as he gripped the yoke. Another white-hot decoy flew out. At the last millisecond, the heatseeker swerved from its course and followed the decoy. The decoy arced away, flying past a huge fluorescent sign hundreds of yards down the road depicting a red-headed prospector girl in super short jean shorts hefting a pickaxe and winking invitingly at drivers from the nearby casino. The heatseeker and decoy zoomed past the fluorescent prospector girl, exploding into a million pieces about six casinos down.

Whew.

Bax’s grip on the yoke relaxed just a fraction.

“How many more decoys do we have?”

“That was the last one.”

Great. My last NIB, my last decoy...

“Bax, may I suggest—”

“Shut up! I have an idea.”

Bax yanked hard on the e-brake, spinning out in a 180-degree arc, columns of billowing smoke pouring forth from the freshly burning ruballoy on the pavement.

In the scintillating mosaic of neon hues reflected from the blinking casino lights, sparkling along the length of her streamlined argent body, as if fashioned from one colossal primordial vein of silver in the forge of the gods, his Cheetah was a sight to behold. Heavy as a tank, light as a crotch rocket. Three and a half tons of weapons, armor, and powercore, concealed within a single sliver of silver almost too graceful to be solid, as if she were quicksilver poured along the asphalt in the night, presenting no more to the wind than a wisp of evaporating oblivion. She was more than a warcar.

She was hell on wheels.

In the darkness in front of him, three transparent metallic shadows were moving toward him like wraiths. Red Crosshairs flitted about on the windshield as Bax looked this way and that, trying in vain to get a lock-down on the lead car.

“Now would be a good time for your idea.”

“Highlight the one with the heatseeker.”

“Activating visual enhancement. Standby.”

Bax knew VE took time...time that he didn't have. But he had just upgraded Cheetah's memory banks. Was it enough? This was the life of a runner. Every moment, riding on the edge of extinction. Every thought, every calculation, every millisecond, hurtling you through into the next moment, or else into that void unfathomable to sentient minds.

Before he could come up with a Plan B, razor-sharp yellow lines suddenly shot out around the formless invisible mass hurling itself towards him, racing along the contours of the enemy vehicle, converging into gridlines, pulling in tight, burning into Bax's eyes. Instead of a barely perceptible outline, he now could see the vehicle clearly, a glowing jumble of wires and light with hard edges, as if the blueprint from some warcar designer's computer had just sprung into life.

Bax slammed the gas and made a beeline for the shining digital car ahead.

He pressed down on the buttons atop the twin joysticks gripped firmly in his hands. Muzzleflashes erupted from the front of Cheetah's bumper. Bax was screaming at the top of his lungs now, launching a full frontal assault.

Every ounce of his consciousness was now focused on the glowing yellow car ahead. Bax knew it was just the synthlumes in the smartglass—

synthetic bioluminescent cells capable of emitting several times as many photons as natural bioluminesces and of reproducing any color from the visible spectrum—embedded into the missileproof polycrystal-sheathed synthetic duradiamond of his windshield. Like millions of electronic colorshifting fireflies swirling around in front of him, creating any sort of image imaginable.

But every time he saw it, it still looked like magic.

The retinal targeting systems kept the digital crosshairs centered on the leader's warcar. But the timing had to be just right...

Closer...

Closer...

Suddenly they were slamming through a hail of bullets.

"Activate auxiliary shielding!"

Segmented dull grey metallic panels shot out around the hood and fenders, protecting Cheetah from the bullets. The auxiliaries made the warcar less aerodynamic, but were cheaper to repair than the primary armor plating. Just chalk it up as one more expense. This run is going to be more costly than anticipated, Bax lamented.

The shining yellow gridlines in warcar shape kept growing larger and larger, brighter and brighter.

Bax flipped a switch, and a compartment in the center of the hood slid open and something started rising into position.

Almost there...

Don't

Almost there...

...YOU...

The warcar was scant yards away.

...dare use my memories of her as a weapon!

Now!

Bax pressed a button on the back of the right twin stick and a rocket-propelled, laser-guided, diamond-tipped mini-jav shot from its thrower, impaling the hood of the enemy warcar. The javelin was connected to a durasteel cable, which stayed firmly connected to Cheetah's war chassis.

Bax gunned the engine, frantically trying to find an opening between the yellow gridcar and the shimmering, near invisible warcar on its flank. As he shot past the three cars, there was a loud grating noise and a shower of sparks lit up Cheetah's left side as it violently scraped the invisible car.

Whew! That was close. Bax breathed a sigh of relief.

The cable suddenly jerked hard. Bax gritted his teeth, gripping the yoke with all his might as the two warcars played tug-of-war. The cable was now throwing up sparks as it dug into the duradiamond windshield. It seemed as if he was locked together in this eternal moment with his enemy. But then suddenly, the mini-jav came flying out of the enemy warcar, ripping its hood off with it. But before its razor sharp grapple prongs had deployed, it had impaled itself clean through something else. The leader's hood and the other object kicked up a fountain of sparks as they trailed behind Cheetah. It was a boxy object.

A boxy, metallic object.

The enemy leader's powercore.

Bax was more than just a runner, more than just a smooth warrior behind the wheel, ready to take on a run for a few creds. More than one of the very few people left in Normerica crazy enough to brave the vast territory outside the safety of the megacities, flowing freely across the war-torn continent, rubber

gripping the road and finger gripping the trigger. He was all these things, but much, much more.

He ate, breathed, and dreamed automobiles.

He had instantly recognized that make and model and was intimately familiar with its schematics, having even owned one for a brief time before trading up. He had done his own repairs, knew exactly where its powercore was located.

A destroyer class warcar, the Silver Cheetah came factory-installed with a high-resolution, broad-field, ultrarapid retinal targeting system. Sensors inside the cab analyzed his eye movement from different angles, creating the synthlume digital crosshairs which appeared on the windshield in front of him wherever his retinas focused. To lock a target in, all he needed to do was look at it and press a small button on the front of the right joystick. But for tricky maneuvers like the one he had just pulled off, having the computer lock off the targeting reticle had its weaknesses. Better to do it manually, using time-tested battle know-how and gut instinct. Knowing when to trust the computer and when to trust your insides was what separated the amateur from the pro. He and Cheetah were the perfect team, the organic and the digital complementing one another, making up for each other's weaknesses.

But a smoothly operating organic-digital team was just the bare minimum necessary if one wanted to stay alive on the highways for more than a few days, competing with the other pros. To turn that into weeks, months, years, it took much, much more...

What Bax had learned over the years was what war came down to was ultimately...

Knowledge.

And it was knowledge that had allowed him to

pluck the enemy's source of power out of his war machine, like ripping the heart out of a jaguar.

The leader of the pack, heatseeker and all, was now out of the fight. He couldn't flip on his headlights if he wanted to, much less fire a weapon.

"Another successful wrangle," Bax peacocked. "What does that make it? Ten for ten?"

"Well done, Bax. I'm a lucky artificial girl to have such an operator."

The inky blackness of the night sky was now giving way to a rich blue, a few rosy clouds emerging from the mountains in the distance, as Bax ejected the cable and the jav thrower sealed itself back up tight. He peered around for any ripples through the air belying chameleon-wrapped vehicles, but spotted none. Apparently that tricky high-speed maneuver had shaken them up. But they'd be back.

He quickly scanned his surroundings for a way onto the interrepublic. He was in luck—he passed by an onramp with a highway sign riddled with so many bullet holes it was barely legible, bearing the words "B*eh*v* C*ty - 12* m*les." He quickly did a u-turn and got onto the onramp, keeping an eye out for muzzleflashes as he ejected a swath of exploding caltrops extending across the road as he veered from left to right. He then floored it and got on the freeway, keeping one eye on the rear-view mirror.

Next proceeded a few moments of eerie silence.

Wait for it...

Wait for it...

A chorus of lovely explosions went off behind him, as the caltrops tore the enemy's tires to shreds.

In the rear-view he saw two men get out and start cursing, looking like ants as they shrank in the distance.

Ha ha! Suckers!

Next time do yourself a favor and get some ruballoys. Well worth the investment.

He knew from experience.

Thank God! Finally free, he thought, as he eyed the open asphalt in front of him. The road was his.

He touched a stud and rolled down the window as he stepped on the gas, the wind whipping through his hair as he raced along on the completely deserted empty highway.

Now let's deliver this fucking package!

"Yahoo!" Bax let out a hearty yelp as the Silver Cheetah sped towards the morning horizon. All was now quiet, save for the purring of his engine, and the beating of his cargo from inside its titanium casing.

The good thing about constant, never-ending war was no traffic. The bad thing about constant never-ending war was...constant never-ending war.

Soon, a large sign on the side of the road with a golden beehive icon greeted him with "Now entering the Beehive Republic." Hmm. Hardly a scratch on it. They must have just replaced it. He sped past the sign, entering the burnt out shell of what was once Wendover on the Beehive side.

Presently, dust being blown across the street and the sound of approaching blades told him to look up. Overhead, the huge Dreadchopper blocked out the pink and blue morning sky. But the massive warheli, bristling with armaments, just ignored him and continued heading north. Scanning the perimeter, Bax realized.

The days of border checks were long gone. Who was there to check? The civilians all cowered in the megacities. Governments like Beehive had satellite imaging and used AI to monitor all traffic coming into or out of their borders. The moment you were one

inch over the line a computer somewhere was tagging and analyzing you. If they thought anything was suspicious the military would be on you immediately. But for the most part they left the warcar runners alone, as long as they didn't interfere with their affairs of State.

Glancing down, he swerved to avoid a section of highway that had sunk into a small crater about five feet wide. Shit!

He kept his eyes on the road as he saw the Wendover city limits sign coming up. He was already on the other side. The burntout town was so small, it was over before it started. Just a few ruins of exploded buildings and the stripped shells of cars. He was quickly surrounded on all sides by nothing but desert and an occasional small barren mountain in the background. Green shrubs dotted the sandscape. The sun was now rising up over the horizon, a shining yellow ball heralding the new day.

Bax swerved to dodge another missilehole. Fucking hell! That one was new since the last time he had come through this way, he was sure of it. He knew this route like the back of his hand. He slowed down, apprehensive of what other new surprises may lie ahead.

"Cheetah, do a scan of the next ten miles of road and highlight potentially hazardous structural damage."

"Initiating scan..."

But then something grabbed his eye. "Hold that thought." Bax spotted a section of the road where the ferrocement control barrier had been reduced to rubble. He slowed down as he approached it and skirted around the rubble, finding a section where he was able to drive off the highway.

At first he had to swerve to avoid the desert

shrubs, but soon those disappeared, and they were making tracks on a vast expanse of nothing but an immaculate smooth white surface, shimmering in the light of the morning desert sun, extending in every direction as far as the eye could see, with just a small sawtooth of jagged brown peaks clinging to the distant horizon, so tiny they felt thousands of miles away. The wind-whipped flat surface was criss-crossed with what appeared to be a pattern of fine cracks, receding back into infinity. The feeling of openness, of space, was exhilarating.

