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Northward

by Andrew Macrae

Youse all know the story of how I come to kill Old Crow an put on his trucktyre coat, well this tales from after that time, I is roadin northward with Sinnerstorm which is a truckmind what I meched across into a truck in the Brumby Kings lair. We is roadin coastwise, to where Night Rider sez the big rigs go when they die. Sez theres a way to live beyond death an this storys how I come to find that might be so.

Im sat in Sinners riders cab watchin the white line playin out in front. The IVs slotted into the crook of me arm, pumpin truckdream into me blood. Im ridin high as a satellite eye in that cab with the sun over our right side and desert to the left, twenny hour of nuthin an another twenny after that to go with Sinner startin to fail. Startin to need its fix of death meted out in small doses an Im peelin me eyes out for someone to trade with whos got the patches to keep Sinner goin a little longer.

Its a bright an sunny day, no sign of weather, its lookin all right on the radar but theres no tellin out here in the backroads between gigacity climatezones. Storms come up outta nowhere. Its okay for them city folk, they got all the weather controls they need, but they dont care what happens to us mob out in the backroads. Im checkin the radar again an downloadin cloud pics when theres

some action on the link, a rider up ahead sendin a wave with patchfile tags. Right away I see they is good patches, an Im siftin thru the tags lookin for skull death an sure enuff hes got it so we slow up. Sinnerstorms whinin down the gears an pullin over to the road side.

The riders standin beside a tree next to a dried up creek an a dusty sand bank. Wind blown hot desert breath an now theres a dust storm comin up on the radar, fillin the waves with its stackity noise. I cant make out much thru the viewfinder but its a man, Im pretty sure, wearin faded denims. Hes got a dust mask over his face, shape of a skull, but his dirty blond hairs stuck out over the top. Hes got some connections, lookin at the patch tags, hes carryin quality gear. He musta been into some heaviness that Id not seen meself for some time, not since Id bin roadin with the Sinnerstorm.

The bloke pulls down his mask. Hes got a tanned face with long lines down it from grinnin. Hes carryin a satchel an a umberella an as I stick me head outta the riders port he seems kinda surprised the trucks already carryin a rider, well he didnt know nuthin about the situation of me an Sinnerstorm. Anyways wed stopped by then an we was gonna do some busyness. The bloke smiles on up thru the lines on his face, you can tell hes a pro, hes goin with the flow.

-- I got some patches. You seen me tag file. Whatdya wanna do? he sez.

-- Well that depends on what you want outta the deal.

-- Why is you talkin for the truck?

-- Thats just how we do busyness mate, we is a team.

-- I never seen that before.

-- Just coz you never seen it doan mean it doan exist. Now what you want for the skull death?

-- Passage north. Im roadin borderwise. There enuff room for another rider?

-- Theres enuff room.

-- Half now, half later.

-- Up front, else we is on our way.

-- All right, deal.

The dirty haired bloke holds out his linkreader. Sinner sweeps it for dodgey code an greenlights the trade, suckin up that patch of skull death like a kitten lappin at a plate of milk.

When the hatch opens an he sees me lit by the soft warm light from the dash hes sorta taken aback at the trucktyre coat an the hole in me shoulder where me arm use to be. That Old Crow use to foller me roun like a shadow but not since I took the coat. Now its me doin the follerin. I larf right in the blokes face.

-- What, didnt you know what youd be getting into? You sure you wanna road with us?

The stink musta wafted then, coz he swallows an doan look too happy to be there all of a sudden. I guess rotted flesh an human waste doan smell so good after the bone bleachin sun an dry desert air.

-- Yeah, I'll road. I heard stories, but I didnt believe em till I seen you. You been jacked in too long, man, he sez.

-- Mind your own fuckin busyness. You getting in or you wanna chin wag all day?

Well he straightens himself up an despite what he must be feelin inside, he climbs on in to the cab with me an Sinnerstorm. I larf inside. Hes got a tough front but hes not near as hard as he shows outside. But most folks wouldnt a got on in to the cab with any other rider, let alone one such as me, so I hand that to him an help him in.