It behooved a runner to study not only the intricate highway system of the whole of Normerica, as blasted to pieces as it was in nearly half of the continent, but also the natural lay of the land. Bax knew this area well. Since Beehive and the New Vegas Republic didn't usually have many problems with each other, the hundred-and-fifty-million tons of salt sprawling out before him was one of the last of its kind that hadn't been destroyed.

The Beehive Salt Flats.

Bax knew what appeared to be cracks were actually diminutive ridges of salt, jutting up from the bed of salt, formed by evaporation.

He slammed the pedal to the metal, picking up speed. He was now doing a cool two-hundred, the flat hard salt bearing him up as if on angel's wings.

Finally, he could deliver his cargo. Finally, no one else fucking with him.

Just then he noticed a strange phenomenon in the distance. Like tiny ripples. As he sped onward, they grew, taking shape into pinprick clouds of sand dotting the horizon.

Bax frowned. He didn't like this. Who the hell else would be out here on the Flats this time of day?

And then there was a blinding flash, and it felt like

another sun had just appeared over the desert floor. He put his hand up to shield his face as he tried to get a glimpse of what the hell was going on.

Oh, fuck.

An extravagantly stylish, extra-wide glistening metallic gold warcar had just zoomed up to his right and was pacing him, the radiant beams of the sun streaming down from above and exploding off its 24-karat body and gold-tinted windows into a dazzling symphony, as if all of the gold in Fort Knox had found its way here and formed itself into a high-speed war machine every whit as deadly as Cheetah.

“Cheetah, increase tint on the windows.” The windows suddenly darkened in response.

Bax knew this warcar. Even worse, he knew its owner.

Suddenly, a translucent digital image of the gilded warcar flickered into life on Cheetah’s windshield, rotating in front of the salty desert backdrop. Thin glowing lines sprouted out in all directions, as copious amounts of technical data began pouring forth, dissecting each of the vehicle’s multifarious weapons systems, which were highlighted in varying colors. “Golden Flash, dreadnought class, modified Toyota Casus Belli. This four-ton vehicle is capable of significantly faster than average warcar speeds, topping out at two-hundred and forty miles per hour. The driver is—”

“Yeah, I know who the driver is,” Bax sneered as he stepped harder on the gas, trying to outmaneuver the golden car, to no avail.

Through the blinding solar reflections and the golden tint on the windows, Bax could see his smirking face and gigantic hairdo now.

Blonde Elvis.

Born Fukumoto Shinji, Elvis was famous

throughout Normerica as the only runner to make the Angeles to Juneau run in less than 24-hours. He was also known to be one of the most arrogant runners on the continent. Arrogant, but unfortunately good. Most runners who attempted that run never made it back, much less at record time. At the age of twenty-five, Fukumoto had undergone somatic engineering to pink his skin for a more Normerica look. A year later, he had done surgery to turn his irises into literal sapphires. The tiny gems contracted and expanded like normal irises, but never failed to catch the attention of all around him, especially the female crowd. His gigantic crow's nest of platinum blonde hair and its massive forelock sparkled in the sun as Blonde Elvis transparented his side window and flashed Bax his pearly whites, designer sunglasses concealing his jewel-studded eyes. To top off the image, a enormous black collar encrusted with glittering rhinestones jutted up to meet two voluptuous flaxen sideburns.

Bax and Elvis had a history. The time they had met in New Vegas, two years back, Bax had lost about two-thousand creds to the obnoxious, loud-mouthed bastard. Besides, Elvis had insulted his car.

No one insults my Cheetah.

No one.

Bax gripped the steering yoke harder.

"Golden Flash driver requesting parley."

"Oh, yeah? Well tell him he can—"

"Bax, I suggest you take my advice for once. We have a much higher chance of making it to our destination if we avoid any unnecessary combat."

"Patch him through," Bax growled.

The Golden Flash's image and specs disappeared and were replaced by a bust-view image revealing

Blonde Elvis's smug face and that ridiculous-looking black version of Elvis's American Eagle Jumpsuit he was prone to wear. "Bax! Long time no see, buddy." Elvis's English was nearly perfect, having emigrated from the Empire of the Rising Sun to the Angeles Republic at around seventeen or eighteen years old. "I see you're still in that tacky jalopy. Too bad not every car can be as stylish as my Flash," the flamboyant runner sighed.

"Elvis, it's been a while," Bax said through clenched teeth. "What brings you all the way out here, *tomodach*?"

"Tomodachi? Come on, man, you know I'm one-hundred percent Normerican now. I can barely even remember Nihongo. I'm even fluent in Far North Normerican. Came in real handy on the Juneau run. I learned how to say 'about' instead of 'about.' Parlons Canuck?"

"Cut to the chase, goldilocks. What the hell do you want?"

"Oh, you hurt my feelings, Bax," Elvis bewailed, gripping his heart in his characteristically overly dramatic fashion. "But ah, well." His face turned serious. "I'm afraid I've got some bad news, old friend. I've been ordered to have you hand over that cargo you're carrying."

During their riveting conversation, the clouds on the horizon had grown. Fuck.

Competing interests. Was that what this was about? And those chameleons back in Wendover? Bax had assumed they had simply been freelancers, wanting to nab his cargo for a tidy profit.

All warcars were connected at all times to the web, and cameras were everywhere. And after the breakup of the old government, computer surveillance was cheap. With no more NSA hoarding

all the data to themselves, the new republics were small enough that whoever wanted data could have it—for the right price. When the republics had splintered off, the old tech monopoly, as dependent on and interwoven with the government as they were, had gone down with it. The result? Dramatically lowered barriers to entry. An entire black market of data had sprung up, supplied by corrupt republic officials, signals intelligence technicians, I.T. geeks, gadget manufacturers. Long story short, you had enough creds, you could find out what cargo any runner in Normerica was running at any time. So cargo raids were a dime a dozen.

But now he was starting to think that perhaps this was about more than just making a quick buck. Those chameleons had had some pretty hi-tech equipment, now that he thought of it.

Bax kept his stare dead ahead, eying the growing sand clouds on the horizon, as he replied. “Well, you can tell whoever’s giving you orders to shove it up their ass.”

“Come on, Baxy Boo, don’t make this difficult. I thought we were tomodachi! You’re breaking my heart.”

“Look, I don’t know how you do things, but I’m a professional. If I give my word, that’s it. So this cargo is getting through, whether you like it or not.”

Elvis made a “tsk-tsk” sound while shaking his head, making a histrionic show of regret. “That’s too bad, amigo, because if that’s your decision, I’ll just have to take it by force.”

“I thought you’d say that. Cheetah, turret machine guns, open fire.”

The rearmost of Cheetah’s three roof turrets lifted up. A volley of rounds shot out at the Golden Flash, putting a line of dents on its armored golden veneer.

To a normcar, Bax's maneuver would have been tantamount to attempted murder and wilful destruction of property. But to a warcar it was just a friendly warning shot.

"Now get the fuck out of here, or I'll use something more powerful!"

All along the edges of the windshield, iridescent, translucent diagrams began popping up. They reported the readout of Cheetah's various onboard systems. Weapons were represented by red, ammo reserves orange. Armor plating blue, divided up by quadrant. Targeting systems were yellow, weapon cooling systems green. All sparkled into existence in the twinkling of an eye, lining the perimeter of Bax's vision.

"Wrong move, Bax. Wrong move." Blonde Elvis raised up a crimson helmet with the image of a rose on it. With a solemn look on his face, he kissed the rose, and then set it back down on the seat next to him. No helmet would ever be allowed to trample his lovely mane.

Bax recognized it as the ritual Elvis did before each fight. Rumor had it that the helmet belonged to his former partner. Whether that was a man or woman, no one knew, but as the legend went, he traveled all the way to Graceland once a year to visit their grave and pay his respects.

Blonde Elvis blew a kiss towards the camera, then bowed. His image disappeared from Bax's windshield as he cut the transmission. Then his driver's side window turned an opaque gold.

Bax grabbed the black helmet lying next to the cargo box on the passenger seat. He strapped it on, triggering the computer to switch the retina targeting systems to the tiny sensors inside the helmet visor. Crosshairs appeared on the smartglass

of the visor, instead of the windshield. Adorned neck to toe in black cowhide leather lined with ultraflex kevlar, the helmet completed his outfit.

Cheetah highlighted the growing dustclouds ahead. “Five C-Class warbikes and one B-Class wartrike ahead. I’ve been able to identify them as belonging to the Grim Reefer warbike gang.”

The Grim Reefers. Bax had run across them a few times. They were easily identifiable by the logo on their leather jackets—a black-hooded skeleton smoking a joint.

“What’s more, Elvis and the Reefers have worked together, as recently as six months ago.”

Fuck. I knew it. So Elvis wasn’t alone.

“Cheetah, engage auxiliary armor plating on—”

Suddenly a beam of light shot out across the desert sky and the translucent diagram of his minirocket launcher array, his mini-jav, and his front machine guns went dark.

“Main front armor now at seventy-five percent.”

“Shit!”

Elvis had a laser. A fucking laser.

And not just any laser. That thing was huge.

This was worse than Bax thought. He knew Elvis was fast, but he didn’t know he had a fucking *laser*. Where was he concealing that thing? With the sun glaring in Bax’s face, he could barely even see the bombastic warcar, and that weapon definitely hadn’t been on the readouts.

“Deploy auxiliaries!”

“Auxiliary plating is already fifty percent destroyed. If I deploy it now, there’s a seventy-five percent chance it will be unrepairable.”

“Never mind! Deploy it!” This run was going to be a bit more costly than Bax had anticipated. The risks

of running.

Suddenly, several small pinprick clouds detached themselves from the ever-growing dustclouds on the horizon and rapidly started growing. Bright green boxes flew in from the edges of the windshield and shrank down to highlight the growing clouds. One of the boxes expanded, revealing within itself a much enlarged image of the cloud, which wasn't so much a cloud per se, but rather a glinting metal object with sparks flying behind it.

"Incoming guided missiles. Should I—"

"Fire air defense micros!"

Suddenly the microrocket arrays hidden under the rear fenders on both sides of the Silver Cheetah flipped up, firing a volley of defense rockets which raced up to the sky, meeting the incoming missiles with a dazzling array of explosions.

"Their leader on the trike is—"

"Never mind who their leader is. Cheetah—"

Suddenly Blonde Elvis sped up and swerved, cutting Bax off and blocking his view with the huge golden dreadnought. Two shiny silver pipes emerged from the back of Elvis's warcar, and what looked like a fine rolling mist started blowing out.

Within moments, everything had turned white.

They were lost in a fog.

All around, on all four sides, they rolled through a dense cloud of smoke, choking them like a miasma. His windows were useless. Bax slammed on the breaks, slowing down to a crawl.

"Golden Flash has deployed a wide-area smokescreen."

"I noticed."

"Now loading A.R. Visual Guides."

The windows all around Bax, covered with white

mist, blinked once, becoming dark, as if glitching.

As if they weren't windows at all, but screens.

They glitched again.

Then everything went dark.

The day had turned into night.

The Silver Cheetah no longer had windows, but rather four pitch-black digital displays. An inky nighttime darkness enshrouded the interior of the warcar, the only scant illumination coming from the myriad of glowing instruments.

Suddenly, blazing purple lines arced out onto the black displays, etching themselves like digital fire across the virtual landscape, forming a grid receding into the horizon. Hands still firmly planted on the yoke, he was now riding his warcar on a bright geometric plane. Fluorescent turquoise wireframe mountains rose out of this grid to loom in the distance. The sun, so bright moments ago, was now simply an orange ball with empty slats taken out of it, floating in the dark, digital sky.

The real world had been transformed into a literal cyberpunk landscape, as if they had been transported back in time and trapped inside the cover of a 1980's videocassette tape.

Suddenly, in the digital darkness outside the warcar, thin wireframe lines began constructing themselves.

"Cheetah, what the hell is going on?"

The wireframes were starting to take shape: an arm here, a leg there, handlebars here, a wheel there...

He could hear motors all around them.

And then, a loud sound like popcorn invaded the cab.

Bullets.

“Sorry, the warbikes take longer to digitize.”

Fucking hell.

Soon they were surrounded by glowing, yellow wireframe bikers riding on green wireframe warbikes, riddling them with neon bullets, flower-shaped muzzleflashes bursting out from geometric guns like violent cartoons.

Bax swerved wildly in a desperate attempt to evade the close-range fire.

Warbikes were no laughing matter. Nothing like normcycles, these behemoth personal war vehicles sported military-grade weapons including missile launchers and rail guns, large active display windscreens, often with retina targeting, flip-up, segmented armor shielding which, when activated, encased much of the rider's limbs and body, and mini powercores akin to the ones in warcars.

A warbike wasn't your grandma's motorcycle. It was a fucking tank on two wheels.

Their extensive armor and weaponry, coupled with their agile size and maneuverability, made it so in many cases, as few as two warbikes could easily take down a warcar. And the warbike was almost as big as a small warcar, and in the hands of some drivers, just as deadly.

“Fuck!” Bax cursed as he pressed a button on the dash, activating lateral flamethrowers. Orange cartoon flames shot out to either side of the Cheetah, spreading to the nearest wireframe rider. Wildly waving about his arms covered by a sketchy blaze, he lost control and crashed. Another nearby rider was nimble enough to dodge out of their way. In the background, the warbike was keeping its distance, its rider letting his bikers do most of the work.

One down, four to go.

But something was missing.

Elvis was nowhere in site.

“Where’s the Golden Flash?”

“I’ve lost it. It must have some kind of radar-cloaking device. I estimate it will take my anti-jamming algorithms at least thirty seconds to break it.”

Focus on the task at hand, he thought. First I’ve got to shake these damn bikers loose.

He flipped a switch on the dash and the forward-roof turret housing the twin vulcans deployed. He squeezed the triggers on the steering yoke’s twin sticks, creating some cover fire as he hit the gas, trying to break free from the warbikes. One unfortunate biker was crossing in front of him and he sped up enough to clip the tail end of his warbike, the force of his warcar sending the glowing green bike into a sideways scraping spin on the desert floor, throwing up a shower of neon sparks and no doubt shredding the warbiker’s leg into hamburger in the process.

That makes two.

Bax continued to accelerate, forcing the remaining bikers to take chase.

The cyberpunk scenery was now moving past them at a much faster pace, creating a parallax effect. The purple gridlines on both sides of him blurred into infinity, as the sun and turquoise mountains watched on.

Still no sign of Elvis.

“I’ve analyzed the warbikes and found a possible weakness. Their tires.”

Bax immediately shot out a spray of 22mm bullets at the front tire of a nearby bike. Suddenly a green grid shot out, engulfing the tire. Segmented armor.

“Emphasis on possible,” Cheetah amended.

Bax yanked the handlebars to the left and tried to ram one of the nearby wireframe bikes. It deftly swerved out of the way.

The incoming fire kept on pouring in.

“Aux plating now at twenty-five percent integrity.”

Even as he grappled with the bikes, Bax kept a watchful eye on the trike. He didn’t trust this strategy. His caution paid off as he noticed the wartrike’s nearest fender opening up, an array of wireframe missiles bristling ominously.

“Shit! Cheetah, activate—”

“On it.” Cheetah fired off a volley of defense micros just as a salvo of missiles leapt from the trike. Orange missiles blurred across the black sky before exploding into a fireworks show of turquoise and hot pink sparks.

“Fuck! I don’t have time to dick around with these clowns. We need to outrun them.”

“Bax, we’re nearing the edge of the smokescreen, activating normal window mode.”

All at once the orange cutout sun transformed into a sweltering yellow fire in the sky, the turquoise mountains became brown again, the purple grid dissolved back into the ridged, salty white surface of the Salt Flats, and the wireframes materialized into warbikes, which seemed to be retreating as the few wisps leftover from the smokescreen vanished into the wind. As the daylight came pouring back in, Bax put a hand in front of his face, his eyes readjusting to the light.

His world had become real again.

Not a moment later, the Golden Flash appeared out of nowhere, racing full speed ahead right towards the Cheetah. Suddenly, a massive sunglint

shined out, blinding Bax.

Everything went dark.

There was a huge boom, as if Bax were in the center of an explosion, leaving a high-pitched ringing in his ears. The air around him was suddenly hot and muggy. Sightless, he called out, "Cheetah! Confirm damage!"

"B– B– Baa– Ah– Aaahhh–" Cheetah's voice was garbled and far away. "Bah.. Xxxx.....xxxx"

She was dying.

His vision finally returning, he saw that he had overshot the Golden Flash. Searching desperately for his enemy, he slammed into a powerslide.

Bax was now facing his nemesis dead-on. The Golden Flash and Cheetah stood perfectly still. The only sound was the sound of his own breathing. It was as if the power of their gaze was so forceful they could lock eyes, straight through the tint of their windshields. Like two gunslingers in a shootout, fingers twitching barely above the trigger, each waiting for the other to make the first move.

And directly in between the two mortal enemies...a warbike. And on the warbike sat a lone rider. And on the rider's shoulders...

Nothing.

The man's head had been incinerated.

Actually, most of his shoulders and chest were gone too, his torso ending in not much more than a charred, concave stump.

The biker and warbike crashed to the ground.

Out of his peripheral vision, keeping his eyes dead ahead on Elvis, Bax noticed the other warbikes and wartrike were backing away, giving them space, no doubt wanting to stay clear of the hellish laser cannon.

Suddenly, the two duelists shot forward, kicking up huge clouds of sand, their wheels spinning in synchronicity as if their minds were two halves of the same deadly whole.

Bax fired his twin vulcans, keeping the Flash dead center, accelerating all the way. A golden turret rose. Muzzles flashed. Harsh explosive pops started up on Cheetah's hood and then windshield as he neared his adversary, the tiny explosions on the other side of the duradiamond beating into his eyes and ears. Still, the Flash stayed dead center in front, full speed ahead, closing the gap. They were now playing a fatal game of chicken.

Suddenly a volley of missiles erupted from the golden car, zooming towards Cheetah. Bax fired the defense micros, and the missiles flying in at him from all sides suddenly transformed into a torrent of violent explosions.

And still the Golden Flash loomed nearer.

Bax kept his fingers pressed into the triggers, his arms locked in place, refusing to budge. The relentless sound of explosive ammo pelting his vehicle continued, and the Flash zoomed forward, filling his windshield, until collision was imminent.

They were about to crash into each other at full speed.

At the last moment, the Flash swerved, missing Cheetah by inches.

Bax forced his soulless warcar into another salt-spraying bootlegger. The Flash did the same.

Once again locked into a showdown with his archenemy, he looked ahead at the golden monster in his way, boring holes into it with his eyes, intent on his prey.

A single plume of black smoke rolled off the golden turret on its rooftop, marring the pristine sky.

No longer pure gold.

No longer invincible.

He had taken out the enemy warcar's explosive ammo-firing machine guns. But he still didn't even know where that damned laser cannon was housed, so blinding was its eruption each time it fired.

"Bax," a voice began.

"Cheetah!"

She's not—

"No time to explain. The laser cannon got some of my s— s—" the voice started glitching, but then stabilized. "S— Storage, but I've restored the data to a backup drive and mostly repaired it."

That was no sunglint. It was the most powerful laser cannon he had ever seen. How much energy was he packing in that thing?

Lasers, especially one of that size, were extremely rare. The problem was that the energy required to operate them was off the charts, making them impractical for battle. They were mostly a novelty. One could perhaps use them to surprise or disorient the enemy, or simply to show off. But as a main weapon, they were useless.

"I've searched some hid— d— d— den databases on the Net, and come up with a remarkable discovery. The extremely rare New-Q-Lure Core, of which only three were ever assembled, was recently acquired by one Fukumoto Shinji, in return for a top secret run done for a h— h— high official from the government of the Lone Star Republic."

So that's how he does it!

"Bax, that laser has put half of my weapons systems offline and almost destroyed my main computer. You must run! We can't possibly win against a w— w— w— weapon like that. We've got to get out of here! I know he's fast, but we can do

enough damage from behind to make it painful for him to—”

“What happened to the warbiker?”

Bax hadn’t hit him.

“He was caught in the crossblast by the Flash’s laser cannon. He happened to be directly behind you when it fired.”

Ha!

It all made sense now.

That’s why Elvis kept running. That cannon draws a lot of energy. Takes a long time to recharge. That’s why he contracted the warbike gang to keep me busy while it recharged. He knows he’s no match for the Cheetah without his beloved laser. His plan was to keep trading off with the warbikes, like a tag team, until he landed a fatal blow.

But now that you’ve gone and royally fucked things up, and scared off your own little warbikers like a bunch of chickenshit losers, you’re mine, you son of a bitch!

Bax revved the engine. The Flash was motionless, not moving an inch.

“Bax, you must run! I’m telling you—”

“Like hell I’m running. I’m going to hit him hard before that cannon charges back up.”

“Bax—”

Bax gunned it, launching the Cheetah at his adversary, laying into the golden behemoth with his 22 millimeters. He flipped a switch, trying to open the center turret-mounted missile launcher, only to find it was offline.

He was yelling with all of his might, one last primal warcry, putting everything he had into the Flash with his vulcans.

The Flash didn’t move. It just stood there, parked

on the desert floor.

But suddenly—

Another sunglint.

And then...

Darkness.

Bax was blind.

The world exploded all around him again.

Everything was unbearably hot now. It felt as if he would burn up.

Ears ringing, Bax was barely able to discern the faint murmur in the background, as if from a voice millions of miles away. “Auxiliary armor now at z— z— zero percent integrity. Main armor taking damage. Main forward armor now at f— f— fifty percent...”

Bax, groping in the darkness, reached out to her.

“Cheetah, engage merge!”

Another explosion in the darkness.

“Cheetah, merge now!”

“—ax, it’s been less than forty-eight hours s— s— since your last merge. You need to—”

His sight was beginning to come back.

“I said engage merge, dammit!”

Suddenly, two metallic arms extended down from the ceiling on either side of Bax’s head. Each one then sprouted additional arms with shiny silver prongs, like small metallic trees. The prongs proceeded to insert themselves into the six helmetjacks, three on either side, which in turn connected to the skulljacks in his head.

Suddenly the interior of the car, the windshield, the leather seats, even Bax’s own body, disappeared.