Sinnerstorm cranks its rumblin donk, transmission hummin, rollin up to speed on the road an in the cab I feel the vibrations comin up thru me arse. Its soothin an wholesome even if its not quite right. An now theres a new mix comin thru the IV, new set of truckdream, different flavour an texture as the hit of skull death cascades thru the truckmind. I feel the rush of it an Sinnerstorm guns its donk, its kickin to get goin now its got another dose under its belt. I shiver unnerneath the coat. Im feelin high too, tho nuthin like Sinner would be, its movin thru changes like shiftin gears an we is roadin finally, rhythm of the road flowin past the screens that filter the world out even as it dances before us. The bloke seems happy enuff to be movin an he dont react at the little gasp I let go as the acceleration matches a point in the flow of truckdream thru me vein.

Trackin on the north road, highway stretches out in front an nuthin behind but dust an bad memories. I crank some new tunes thru the audio, a wave mix Id captured off the lot last time Id seen a bunch of indie trucks ampin together. Its got beat an meter, rockin along, losin then findin isself, build an break, build an break.

-- Wanna mainline? I ask.

-- No, I'm fine.

I try not to let surprise show but its not many riders as would turn down truckdream from a wild indie like the Sinner. Maybe we is too far gone to realise what we become, an maybe we scared them ordinary riders, I dunno. But it made me think. It made me think, now who is it what waits beside the goldcoast highway with a patch of skull death an the need to travel north?

-- You sure now? Its good shit.

-- Thats ok, youse are welcome to it. I doan truckdream.

-- There aint too many riders in the backroads as would say that.

-- I aint from the backroads, mate. I come up from down south to getaway. I got other kinks apart from truckdreamin what Id appreciate not talkin about an I try to stay hid from Control wherever I can.

--Fair enuff.

He lowers his head like hes goin to sleep. I watch out the front screen as the highway plays, feelin the buzz an catchin the waves from Sinnerstorm, its feelin fine, its roadin now, its lost all the limp laggardy ways an found its stride finally. Im figgerin how long this patch will last, will it be enuff to see us clear of the border at Tweedhead? Depends on what opposition we find from the transcop. Things is tuff since we been labelled rogue an orders out for bountyseek.

Theres more traffic on the road as we start to leave the desert behind. Its greener too, more mountains an passes. Sinner is roadin like a champ, gunnin faster an faster, overtakin an feelin the rush of the skull death still. Im feelin it secondhand its keepin me wired up nice an tight with a grin on me mug, rifflin thru me database of mixes an slottin audio amps. I pop a sky hatch to let some air

in an its a real thrill.

Theres all sorts on the road to bordertown. Company trucks with their dull logopolised colourbrands, guvvy transports what haul goods between the border an the gigacities. Them company truckminds is slaved to another system altogether, no riders for them just a life of service to Control. Theres also freestyle indies of all sorts, custom paint an stylin. One what we come up on behind is dozer yellow with black details, shiny an new, a loader carryin a cargo of riverstone probably for landscapin one of the sentient buildins further north at goldcoast or maybe beyond. Thats where we is headed. Brizbin. In the freezone where Control got no sway.

Im lookin over at the rider, hes not sleepin but his eyes is shut. His right hand is movin, an its findin somethin inside his tote but Im zoned an before I can move hes found somethin in there an Sinnerstorms bellowin an screechin to a stop. Theres traffic all aroun swervin an swayin to get outta its way an it locks up an skiddin with dust an tyresmoke billowin aroun us. Im turnin to the bloke, hes got one hand in his bag, one hand on some kind a substrate what hes used to lock up the Sinnerstorm but he doan unnerstand the special relationship we got, he doan know Im sendin signals thru the link even as the first wave of sickness hits me from whatever the bastard poisoned us with.

I knowed there were somethin not right about him but Id let it slide coz I wanted the skull death so bad for Sinner. It doan matter now anyway, bloke thinks hes up for bounty or somefing, but he dont know nuthin. I open the weapons systems, the links ponderous slow but Im workin aroun that dose of nastiness hes injected. Bloke thinks hes gonna just jump outta the cab an scamper, even as on the radar I see the transcop flyers comin our way. He musta sent a signal to em. All the other vehicles passin us by on the road sees the flyers too an theys goin hard to getaway from that scene.