Gone.

Instead, all there was, all around him, was sky, wind, and salt...

Whipping past him at two-hundred miles per

hour.

Like a disembodied spirit; only, he did have a body, a much larger one...

No steering yoke.

No buttons.

No pedals.

No triggers.

He was flying through the desert, freed from the mortal coils that were his frail flesh.

Instead, he was pure power.

Bax had become the warcar.

He no longer felt with fingertips, smelled with his nose, or saw with his eyes, as the warcar's cameras became his eyes, its tires became his fingertips, and he felt the wind blowing past his titanium plating.

Pure, paralleled, unbridled exhilaration.

Freedom.

He was now a three-and-a-half ton armory on wheels, bristling with weapons, clad in hi-tech armor plating, sailing smoothly over the desert floor at breakneck speed.

He no longer needed to talk with Cheetah, like humans do. They were now communicating at the speed of thought. His neurons were reaching out and intertwining with all the data in her system as their psyches interlocked, melded, blurred. He could see all her calculations as if they were his own, as if she was merely an extension of him. Their mental processes comingled until soon it was difficult to tell where Bax ended and Cheetah began. Their minds were fusing into one.

This was his home, his temple.

His solitude.

His fortress.

Becoming one with his Cheetah was the closest

thing to a religious experience he had ever felt. All his life, in love with the beautiful machine, wanting to know everything he could about them, pouring every free second into becoming the best he could at driving them, racing them, pushing them to their limits. Now, to finally *become* what he loved. There were not many people in the world who could make that claim, not many people who could ever achieve anything close to what he achieved every time they merged.

And to become not just any car, but the most sophisticated piece of automotive equipment ever built.

Far from being a normal car mounted with weapons, the warcar was something else entirely. Part tank, part racecar, part mechanical dragon breathing fire through their flamethrowers and heavy ordnance. To power and speed they fused a third advantage: cutting-edge AI tech going far beyond a simple targeting computer, enhancing every aspect of the driver's combat abilities. Some with even the capability to merge man with machine, if even for a short duration. The technology was experimental and extremely risky.

Which was why Bax loved it.

The ridged white surface of the ground, whizzing past him at over two hundred miles per hour, mere inches away. The smooth, dry crust of ancient brine massaging the surface of his tires, like gliding over butter with an edge of salt. Unfettered by flesh. Surpassing human limits.

Nothing could compare to this.

But his bliss was soon interrupted as a beam of glorious radiance lashed out across the desert, searing into his metallic flesh. Instantly, his body felt like it was on fire. Desperately, he opened his steely

jaws to retaliate, breathing out two missiles. But in his fiery agony he misfired, and the missiles exploded harmlessly on the desert floor.

Just as his joys were augmented in this new, powerful body, so were his pains. No longer in need of readouts or instruments, he instantly sensed that another thirty percent of his primary front armor and two more of his weapon systems were now offline. But instead of being mere statistics, it felt like his guts had been burnt out of him, like his entire body was now burning to ash.

Fuck! He had waited too long to switch over, too long to make the decision to become one with the machine, and had given Elvis the advantage. Now, he was in critical condition. Through his perfect calculations, he knew exactly how much it would take to breach his engine block sheath, blasting into his engine, his powercore, setting in motion a chain reaction, and destroying this mighty body of his.

His calculations revealed to him the sobering fact that one more blast, and he'd be a goner, just a pile of charred scrap mingled with human bones in this salty grave.

The Golden Flash hissed past, a streak of golden fire on the desert floor. Bax suddenly engaged the e-brake internally, inside his mechanical three-and-a-half-ton body, powersliding along the salt, clouds of dust kicking up all around him, like a dance with the desert, twirling his massive yet elegant bulk in a smooth arc to face his now fleeing enemy, already just a speck on the horizon.

He struggled to stay conscious. He was being consumed by the flames coursing through his veins, smoldering his body, burning him alive. Cheetah was dying. He was dying. They would die together in this desolate place, just a piece of burning wreckage on

the sunbaked desert ground. The speck on the horizon was getting smaller, but he had no doubt it was to buy time to recharge his laser and come back around one more time to deliver the killing blow.

That laser had a range of at least three times a machine gun. If he tried running, he'd be mowed down easily. He instantly calculated, dipping effortlessly into Cheetah's processors, how long it would take for the laser to recharge. He had exactly twenty-nine seconds.

He now had two choices.

He could become a landmark, joining with the antediluvian salt all around him to mark the final resting place of a bygone warrior.

Or.

He could.

Fight.

Forcing himself to ignore the pain, he revved his engines and sprang forward, putting everything into this one last effort. He and Cheetah were now moving as one, their great silver bulk pouncing across the salt like a cat, its paws sprinting effortlessly across the dunes. They reached maximum velocity in about half the precious seconds they had to spare. As they sped forward, like lightning across the sky, all his thoughts, all his focus flowed into Cheetah, ranging her depths, delving the extent of her powers, searching for the way...the one way to win.

There it is.

The New-Q-Lure Core.

Developed by the Lone Star Republic's research and development team, and named in honor of a famous politician who grew up in Old Texas, it was touted as the most powerful portable energy source at such a minuscule size ever created. A veritable miniature fission power plant...running a car. That's

how he had enough power to fire off that laser cannon, and at such high intensity.

And that was Bax's ticket.

He now knew what he had to do.

As he honed in on his target, computations moving at the speed of light, something happened. Something sublime. Bax could now feel the pain falling away, all misery and hurt flowing out from him, as he became one with the calculations. He was becoming one with the targeting computer. As his mind transcended physical limits, high in the stratosphere of pure logic and data, pain no longer had any meaning for him. His entire consciousness was becoming...

Math.

Pure and perfect math.

The soul of the universe.

He was now becoming one with the underpinnings of reality, that base level at which cause and effect operate, independent of the petty concerns of fleeting mortal existence. To feel pleasure or pain, to strike or be struck, no longer held any meaning for him. For he was moving with the perfect eternal gears of the universe, where every inexorable event was right, could never be anything but right, every immutable change was perfect, as the perfect allbeing, allnow moves forward through its never-ending permutations.

Calculating, projecting, computing. The imperfectness of the human mind becoming one with infinity, as he reached out into pure numbers to find what he needed.

And then something else happened.

Suddenly, he no longer cared if he lived or died.

Because now, in this eternal moment, in his oneness with reality, was the only time it didn't

matter that he had lost her.

Sherry.

And as soon as he went back to his normal existence, to the imperfect world of not being one with eternity and logic, to being merely human, the gaping hole in his heart, in his entire world would be there again, the misery, the heartache, the sorrow, the pain of being human would return in all its ferocity.

But now, in this fleeting plane of evanescent rapture, she no longer held any appeal to him. As his mind melded with the warcar's algorithms, her circuits wrapped in his loving neuronal embrace, the electrons dancing between them like the spark that gave life to the primordial soup, he spasmed in the throes of the never-ending orgasm that is the cosmos, that constantly births existence to everything. His cerebrum quivered serenely in the mindsex, his psyche expanding to fill the universe, his very thoughts becoming things, squirming into her programming, fluid, virile, and alive..filling every crevice, every cavity, as his mindjuice slid into her ones and zeros.

It was fucked up.

It was perverse.

It was heaven.

God, my life is so fucked up, the thought flashed for just a moment, interrupting his bliss. But that's the life of a runner.

Suddenly Bax fired off a lone missile into the salty air.

No onscreen crosshairs, no triggers, no guesses.

Just pure math, connecting him and his target. Cause and effect.

The solitary missile flew through the sky, seeming to move in slow motion. No hurry to reach its

destination. No effort.

The Golden Flash was now huge, close, bearing down on him. He could see the energy crackling, building up on the hidden turret under its grill that housed the laser cannon. It was about to fire. But just then...

The lone missile connected.

Exactly at the only spot on the golden carapace where it could have any chance of penetrating through to the New-Q-Lure Core.

And penetrate it did.

Even though extra money and planning had been spent to fortify specifically that part, there was just one single point where if a missile struck at just the right angle, it would get through.

And that's exactly where the missile struck.

As the New-Q-Lure Core exploded outward, killing the driver instantly, turning the Golden Flash into a gigantic mushroom cloud, expanding outward, upward, reaching to the morning sky, almost touching the sun, Bax didn't have a care in the world. He didn't notice as the bikers hightailed it the fuck out of there, terrified of meeting Elvis's fate. He no longer cared.

He simply was.

Until about two seconds later, when his mind suddenly shut down from the overload.

Floating in the darkness.

A chime sounded.

All of existence passed before him in an instant, taking only the amount of time it takes a single drop of water to ripple outward on the smooth glassy surface of the sky.

And in that instant he saw everything.

The forbidden fruit in the digital garden of eden.
The destroyer of worlds, the bane of all existence.
The death of the organic and the rise of the
inorganic.

The destruction of everything in the universe.
The creation of a new one.

From somewhere far away, a voice was wooing
him.

The voice was so smooth it almost purred, like a
benign feline beckoning him to come with her. But
where do you want me to go, in this black
nothingness? I don't want to go anywhere. It's
comfortable here, where I don't have to think. Don't
have to do. Just drift, just float..in the comfortable
void.

The voice purred at him again. It was getting
more insistent.

Suddenly, he had a sensation, like he was in a
body.

Oh fuck.

"Bax, Bax, are you there? Can you hear me?"

Bax reached up and felt himself. Yes, he indeed
had a body. And hands to feel it with. Fuck.

Coming out of merge was always a jarring
experience. Much more jarring than going in. He'd
much rather be a warcar than a puny gangly human
with all these useless fleshy weaponless
appendages.

Bax looked around. They were parked on the
desert side of the interrepublic.

"I thought I told you to only take over when I give
you permission."

"I just wanted to get us away from that spot in
case the bikers had friends and came back. This
looked like a safe spot. In the interim, I've completely

repaired my data construct. I'm as good as new. My physical shell, on the other hand, could use a little work."

Als could be programmed to strictly obey all orders, but that usually ended up in disaster during a fight, some previously given order, long since forgotten by the driver, being followed to the letter at exactly the wrong moment. To avoid such situations, manufacturers programmed them to obey orders, within the framework of their basic logic routines. In other words, they had "common sense." Bax wasn't sure he could say the same about many humans...

"How long was I out?" Bax said as he removed the helmet. The metallic arms had long since detached themselves.

"Only about fifteen minutes, but during that time I assessed that your mind has undergone another roughly three-point-four percent damage. Bax, you need to give yourself at least a few weeks before you do something as reckless as that again. The human mind is only capable of so much. You need time to rest to avoid psychic damage."

He tapped a display on the console. Tire pressure optimal.

"Yeah, yeah, always nagging. Did they add that to your subprogramming to make you more like a real woman?"

He tapped another button. Engine status...fully functional. By some miracle, Elvis's lasers had only hit weapons and armor, almost completely missing the engine. The sensors showed that the duranium alloy engine sheath only had a few minor contortions on one side from the heat. But that laser was fucking powerful. A few more seconds of battle, and...

"Bax, I'm being serious. We're talking about

potentially permanent damage. How many times have I—”

“I’m fine. All I need is a little rest and I’ll be good as new. Now quit bothering me.” That compassion chip is getting a bit annoying, he thought to himself as he started the engine. It gave a gravelly complaint, but still worked, and the scorched warcar began moving forward along the light, fluffy terrain. They were no longer on the salt flats. Instead of salt, they were coasting over a flat, endless expanse of sand, like riding on an oceanless beach.

“Yes, of course. My directive to obey my owner takes precedence over my personality routines. But my logic dictates that I ask just one more question... are you trying to kill yourself?”

Bax just stared ahead at the road, not answering.

There was just this one little problem with merge.

Merge rot.

Merging was a highly experimental technology. Only built into a few models, most runners eschewed it, claiming that mind and machine simply weren’t made to become one. A human brain was one thing. Silicon chips were something else entirely.

Therefore, according to the naysayers, he was slowly killing himself.

But it didn’t matter. Because merge was the only time in his waking life when he could forget.

Forget her.

Shit. He wasn’t seeing any breeches in the control wall. And driving in this sand was getting annoying. It was all soft and mushy, not tight and smooth, like that salt. It was like fucking a loose vagina. He swerved away from the wall, giving himself ample space, and then turned around so he was facing the highway. He pressed a button on the yoke to bring up his sights. His eyes focused the floating reticle on

the windshield onto a point on the ferrocement wall. He pressed a button on the dash and a missile shot out and blew up a section of the control wall.

“Bax, you know they monitor this area with satellite AI.”

“Then they can send me a bill. Can’t be more expensive than the parts I’m gonna need to fix you.”

He got back onto the highway, moving slowly over the fresh rubble, and then gunned it, heading east.

They didn’t talk for a time. The sun was getting much higher in the sky when the massive fortress-city wall approached, extending out for miles in either direction, protecting the millions of people trapped behind it. As he drove towards the wall, a gigantic angel in flowing white robes rose up from behind it, a long golden trumpet in one hand, pressed to its lips, as its shimmering blonde hair whipped in the wind. Then, as if by magic, the Rocky Mountains rose up behind it as if to join in the clarion call, their majestic snow-capped peaks shining through the angel’s translucent white fluttering robes.

The heavenly vista opened upon him suddenly, like a delirious vision in the desert, and although he knew it was just an elaborate holographic projection, it made him feel as if he were passing from this worldly realm to some place more ethereal.

Ah, yes. The blonde indian from Cumorah. Hovering like a weightless titan above the new temple crouching in the heart of the megacity. The old temple had been destroyed in the war. But with the money the Mormon Church was now raking in off its colonies in the Subantarctic Tropics, they built it back, five times its original size.

The elders had visited him once, back in Mont-

Dakota. One of their selling points was that he could have more than one wife. After the formation of the Beehive Republic, the Mormon Church had reinstated polygamy. Bax remembered what he had told them, that the Church needed polygamy to help attract people, since they didn't really have anything unique to offer. Looking at the angel he remembered now their answer to that, the thing they had told him was the most important thing they offered.

Salvation.

As he reached the megacity wall he was greeted by two guards in full kevlar armor, their eyes hidden behind glinting silver visors, Beehive insignias adorning their shoulders and fully automatic rifles gripped in their black gloves. Behind them stood a large durasteel gate. To the sides of the gate he could see the numerous scorch marks that pocked the huge wall all up and down its length, a testament to its absolute necessity. Next to the gate was a large viewscreen displaying X-rays of Cheetah along with a full technical readout. One of the guards walked up to the driver side window and, lowering his weapon momentarily, waved a device at Bax. A brainscanner. He knew that the Republic's equipment had scanned him long before he even approached the wall and knew every detail about him and his cargo. The brainscanner was merely a formality.

The guard with the brainscanner waved him on. As the durasteel gate began to rise and he drove into the city, he thought to himself.

Ha.

Salvation.

Who needs salvation in a world as damned as this?

* * *

Instantly the elderly man lying in the hospital bed perked up as he saw Bax walk through the door, titanium strongbox in hand. All white hair and dimply cheeks, the charismatic patriarch was eating jello salad with shredded carrots, but he handed the tray to one of the nurses fluttering around him and raised his arms in the air.

“Oh, bless the Lord! You made it. Protected by the hand of the Lord, all the way from Francisco. I put your name on the prayer roll at the temple. I knew you’d be safe.”

They were on the fifty-first floor of the new wing of Beehive Hospital, dubbed “The Stripe” because of its innovative design. Reserved for the most elite inhabitants of the city, from outside you could see right through it to the other side. Two walls of glass with thousands of people milling about inside, it looked like a gigantic futuristic ant farm with people instead of ants. Inside, the shiny white floor beneath their feet and silver walls separating the rooms did little to help Bax escape the sense of vertigo. They were trapped between two enormous windows covering the north and south walls, giving a view so fantastic it bordered on floating mid-air above the city. Dusk had overtaken the metropolis, and the what seemed like millions of lights winking into existence appeared to recede back into infinity to both the north and south, giving the impression of an eternally growing human settlement, limited only by the gigantic city wall to the west, and the even bigger Rocky Mountains standing like megalithic sentinels to the east. Desert sand trapping the city on one side, and alpine snow on the other.

Urban sprawl, interrupted.

This dimply man addressing him, Elder H. Jeffrey Hogan of the quorum of the Twelve Apostles,

happened to be one of the most powerful men in Beehive. Third in line from being the absolute ruler of the republic, he also owned a smattering of key businesses in the valley, including the largest news outlet, the Moroni Trumpet. A gaggle of wires flowed from him to several racks of machines, monitoring vital statistics.

Upon entering town, Bax had pulled over to the warcar stop and slept the sleep of the damned for several hours inside of Cheetah. Blonde Elvis and his golden forelock, not content to be dead, plagued his nightmares. Then he had paid for a quick shower, downed a couple of horrible warcar stop hamburgers, and headed straight to Beehive Hospital.

Bax smiled as one of the nurses took the box from him, its freight still beating within.

Elder Hogan eyed the cargo. "Who'd have believed we'd live in a time when the Lord has seen fit to let his children create artificial organs to allow his servants to extend our earthly sojourn? And manufactured in the Francisco Republic no less. Ironical. That place is quite decadent. But the Lord works in mysterious ways. Now about that payment." The apostle looked at Bax and nodded towards a group of people in the corner. "My youngest wife, Laura, will take care of that."

Bax hadn't been paying attention, but about five or six women were seated nearby in a corner of the large hospital room, some eating jello salad, others playing cards with a strange colorful deck that looked like it wasn't for gambling. One of them stood up, and Bax's eye was immediately drawn in her direction.

A young woman with strawberry hair and a peach dress with floral print and white lace around a high

neckline, he would have figured her more for a daughter than a wife. She smiled at Bax.

The apostle continued. "A friend of mine owns a repair shop that specializes in warcars. He'll take care of any damage incurred during the trip, all expenses on me. Weapons, armor, ammo, whatever you need. He'll get you stocked up. You can follow Laura over there, and then she'll give you a ride to get the part."

"That's mighty generous of you—"

Elder Hogan waved a hand, "No, it was understood as part of our agreement. Think nothing of it."

"I appreciate it. The trip was...dangerous."

"There are powerful forces at work that don't want me to continue my holy calling. But once I get this new heart installed, I'll be ready to go back and grab the bull by the horns. I'm glad the Lord blessed you to make it here in one piece with your hallowed cargo."

"So am I," Bax replied.

Powerful forces, indeed. The Mormon Church had grown quite influential in recent decades, controlling its own republic, as well as far away overseas industrial ventures. Many a competing church would be happy to get rid of one of its most prominent leaders. Could that be who hired Elvis?

"Look at him, sweetheart," Elder Hogan crooned. "He's a wonderful man, isn't he? Without him, I couldn't enjoy my new wife. Who knows how many children we'll have together, and how his bravery has changed destiny?" He turned to Bax. "I knew I could count on you. You came highly recommended. Now I can continue leading my flock, as long as the Lord sees fit."

Only the very wealthy could afford runners, what with warcars costing so much as well as them

getting blasted to pieces so often. Most of Bax's clientele were referrals, and that's the way he liked it. He didn't like unknowns.

"We won't be gone long," Laura said to Hogan. "Don't worry, Jeffrey, the other sister wives will take care of you while I'm gone." She leaned down and kissed him on the forehead.

Bax cocked his head. Sister wives. Was that just what they called each other, or were they really all sisters? Well, families are big out here, he reminded himself. Anything's possible. As Bax stole a curious glance at the other women, they did all kind of look similar. He had noticed that with other Mormon clients, too, but had assumed it was because all Mormons kind of looked alike. As if they were all one big happy family trying to take over the world.

And now the old man would be able to continue propagating the world with more of them, together with this young bride, thanks to the cargo Bax had just delivered. The Republics were at constant war with one another, and, although the megacities were supposed to be nogo zones, a recent precision drone airstrike had destroyed the last of Beehive's artificial organ factories. With his failing heart, the old apostle had had no other choice than to import that which he needed to save his life from another republic. They could have gone and retrieved it themselves, with some of their jet fighters, but that would have risked getting them in a skirmish in the process. Much smarter to outsource the work, and the risk, to a third party, who, with a much less costly vehicle, could also do it at a fraction of the expense.

Hogan's eyes shined as he gazed at his young wife. "You are my favorite, Laurums." He looked over at Bax. "She's lovely isn't she? How the Lord has blessed me. But still a bit of a dunce when it comes

to practical matters, though, I'm afraid. My other, older wives are much more experienced in aiding the sick and those undergoing medical procedures. But I do go on sometimes. You've already given enough of your time. I better let you go and get that payment. I'm sure you have other clients to attend to."

Bax followed Laura out of the hospital.

The Hogan mansion was the standard to be expected from Bax's clients, except the only slight difference being that there were high chairs all over the place and macaroni and cheese almost dripping from the walls, as if he were caught in a horror movie where the set decorators had decided to change it at the last minute to comedy. The sound of the dozens of kids, tended by a spattering of Mormon wives, cooking, changing diapers, playing games with the young ones, was mildly deafening, and it didn't take long before he realized he was wrong. This was worse than any horror movie.

They passed a large room where several teenage and adult kids knelt in prayer, one of the older boys waxing eloquent about Hogan's speedy return to full health.

Laura led him from room to room, parting the kids like Moses in the wilderness, and he began to feel like he truly did need a miracle to get his paycheck. Although he usually received his payment in creds upon arrival, they had agreed to an unusual arrangement, but one he had been more than eager to accept, for as it turned out, the old codger had in his possession a very rare and powerful warcar processor, and had agreed to trade it in payment for the run.

She kept up a nice patter in a pleasant friendly tone the whole way, as if she was a reverse tour

guide, trying to get him to ignore the chaos all around him. “Before Elder Hogan got sick he was going to buy a warcar for himself, just to try it out, maybe take it to Wendover and back, blow up a few abandoned buildings, along with a warheli entourage to protect him, you know, that sort of thing. That’s why he was picking out these custom parts, so he could build the warcar he wanted. But then his ailment befell him.”