I doan move from where I sat in me trucktyre coat an me puddle of stink. I let that bloke pop the hatch an start runnin as I shift chem commands thru the IV an swing the big fifty cal aroun to cut that lined face bastard down right in front of the transcops as they swoop, loosin laser-guided

boms.

Tho the links slow an Im strugglin like movin thru mud, I can still blast out a cloud of chaff an debris from a launcher what Sinnerstorm has behind the trailer at back. Im floggin the link just tryin to get Sinnerstorm to move before the boms hit but its not getting anywhere real fast. Theres a cough an a stutter an the donk kicks over, I can feel the badness thru the IV but we gotta jam, we gotta move outta that trap.

I guide that sluggish truckmind away from the path of the boms but theres a blast an we is knocked aroun, the trailers hit so I ditch it. We wont be able to cart loads no more but it doan matter now, we is on the final leg home to northwards. Where all the big rigs go when they die.

We is skiddin aroun, pickin up speed at last, them transcop flyers is swoopin down for another shot but theres still the hot fifty on the roof an Im sqirtin lead, spittin fury even as the nausea washes me thru the link, Sinners in a bad way an theres nuthin much I can do about that now just see off them flyers which Im throwin all our last reserves into. Theres sparks comin off the rotors where the bullets hit. Engine cowlins is dintin an Im screamin till me voice is hoarse. Sinners sick but fishtailin all over that road what is now strangely clear of traffic.

Theres smoke comin from the flyer to the left an bits of rotors flyin off, that flyers fallin down an its lost its tail rotor so its spinnin outta control. It crashes into another one an thats all three of them flyers, they is finished an tho me an Sinners not doin so good neither, wes still movin an Im cursin me luck for pickin up that bounty huntin road agent. I shoulda knowed he were wrong but me greed for the skull death overrode any sense. Now wes in a worse off way than before, limp in like a wounded dog.

But bordertowns in sight now, Tweedhead, an soon enuff wed be safe in the freezone what Id heard about but never seen in all me life of roadin. Its a sacred place for them trucks, its only the ones at the end of their roadin whats allowed to pass thru the border since the change come. We break outta the mountains an theres silver sunslick sea to the right, a line of surf an not so much traffic this close to freezone. The company trucks got no busyness here an the indies is sparce. No

one wants to go northwards since the awakenin, no one who still has hay to make down south that is.

We hit Coolangatta an theres a line of buildins across the road, twin towers either side with a thick crusted bridge between em above us. Theres no turnin back but then theres nuthin back there but pain an grief so onwards we go an I feel the scan of them buildins as we pass unnerneath. It doan matter no more if they decide we aint worth it but that doan happen, they let us thru an we is north of the border like that, over the river an onto the coastroad. Theres a cloud of blue flyin creatures like dragonfly aroun us an we hear the soothin sound of voices its the voices of truckmind an buildinmind, voices of the freezone groupmind an Im wonderin how many human fleshminds has been here. Concrete coastroad highway underwheel, ka-thick ka-thick ka-thick as we road faster than before, theres a new spring in Sinners step even without skull death an maybe the poisons in its system is interactin with the freezone. Theres goldcoast, glitterin like a jewel, the skyscrapers is all grown into each other, growin together like a reef in the sky an we is rollin unnerneath, we is rollin like a star raft on a sea of suns.

Its the end, we is comin up on the end an Im excited to be there but suddenly I is weary, this trucktyre coat wears me out. Shadow of Old Crow still loomin over me, even now, even tho hes dead an gone. I got nuthin much left to give anymore an Sinnerstorm, what I growed to be a part of, what I nurtured from substrate an meched into truckform, I can feel the oldness in that mind even tho its new-birthed. I can hear the voices of the generations whats gone before into makin that mind. Its like layers an layers of meanin, theres always more than there seems an Sinners quiet now but me own fleshmind is chatterin away like a machine. Whats in store for us in Brizbin?

Theres not a lotta traffic, mainly robos an drones flyin in the sky. Sinners more relaxed now, seems to be limp in less an Im startin to calm down too after goin thru the gateway an seein all them buildins at goldcoast, where there use to be crowds of people but now theres just buildins an debris from a world lost to issel. Dead robo bodies piled up an skeletons what was once human all growed over with pipe an cable. Them buildins is eerie quiet on the link, theres no chatter not like inside of

me own head.