Bax was getting antsy to get the extremely expensive little part and leave. She led him into a small office and closed the door behind them. “Where did I put that processor?” She began searching through drawers.

The item Bax was to claim as his prize was a crystal DNA processor, as small as a laptop processor, but the same one used to power the C27s – the fastest and most powerful warjets ever created.

Suddenly there was a loud banging on the office door. Laura answered it and a small child looked up. “Can I have a sammich?”

“Dear, have Trudy make it for you, I’m a little bit busy right now.” She closed the door on the kid’s face and then looked at Bax and laughed. “Kids.”

“Yeah,” Bax said awkwardly. “Kids.”

“Oh, I remember. I was cleaning out some stuff from the office and I think I put it in a box which ended up in another room. Just come with me and we’ll get you squared away.”

She led him out of the office and down a long, eerily quiet white corridor which somehow was not dripping with macaroni and cheese. “He built this part of the house for when he has a new bride. It’s completely soundproof, and the kids and the old wives aren’t allowed in here. I can’t believe I’m telling

you all this. But you're like family. Jeffrey thinks very highly of you."

Just about the time Bax was thinking he should offer to wait for her outside, she led him through a door and quickly shut it. They were now alone in a room with high arched ceilings and red velvet drapes. A large bed sat in the middle of the room with a canopy, a few streaming white drapes flowing down around it.

"Look, I'm a little bit in a hurry, so if I could just get that part—"

"Oh, this? Yeah, it's a bedroom." She laughed. "Silly me, I organized his office the other day and moved the item here by accident. You seem a bit on edge. Relax, I don't bite. Why don't you sit down for a moment? Make yourself comfortable." She patted the bed, giving him a pleasant business smile.

"I'll stand, thanks."

She began rifling through some dresser drawers, Bax held in place by his dire need to get that rarest of processors, so his deadly pilgrimage would not be all for nothing.

"Oh, come on, you must be tired from such a long trip. Make yourself at home. If you want, I'll go grab a chair from the other room. I don't know what happened to the one that's normally in here."

Bax wanted to sigh but instead said in the most polite voice he could muster, "No need, ma'am."

She paused momentarily from her searching to take a few steps towards Bax, her eyes wide with amazement. "You are scared of me!" She poked Bax in the chest. "Such a big man, scared of a little woman."

"There are not many things I'm scared of."

"I know what it is. You're repulsed by me because I'm Mormon."

“I don’t have any problems with Mormons, as long as they don’t cause me any problems.”

“Yeah, but everyone knows about our so-called ‘magic underwear,’ those unsightly pioneer underclothes that make a man’s thing just shrivel up in disgust at the sight of them. That’s why you are repulsed by me and don’t want to get near me.”

“Um, that thought hadn’t crossed my mind.”

“That’s what it is—you think I’m wearing those icky things. Well, I’ll have you know something.” She came up really close to Bax’s face as if to emphasize the next point. “I’m not.”

“Good for you. But if you don’t mind, I’d just like to get my payment.”

Her face was now only inches away from Bax’s. He didn’t budge.

She laughed. “I’m just messing with you.” She went back to her business, seeming to remember something as she tried, unsuccessfully, to reach deep into a high shelf in the closet. She walked over to a large step ladder and tried to pick it up. “Ughh.” Too heavy. “Here, do you mind?”

This time Bax did sigh, but he walked over and picked up the ladder and set it in front of the closet.

“Thanks.” She mounted the ladder and climbed up. The ladder was more than high enough, and she had to bend over quite low as she stuck her head into the closet and began rummaging through some items on the shelf. This was the most disorganized rich person’s house he had ever seen, Bax thought to himself as he waited for her next to the ladder.

“Besides, I’m too young and beautiful to wear garments. Those are for old ladies. Ewww.” She looked back at him and scrunched up her nose for emphasis.

“Well, that’s the life of a Mormon woman, I guess.”

She was quite a bit shorter than Bax, so even on the step ladder, her ass was about level with his head. Whenever she looked back at him, he pretended like he was staring elsewhere.

“Aghh...this dress keeps getting caught on this ladder.” She pulled up her peach dress around her hips. The dress, despite being modest, was made of soft material that clung quite snugly to her figure when she did so.

She kept having to reach deeper and deeper into the closet as she sifted through the myriad items. As she did so, her dress rose slightly higher and higher the further she leaned in. Finally she let out a sigh. “Ughh. This darn dress.” She pulled the dress up even higher, so it was just barely covering her ass, and then reached back and smoothed it, pulling it tighter onto her shapely derriere. She was so deep in the closet she wasn’t looking back now, so Bax didn’t have to worry about pretending he wasn’t looking. She was now giving him the best view he’d had of this side of a young Mormon wife.

“Ugh,” She said after while. “So much stuff in here.”

She stopped rummaging for a moment and popped her head out. Bax didn’t try as hard to hide his gaze, as it was so obvious now.

“But really, you’re teasing me. You really do think I’m wearing garments. That’s what it is. Well here. I’ll prove it to you.” She pulled the hem of her dress all the way up over her ass, revealing lacy red panties adorning pink cheeks. “See? Normal underwear.”

Bax stepped a little closer, appraising the ass and legs stretched out on the ladder in front of him.

“How could I fit those things under here?” She ran a thumb under the side of her panties, pulling them away from her pink flesh.

Bax didn't say anything, but kept looking.

"I think you like what you see. It's a good angle, isn't it?"

She wiggled her ass a bit, to show it off.

Bax gulped.

"Wanna see more?"

Bax nodded, ever so slightly.

"Okay." She grabbed the dress and pulled it all the way over her shoulders, revealing her lithe, freckled body. Then she tossed it to him.

Bax caught it.

She giggled. "This is fun, being all the way up here. You're so much taller than me, but now I'm higher than you."

Bax dropped the dress and came a bit closer so his head was mere inches from her ass.

"Ah...feels so much better now. So hard to do physical activities with that restrictive dress on. Here, I think I'll take this off, too."

Laura then slipped off her lacy red bra, revealing small pink nipples, and handed it to Bax. Bax took it, and dropped it next to the dress.

"Ooh...whatever are we going to do about all this..." Laura proceeded to rub her naked breasts, letting out a lustful sigh. "With my husband away, and me in this room with no one to keep me company." She tweaked a nipple and moaned.

Bax was looking straight into her ass, not saying a word. She wiggled it back and forth, taunting him.

Bax grabbed her thighs, taking one in each hand. He just held on for a moment, studying the pink and beige that flushed those delicious cheeks and thighs. He began to lick her thighs, in the middle. His tongue then caressed her inner legs, then ran along her hips. Then he let himself go with abandon, licking and

sucking her ass cheeks.

“Ohh my god...yes...” Laura closed her eyes as she moaned, moving her ass gently along with Bax’s caressing. “I’m sick of these Mormons; I need a *real* man.” Bax moved on from sucking to biting, leaving red bite marks on this heavenly surface. Staring into the immaculate flesh before him, he wanted to devour every part of it. He then grabbed her panties and pulled them down, revealing a moist, pink vagina, glistening with juices. He prepared his tongue and then moved in on the sumptuous cunt, but at the last moment something caught his eye. In those pink folds, now dripping great shimmering drops, something that shouldn’t be there.

“Fuck!”

Bax sighed and looked up at the thirty foot stripper undulating seductively in the swirling haze. She was Mexican or Brazilian, or something. Whatever she was, she was hot. Almost naked, except a suit made of shiny black straps digging into her caramel flesh. They had designed the circular bar around her, so that patrons could enjoy the larger than life show as they sat and drank. This she-devil, smooth, exposed dark skin writhing in the unholy vapors, as if she were making love to the clouds, was not a true hologram, like Beehive City’s guardian angel. That one must have been fucking expensive. No, she was based on a more affordable tech that needed to be projected onto fine water particulates suspended in the air, and as her belly and limbs rolled over the fog, parts of them disappeared whenever they passed over a hole in the brume.

Mist flowed freely throughout the place, refracting sweeping multicolor spotlights and covering all within with a fine sheen, as if everyone

were sweating. Similarly unreal dancers, flitting in and out of the vapors like tantalizing devils, adorned each of the tables.

He was in the best place in Beehive to feel like you're not in Beehive. During the war, this city had become one of the biggest and most thriving megacities in the Western Republics. But unfortunately many of the people here were Mormon, which put a damper on the nightlife. To make matters worse, the Mormon Church controlled the government and had enacted strict zoning laws, making it hard for business owners to open a place that catered to the non-Mormon crowd. Whenever he had business here, he always came to this dive, situated in the seedy part of town—if any part of Beehive City could be called seedy compared to some of the other shitholes he'd been to.

People all around him were smiling energetically, gesticulating wildly, drinking merrily over cheerful conversation, or dancing as if their life depended on it, drenched in sweat. Others were freaking out, waving their arms protectively while crying like babies, as if the people in the bar were all demons. Still others were carried away in the throes of ecstasy, unable to control themselves, riding a barstool or table or whatever was close to them as they orgasmed loudly.

The all-female bartenders had been ignoring him for a while, but one finally approached. She was a bit on the oldish side, but still fairly bangable.

"A lager, and..." Bax pointed at an item on the menu lying on the bar in front of him.

The bartender looked down. She raised an eyebrow. "You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"It's just that...we don't get many orders for that

one. But...your wish is my command, pilgrim. I'll be back in a flash." She winked at him and disappeared.

He looked at a lady about five seats down that was trying to hump the leg of a barstool, some guys nearby laughing as she did.

The bartender was back with his lager, but not the little item he was raring to get his hands on.

He sipped his brew, turning his attention back to the stripper. As he savored the sight, luscious tan skin peeping out through the black straps squeezing those colossal thighs, he mused. Why is it okay when its up there, away from me, and only pixels?

But when its up close...

He was trying not to think about it. But his mind kept coming back.

Some of them were crazy...those androids. It was relatively rare...but Human Identity Syndrome was a thing. They convinced themselves that they were human, then did everything they could to prove it... to the world, to themselves, who knew. One of the best ways to do that was by having as many human "experiences" as possible. Relationships, family...sex. They wanted to do everything they could with humans, as if our natural cells could somehow cure their artificial ones.

The sickness manifested itself differently in different androids. With some, it was purely a platonic fascination. With others—Human Identity Nymphs, or HINs, as they were called—they became obsessed with having intimate contact with humans. And the more humans, the better. It somehow made them feel more human.

He shuddered.

Well, at least she had given him the processor after he had called her out. She had known where it was all along and produced it immediately when he

told her he wasn't going to fuck an android. When she told Bax not to tell anyone—both about her wanting to fuck him, and the fact that she was an android—he had just shrugged and said, “Fuck all if I care about that. Why would I tell anyone, as long as I have my processor?” She handed him the processor and he high-tailed it out of that nightmarish mansion as quickly as he could. He could have told Hogan. He could have gotten her in real trouble. But as it was, she had only had to endure a few moments of private humiliation in front of one of her beloved humans.

He took it out of his jacket pocket and looked it over. Flat and square, yet translucent and crystalline. He watched in fascination at how it took the colorful spotlights in the bar and bent them into a thousand different trajectories, its sheer beauty alone belying the billions of DNA strands trapped within. A smile came to his face as he imagined how quick Cheetah's computations would now be, how effortless and instantaneous her visual guides, how responsive her targeting systems. He stared at it for a while, then frowned, wondering what was taking the bartender so long.