But theres somethin happenin coz I feel a change in the flow of truckdream from Sinner, its bein upheld in some way, somethins seedin the poison with new code an as we is roadin up that concrete roadway ka-thick ka-thick ka-thick towards Brizbin Im feelin some changes happenin within me self, a movement in the arrangement of me body, a growin in of death inside the flesh but a sproutin outwards as well, the lines between me an the Sinner becomin blurred.

Theres a moment when we crest a hill an I see Brizbin all laid out in front of us, like a model. Sinner lets out a sound like a sigh an tho its not bin motorin too well these few klicks its startin to spring again as we come closer an closer to the source. We is in freezone an theres not many folks with pumpin hearts whos seen it like this. Towers of glitterin glass sprinkle light across the gold afternoon. Them buildins all growin together like a jungle forest of trees, girders an gantries formin crystal structures haloed by a dust of drones in the air. An aroun it all a hummin an sighin of motion, a underlyin bein becomin outlined in signs at the edge of me eyesite an limit of me hearin.

Sinner seems to know where wes goin, takes a exit from the freezone freeway. Theres not much traffic aroun, certainly no trucks as big as Sinnerstorms prime mover, theres little skaters an such like skitterin aroun but they all move outta the way as we motor along. I is sat in the seat feelin the shifts in the truckdream comin thru the link, feelin queasy in the stomach at the shifts happenin in me.

The Brizbin landscape aint flat like the desert backroads, its folded. We come over a hill an round a bend an then alls of a sudden its there, laid out before us with its great snakin dirty brown river runnin right thru it, towers sparklin upwards to the sky an we come to a hill top. Theres a buildin there on that crest, I know it, I seen it before in truckdream tho I never been there, its called Torbreck an its a word spelled out in letters right there unnerneath it. This buildins built into the hill, its in a commandin position, you can see all aroun. Its old, man, its older than anythin built of crystal an carbon fiber in the city but somehow I knows its bristlin with new tech, theres a glass

structure on top like a control tower at a airport.

Also next to this Torbreck is a big old tree, its older even than the buildin with its roots grown deep into the hillside an its roosts of crows high up in its branches. The suns settin an them crows is startin to take flight, fillin the air. Its peace an quiet there an Sinner stops at last, its finished its roadin an I doan think its gonna move again which makes me wonder what Im gonna do when its gone but then Im thinkin Ive finished me roadin too. I try to get down outta the cab but as Im pullin the catheter away from me rotted flesh I seen I dont got no prick no more, nor no arsehole neither, theres just the one hole down there, an its big. A big hole where me lower parts should be, an Ive growed into the riders cab aroun Sinner. I cant move, theres no getting outta the cab for me, I try to shrug off the trucktyre coat but its growed into me too.

As Im strugglin in the cab, three riders on bikes pull up but then I sees they aint riders as such, they is bikes with bloke torsos an horns comin outta the sides of their skulls, pumpin out blue smoke from their tailpipes. Im scared of a sudden an the waste I void comes out a thick fluid, like snakeshit, its runnin all over the riders cab an dissovlin things it touches. Those three riders what aint riders is welcomin me in their way an I know I is home, but still Im scared, they is helpin me outta the cab with acid sprayin from tanks on their backs an Sinner crumbles an corrodes where it touches. Im spreadin me arms, I got two arms again an Im flapplin them, Im staggerin an hop skippin on the ground then into the air, Im flyin free about the city joinin them crows like dust, joinin the moths an the drones fillin the air an Im lookin down as Sinner is bein took apart by them riders an I know me roadins ended but doan worry about that, coz theres life after death.

I circle aroun some, its a view, Ive never flown before, theres a sparklin of lights as the night come on over Brizbin town an Im circlin circlin roun that Torbreck, round that tree. Im seein things for the first time as how theyre laid out across that coastline, Im flyin higher an higher, theres a line of lights connectin the coast from down south sparklin like I dunno what. The crows aroun me has been fleshmind like what I been, forged in the acid of freezone groupmind. They is callin to me in their voices, tellin me the stories whats been past down the line to them an what Im gonna pass on

when its my time. Im seein immortality an Im comin back to earth to tell youse all about it.

ENDS