Where the hell is that item? Trying to get the nympho out of his head made him want it now more than ever.

The sick bastard. Married to an android. No doubt the members of his “flock” knew nothing about that little fact. Some people have a fetish for it. But for Bax, nothing could make him want to wrench harder than the thought of what he had almost just done. It wasn't like it was with Cheetah. That was entirely different. That was pure. That was how man and machine were meant to touch—through their minds. Not their bodies.

The sad thing was, that wasn't the first time that had happened to Bax. That's why he had noticed it right off the bat. The Anthrobotix logo, in sparkling opalescent font, there in the inside seem of her coochie.

The waitress returned with a silver platter with only a shiny microchip laid atop it. Bax took the chip. He studied the small square object, turning it over in his hand as it took the dim light in the bar and reflected it into dozens of different colors.

He plugged the chip into his lower skullport, just behind and below the ear.

Now I can forget about that artificial bitch and think about her.

The one whom I eternally lost.

He let the emotion rush in, saturating his pores, soothing him with its essence. He let his mind be sucked into the vast whirling vortex of memories that made up his life. He sped past all of them in a lightspeed haze until he had arrived at the only one that mattered.

Sherry was a purebred, old-fashioned Mont-Dakotan, the opposite of him. Which is what, he guessed, drew him to her.

They had met because of cars—which was how he met everybody. When other Mont-Dakotans had been riding horses, Bax had been figuring out how to hotwire a car at the age of ten. And he had been participating in illegal backstreet races against adults since he was twelve. Ever since his first time turning over the ignition, he had to be in the inside of a car. They and he were inseparable.

She was dating a guy who let Bax drive his hot rod in return for doing some engine work on it, and that was how they met. She was always hanging around that guy, but he was always busy, so sometimes

when Bax was working on the car, she'd come around and ask him questions.

Nothing had happened back then, and she moved away for a couple of years. But then she came back. And well, life happened.

"I'd only date a man in uniform," she told him as they rode through the valley surrounded by evergreens after the first time they fucked. He asked her why she had just fucked him, then. That was just for fun, she replied. Nothing serious. She was also seeing her ex-boyfriend, the one with the hot rod, but she was just fucking him for fun, too.

His heart was crushed.

The next day, he enlisted in the Mont-Dakota army. He assumed they would send him not that far away, to defend his republic here in Normerica, that he'd be able to see her from time to time, but instead they sent him to Afghanistan, a side war to gain resources to help in the fight against the other republics, and about the millionth war that had played out in that faraway nation.

When he came back four years later, he had learned through mutual friends that while he was on his tour of duty, she had been raped and murdered by a warbike gang while visiting a concert in Seattle. He had also learned that that same gang had been destroyed by a rival gang a few days after that.

Such was life in this fucked up world.

Crushed once again, this time without any hope, he had no idea what he was going to do with his life. All of his dreams, his ambitions, had been quashed in an instant, as if some cruel maniacal being had created this life, this world, only to make him feel pain.

Only one love remained.

The beautiful machine.

In Afghanistan, they had put him in a cybertank. Slow and clumsy, but with a vast array of weapon systems, it wasn't his first choice, but he got used to it. They had quickly found out that he had the best combat reflexes of anyone in his squadron, forcing his tank to act like a hot rod and blowing away enemies with ease. So when he got back, now destitute, the first thing he did was use the meager funds he had saved up in the military to buy a used normcar and outfit it himself with guns, like folks had done in the early days. He even installed the armor he had gotten from the junkyard on trade by himself. Everyone laughed when he said he would take it outside the city walls. Until he did, and came back with the warcar of the guy who had attacked him, thinking him easy prey. It was a shitty warcar, but it was a warcar.

He couldn't see himself working a normal job and having a family. Besides...she was gone. There was only one life for him.

The life of a runner.

And that first conquest had made him something different then these people all around him. He was now one of an elite group, only a few thousand spread across the continent, that dared to leave the protection of the giant city walls, to the land of tumbleweeds, fire, and ash, the land where he with the biggest guns and sharpest wits survives.

He looked up at the form dancing in the mist and saw blue eyes, light freckles, and a river of shiny brown hair falling down all around her as she swayed. Her azure eyes peered deep into his, claiming his soul as her own. All she had on was a cowgirl hat, and the black straps pressing erotically into her naked pink flesh. She moved her hips in a way that only someone who rode the mountains on horseback

since they were old enough to walk could move them. She grabbed the straps clinging tight to her bosom and pulled them outward, exposing her nipples. She ran her hands down her body and then into her crotch.

Suddenly the bartender woman was back. She slid easily over the bar and attacked Bax with such ferocity that he was taken by surprise, sticking her tongue down his throat, feeling his chest, unzipping his fly. She got on top of him, and now she was naked and he was inside her, and they were fucking and fucking as the people all around at the bar watched in amusement.

But then, she was Sherry, those lightly-freckled cheeks next to his, her pouty lips sealed with his own, her hair pouring down all around him. He was gripping her cowgirl rump, pushing her down onto his dick, their fused flesh pumping and pumping, the rhythm of the music pushing them closer to orgasm.

And then she was dancing above him again in the clouds, mist swirling all around her as she climaxed, lip quivering, body spasming.

Even as she orgasmed, the feeling deep inside of him reached its peak intensity, rushed over him like a tsunami of sensation.

As the surge flowed over him like a sweet balm of pain, his soul crushed by the weight of the face in front of him, her orgasm crucified in front of all here present, as she was nailed forever to an unreachable past, saving him from a life of tranquility, something else eclipsed his vision.

A different face. A demonic face, eyes shining like red, glowing gems.

"Who are you?" were the only words that Bax could stammer out.

"Here, stick this in your head," the demon said.

He took a small shiny thing from the demon. “If I do, will you leave me alone?” All he wanted was to be left alone, to enjoy this time, this emotion, with Sherry.

What did this demon want with him? Had he actually died out there in the desert, incinerated by Elvis’s laser, and everything since then until now had been a hallucination?

Was this hell?

“Just do it.”

Well, if this was hell, it wasn’t much different than the real world. Both made about the same amount of sense.

He pressed the shiny object against his head. It slid easily into his brain. He felt weird for a while, as the feeling racked his frame, and his perceptions swirled around and melted with each other, and he wasn’t sure if he was fucking Sherry, or the bartender, or talking with a demon.

But this feeling only lasted for a few moments, and then he was sitting at the bar next to a strange-looking man. The man’s eyes had been removed and replaced with red, translucent twenty-sided dice. There were some black studs on his forehead, flush with this skin—four of them, arranged in a trapezoidal configuration. Broad chin, like it belonged on someone from the Old West. Salt and pepper week’s worth of stubble around the large Cuban cigar sticking out of his mouth. Long grey hair pulled back in a pony tail. Grey duster. Black cowboy hat resting on the bar in front of him.

Shit.

Bax realized something.

This man had just stolen his emotion.

This joint was one of the few good places to score a real fix in this town. EmoTivs, like many other

digidrugs, had become increasingly popular as the war dragged on, one of the few ways to escape the grim reality of eternally now-apocalyptic Normerica.

However, when the Beehive Republic had been formed, the government had quickly proclaimed the Word of Wisdom to be law, meaning even caffeine was illegal. Citizens couldn't even order a morning cup of joe at their local diner. And with the ever-increasing popularity of digital stimulants, their prophet had declared unequivocally that the Word of Wisdom extended to *all* artificial highs, even digital ones. And this was the only place in Beehive that bribed enough Church officials to deal the stuff and not be shut down.

Manufactured using brain scanners to capture the full range of perception of the living subject used to make them, emoTivs were stripped bare of every one of the five senses. They were the opposite of sensiTivs, which brought you into the full captured awareness of the person whose brainwaves were used to manufacture them, as they skydived over a volcano, snowboarded down the Himalayas, surfed a hundred-foot wave, fucked, blew their own brains out, whatever. The emoTiv chips gave you none of that. Your own five senses were left intact, none of them replaced by the original subject's. Those had been stripped out. What was left?

Emotions.

The pure, raw, untainted emotions of the subject.

Just the thought of her alone would have brought on the emotion, but the emoTiv made it that much more intense. Which was why he came here for it. No use feeling an emotion half-baked. You gotta feel it full force.

But why had he seen those other things?

He had never had a full-on hallucination before

while taking an emoTiv. Rather, his perceptions simply became somewhat clouded, like with many popular non-digital psychoactive drugs. The explanation for this was perception residue. The perception-stripping technology used to make the chips wasn't perfect.

But he had heard that with the most dangerous of digidrugs, those using unstable subjects, there were risks involved.

While most of the people in the bar were using one of the more peppy—and safer—flavors, like a Happy Green, or Passion Frenzy, or Talkative Trance, Bax was not most people.

The name of the chip he had inserted, listed on the menu right under Lecherous Lavender and above Nerve-Wracking Berry, said it all.

Melancholy Madness.

It was an open secret that some of the more radical emoTivs were made using...questionable methods. Such as instead of using regular subjects, using inmates from insane asylums. Paranoia Peach, for example, was made using schizophrenics. Melancholy Madness, on the other hand, was made by capturing the emotions of the most mentally disturbed, clinically melancholic humans possible.

Everyone knew that the most powerful digidrugs were the ones made in madhouses. But with the benefit of intensity came the risk of transference. Transferring not just the emotions, but the very delusional states of the subject into the user. Transferring such states could cause hallucinations, paranoia, even complete psychotic breakdowns, although admittedly, this kind of transference was believed to be rare and not fully documented.

Had this man just ruined his divine sadness, or saved him from permanent psychosis?

“Bax. We need to talk.” The dice sort of jiggled around when he spoke.

Bax pulled the chip out of his skullport and looked down at it. It looked vaguely similar to the emoTiv, though less sparkly. But as he held it in his hand the luster faded away until it had become completely charcoal black and dull. “What the hell is this?”

“A digisober chip. You were tripping pretty hard there, amigo.”

“And how the hell do you know my name?”

“Let’s just say you’re well-known in certain circles.”

It was hard to pay attention to what the man was saying because of those distracting eyes. Or were those things even eyes at all? As he looked at the eccentric red polyhedrons jiggle, he wondered, is he blind? Or does he have tiny cameras installed in those things? Or are the cameras in those black studs on his forehead? Should I look at the dice or the studs?

He finally pulled himself together. “Wait, do you know one of my clients?” Or more importantly, he thought, did you kill one of my clients?

“Not exactly. Look—”

“Buddy, I don’t know who you are, but you just ruined the reason I came here in the first place. If you want to continue this conversation, at least start out by apologizing.”

“I’ll buy you another one. But I need you sober for what I’m about to tell you.”

There was something crazy about this man, not just the eyes. It was as if he really were a demon, trapped in human flesh.

“Bax, I’ve got a job for you.”

The strange ominous feeling kept growing and

growing and it seemed like even the dull roar of the room grew silent, as if you could hear a pin drop, until finally Bax brushed it off and laughed, taking another sip of his lager.

“What? Another Mormon? No more Mormons. I’m taking a break, as if you couldn’t see.” This was how Mormons always reached out to runners like him. Through a middle man. They knew most runners wouldn’t give a rando Mormon the time of day if approached directly.

I need to get out of this place as soon as possible, Bax told himself. Get back into the real world. He had had it up to here with Mormons. After what he saw today. Besides, he had what he came for.

“No Mormon,” the man with dice for eyes said. “I need you to take a run.”

Time really slowed down this time as the man took the cigar out of his mouth and said the next part.

“Through Hellfire Canyon.”

The murmur of the crowd completely disappeared as if crushed by the words. Then, a moment later, it started back up again, as if everything was normal.

“What the hell did you just say?”

“You heard me,” the man said and then put the cigar back in his mouth.

Bax knew, like everyone in Normerica, that Hellfire Canyon wasn’t really a canyon, but rather the nickname given to a three-hundred mile long strip going north to south through the center of what was the old United States which was now home to perpetual warfare night and day. The hotspot of this entire unending conflict, dividing the Western Republics from New Britain. The war going on there made the wars between the republics look like

child's play. Every square inch of that desolated, warblasted landscape was crawling with warjets, cybertanks, and drones. The place was certain death. Hardly anyone ever got out alive. The few warcar runners who ventured into that hellhole were never heard of again.

"You fuggin' crazy? Now quit bothering me and let me enjoy my misery in peace." Bax signaled to the bartender, hoping to score another fix.

"Listen very carefully, I'm only going to say this once. I need to get a very important item to the Eastern Seaboard by three days time from now. And this is what I'm willing to pay." The man's face stayed perfectly still, but the dice in his eye sockets suddenly began spinning. First one die stopped, and then the other. He took a drag off the cigar and said, "Add six zeros to that."

"I don't care what you're paying. You're crazy, old man. Now buy me another fix." Bax put his arm up. "Bartender! Over here—"

Wait.

Bax looked at the dice again.

Six zeros? That would make...

A very large number.

In fact, Bax had never even heard of that kind of amount being thrown around at a runner. He must be mistaken.

"Ten percent up front, plus expenses, and the rest upon delivery."

If this guy was serious, he could buy a lot of parts for Cheetah with that amount of dough. Hell, with money like that, he could rebuild her entirely...into the most powerful warcar ever made!

But it was insanity even thinking such thoughts. What the man was suggesting was sheer suicide. Better to stay here and take a gamble on losing his

sanity with digidrugs than go to that place, where death was guaranteed.

“That was a good one, pal. I’m beside myself with laughter. But if you’re not gonna buy me that fix, than at least leave me alone. I came here to be alone, not to talk with crazies.”

“I can assure you, compadre, that this is no joke. And to prove it, I’ve got the down payment right here on this credchip.” He took a small chip out of his duster.

This guy can’t be serious.

“Bartender! I need another drink. And another hit!” He tried desperately to get her attention.

God! What do I have to do to get a fix in this place?

Reminded of the reality of his life, of life in this world, he pondered over the ridiculousness of his situation. He was sitting here, not able to feel enough bitterness, enough sorrow, to compensate for the disaster that was his life, the disaster that was every one of their lives, those who survived this wretched never-ending war. Sherry was dead, just like millions of people were dead. And drugs, God, and technology were all powerless to bring them back, powerless to fix humanity’s most basic problem.

That all of it ends.

And for what? Will we not ask ourselves, at the end, what did I go through all of this for?

The one girl who ever meant anything to him was dead. He had never asked to be here, had never asked to fall in love with her. Most of his squadron was dead. For what? Was the purpose of their lives and grisly deaths simply to be cogs in the perpetual war machine, the perpetual money-making machine, the most profitable, and therefore most enduring,

business in the world, all to make some people at the top of this god-damned blood-fueled racket richer?

People were going through the motions of living, trapped inside these mile-high cement walls like gerbils in a cage, praying to their gods, giving money to their preachers, as if that could somehow give meaning to their laughable existence. And he was out, roving the land, risking his life, trying to find... trying to find what? As if runners were the only true modern-day philosophers, believing, hoping, that somehow, somewhere out there, somewhere amid all the carnage and destruction, there was still meaning to human existence.

Everyone trying, in their own way, and failing, in their own way, to make sense of it all. To put together the pieces of this haphazard reality that was forced upon each and everyone of them without their consent.

And then he remembered something. Becoming one with the cold logic, the numbers, riding the edge. When he was closest to death...that was when everything made the most sense. As if somehow, only by facing death could one ever hope to understand life.

A thought flitted past his mind, taunting him. What do I have to lose? As he longed to once again feel the sadness, and be one with her shattered memory once more, he knew that he of all people knew the answer to that question.

“So, Bax, are you in, or do I have to find someone else to give all this money to?” The dice jiggled a bit.

Bax paused, contemplating.

“Half up front,” he found himself saying, surprising himself. What was he thinking?

The dice man waited a moment, as if waiting for

an answer from someone.

“Approved.”

“And you need to buy me that Melancholy Madness. And a whiskey.” No, wait! Where were these words coming from? Bax, what are you—

Only a scant moment later, the bartender was back, holding out a platter with another glittering chip. Her other hand slapped a whiskey down on the table. What? How had he? It was then he realized this man had a direct mindlink to the bartenders. And they actually answered him when he beckoned.

Bax once again studied the little chip and its dazzling colorful reflections, belying the anguish that lay within.

“But first,” the dice man said, “you’ll have to meet my boss. I’m only the messenger. Enjoy your sadness, Bax. Next stop: Angeles.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Brighton is the author of two novels and a novella, including *A Bioscanner Darkly*, a dystopian novel about a technocratic society enslaved under the Panopticon, and which is also a parody about Philip K. Dick, the great sci-fi author and mastermind behind many stories that spawned a plethora of poor Hollywood imitations. He has also written several short stories.

He is planning to do a crowdfunding campaign soon to hire a cover artist to make a gorgeous cover for all his latest novels. He can be contacted at jamesbrighton@tutamail.com.

You can support his work by making a crypto donation:

BTC

12T1K2RRaqFPaAG2muZsds3kFbHQpgPaBM

Ethereum (ERC20)

0x0f17bd0431924cae93fef5eee6b37113b104a9cf

BCH

Qq87xv6q4u5r708tt6dm6pf6vm4we5ltvr5m4wkl5

ut

USDT-TRON (TRC20)

TKVwWPHdvAT6RVC4mPc68XE5KiWeBgxd5F

* * *

OTHER NOVELS BY JAMES BRIGHTON

A BIOSCANNER DARKLY

In 1933, Howard Scott co-founded Technocracy, Inc., which proposed a plan to control the daily life of all citizens using technology. Fast forward to the future, and the government has declared a series of global disasters, necessitating the consolidation of power into the hands of a few monopolists, who promptly declare that for the cyberproles' good, strict daily limits to all human activities and bodily functions will be set and measured. Every fart, sneeze, step, stare, sigh, word, whack off session, sexual encounter, every use of electricity, gas, or water, down to the most minute portion, every mouthful of food people eat, the water they drink, every sip of alcohol.

As if this wasn't bad enough, the cyberproles are divided into castes based on the color and shape of their genitals, while the monopolists' media companies incite hatred against the lower castes.

Enter Joe, a member of the lowest, most hated caste in society, a Pale Penis, hellbent on escaping the monotony of this dystopic existence. One day, Joe casually wonders what it would be like if life were like a Philip K. Dick novel, jumping around from point of view to point of view, getting inside everyone's head. When mere moments later a strange man in an alleyway offers him a drug, claiming it will turn him into Philip K. Dick for a night, he starts to realize you must be careful what you wish for, as things start to become more like a PKD novel than he could ever have imagined. Things take a turn for the worse when he realizes the entire

world is in danger, as this technocratic nightmare has awoken an ancient, cosmic entity intent on turning the entire planet to kipple, and with Joe's newfound abilities, he is the only person in the world able to reach the one man able to save the world from total disaster...

But will he make it in time? Can humanity save itself from the technological prison it has created for itself? Or is it already too late?

James Brighton's debut novel, *A Bioscanner Darkly*, is many things at once. Philip K Dick parody, absurdist dark comedy, and warning about the dystopic side of technology. Dark, surreal, and absurd, *A Bioscanner Darkly*, plunges us into a world that isn't quite what it seems. A biting social satire exposing the hypocrisy of Hollywood, *A Bioscanner Darkly* serves as the perfect Brighton gateway drug.

MIND GRID

In 1969, Jose Delgado wrote *Physical Control of the Mind: Towards a Psychocivilized Society*, in which he explains how electronics implanted in the brain can control the mind. Fast forward to the future, and all humans have a Brain Computer Interface, and their brains are connected to the internet at all times. And...the internet is run by Earth's wonderful saviors, the mighty Corporations. What could go wrong?

Enter Drake Lively, a Reality Fixer. Growing up in a world where humans are indoctrinated to be asexual, and even the intentional thought of sex is punishable by having one's mind uploaded to the cloud, to endure never-ending psychic torment, Drake's job is to make sure that even the slightest

anomalies, such as residual sexual memories, or doubts in the beloved Corporate Saviors, are promptly removed and the person's reality is restored to its government-mandated normal.

But what happens when even the Reality Fixer's reality needs to be fixed? When Drake makes a not-so-permitted intimate mental contact with a female patient, things start to get incredibly dangerous incredibly fast. But never mind that his digitized mind might be forced to endure unending torture, because soon he finds out things are about to get a lot worse for all of mankind, who won't just have to deal with being banned from sex or treasonous thoughts, but will instead become the literal puppets of the Corporate Saviors, who are about to take technological manipulation of the mind to a whole new level.

Welcome to Mind Grid.

In the future, there is only control.

James Brighton's first sprawling sci-fi epic, *Mind Grid*, eschews the traditional approach in sci-fi of focusing on outer space, and instead explores the vast complexities of the human mind. The second novel in Brighton's Social Satire Trilogy--thematically related novels that can be read in any order--*Mind Grid* dials up the satire, absurdism and surrealism to new heights. At over 500 pages, *Mind Grid* delves deeper than any Brighton novel yet and provides hours of mind-bending entertainment to a growing cult of Brighton addicts.

BEAT THE SILICON BLUES!

A big problem nowadays which prevents many people from reading books like in the old days before the advent of the internet and smartphones, is that many people have become addicted to staring at their device screens all day, and watching audio-visual things such as corporatetube. For anybody who has a problem with not reading as many books & stories as they would like to because of this device/audio-visual addiction, simply download a book reading app with TTS (Text To Speech) like Libreria or Evie for tablet, phone, or on a computer using a device emulator program like BlueStacks, and it will read ebooks to you in basically any format, epub, pdf, mobi, etc. Then the book becomes the movie. Stop watching corporatetube and start reading books! You can even set the voice speed to whatever you want, like 2x or 3x, in case the voice is too slow for you. You can also simply listen to it as an audiobook, even if no audiobook version is available! This works for books, essays, or just about any kind of document, or even for web pages, which can easily be shared with ebook reader apps on most devices.