

Trucksong

Experimental version

A novel by Andrew Macrae

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Chapter 1

Ever time I seen them crows roadside it made me member me Mar an took me back ta wen Smoov fount me. Wen ever ther wer illness an despair ther wer all ways crows near by ta peck tha flesh an see wat they cud findt in others greef. Me Mar heavy wiv childt an I wer weened but still a childt. Smoak an blankits around her shulder. I clutcht at her, tryen ta pull her a long in tha crush ov bodies an scarvengin machiens, forrist ov brown legs dustid by camp fire ash an trucktire shoes tiedt wiv twine. Lookin ta find a place ta lie down but ther wernt no place on that road, no place in tha voices an snatchin hands graspin feelin bony arms hissperin

— Wotcher got?

An mebbe it wer me own wayt pullen wat pullt me Mar down, wore her out moren tha holler stummick march an tha sandy sinkhole drinkin an tha sickenin an dyin all aroundt. She cudnt go no furvver an ther wer nowheres ta go enny

how so we set down by bitchumen swettin tar tears an sunblasted chunks ov bustid concreet.

Tha sky split like rottid froot an darkniss come in ta tha night time shift. No body stoppt, they all kept on goin ta ware evar it wer they was goin, follerin food rumers. But ther wernt no body gunna come help em like ther wer no body stoppin for me Mar. An mebbe if we was ded theyd be stoppin ta see wat wer in ovr rags wirf taken but we wernt ded yet an that bebbe in me Mars belly startid its pains evin tho looken back I can tell its blak blud an mattid hair birfed ta soon, Mar screemin an trashin, face pullt tite shut an I got ta know as how dyen takes its time ta come on. Mostly its not one thin or a otha, theres a space in be tween one shore an tha nex an I seen me Mar in that place all thru tha long nite ware time aint counted in minims or daze an I dunt wanna spend no time ther wen its my tern. I wunt it ta be quick.

Day lite dorned an Mar wernt makin no more souns. I snugld up against her in tha crustid blud blanket wile she got coldter an coldter. We was eyd by a crowd ov roaders but they cud see wats gorn on an they dint wunt no part ov it, theyd got trubbils ov they own an pain enuff all reddy. An tha day warnt up an Mar stiffent, still an quiet, pale blu, an coldt like tha cool clay ov a damp creek bed. Tha crows started getherin, rattlin they chests an ark arrrrkin an hoppin closer. I made noyses an flappt me arms but they wernt feered, theyd got me number all rite, one hoppit up on Mar an lookt at me wiv his wite eye an sayed:

— I know ya, boy.

Jest like that, wirds dropped in ta me hed like stoans in a jar. I sat back, an tha crow ruffed his fevvers an flumped his chest an pullt a bluddy shred frum tha blankits. I wer frozin in tha burnin sun, clingin ta me frozin Mar.

I wer clung ta her still wen a face come outta tha dreemy clouds ov me teers. Red cheeks abuv rusty scraggle beard an a weepin sore. Glassy eys wen they seen tha child next ta its ded Mar.

— Yore roadin wiv me now, cunt.

I member it like I member me own name, tha sound ov them words as he sed em an tha sinkin feelin in me guts as I seen me hole life change rite ther.

He reecht out an given me sips frum his skin wat I gulpt it down like sweet nectar tho it wer only stale water. I seen he had a kid wiv him then, too, a gurl, dark hair, dark eys, lookin low an keepin neer her Dar. Mebbe she saw sum thin in me wiv them eys I dunno but they bord in ta me own eys.

Then he sed ta tha gurl:

— Got ourselfs anuvva pare ov hans, Isa.

Wiry arms round me, liftin me up an away frum me Mar, I felt tha scritchey beard an smelt ganja smoak an rottentoof breff an then I wer looken back ova his shulder as we walkt on a way an tha last thin I seen be for sleep took me in ta its foggy arms wer that crow on me Mar an I nevva forgot it. An that wer how I come ta be wiv Smoov an Isa.

#

Me name is Jon Ra an Im typin this out on a old typeriter wat I fount one time pickin in tha dirt an ther wer a rottid an rustspecked case half buried in tha ground. Sum times tha erf spat up stuff watd bin swallered for a long time. I cud see it use ta be a greeny culor but itd got all bleecht an rustid. I pullt it out an later Smoov tort me tha ways them diffrint letters fit ta gether in ta wirds an tha wirds clumpt in rows an thats how they roaidid. It wer a old machien, not like tha seamless teck wat glows in side tha trucks powerin emselves along tha hi ways

an tha backroads. It wer small enuff ta carry it wiv me evar ware an tho tha dust got inside an made it stick, I lubedt it wen I cud. I foundt a buncha parched mint too wat I used for messigin, they wer a little stak ov cards I crankedt em in an rited on em then I cud shuffill em aroundt, coz sum times it wer hard ta keep thins strait in tha order they happent. Like rite now, all this stuff is all reddy happent an Im workin up a start ta me tale. Im shufflin tha pieces an I keep em all in tha case a long wiv tha trance scripshuns frum Smooovs rants.

This little machien had tha wurd HERMES on it an I offin wunderdt wat it meened, sittin in tha flickrin firelite ponderin wat I shud rite. Who wer that HERMES bloak an wat wer his game? It wer a strange name for a machien like if I wer gunna call it sumfin Id call it Clackerplay or Riterman, sumfin wiv sum meenins. In sted, it wer a buncha lettas wiv sum diffrint meenins. HERMES, thats like /her/, yair? It wer a wimmins /me/ only ther wer moren one. Its her me/s, her diffrint forms an shapes. Tha diffrint changis she made, how sum times I cud look at tha lite fallen on Isas face an see one thin then when darknest come down anotha lite mite take up in her eys. She wer all ways shiftin an changin, we all was. All tha time. Ritin wer one way ta stop tha changis. Wen sum thin is lettrd thats it, its fixt on tha page. Ya can change yer story or tha way ya think on it, but ya cant change them wurdz once theyve bin rote down, thats it. Ther yores an ya gotta deel wiv em.

That wer tha meenin I took ov it anyway. I wunderedt about tha magik ov that name, tha misstery ov it. Ther wer powar in tha HERMES. Powar evar ware ya lookt. Ther wer powar in tha trees in tha sun in tha wind. Ther wer powar in tha rollin ov tha weels on tha road. All ya neededt wer a altinater an a cell ta store tha joose.

Wen I first foundt tha typeriter I didnt know wat I wer sposed ta do wiv it, but it come ta me inna dreem a few weeks afta. In tha dreem I wer crankin wirds in ta that typeriter an all tha wirds was makin sents an I leend in ta take a big wiff ov it an tha smell wer like nuthin Id knowed, it neerly knockt me down, machien oil an solvints an inky wiffs an sum thin unner neef. Tha smell ov truf. I knowed then it wer a way I cud use ta set out me own tru self. It wer a way I cud be free frum Smoovs changis an tha beetins an greef he given me, witch wer funny reelly coz it wer Smoov showed me ritin in tha firs place so I cud docker mint tha shows an I kept all tha trance scripts in me typeriter case a long wiv these pages here witch I wer all ways addin ta an shufflin around. Smoov shown me tha shapes ov tha lettas all lined up onna grid, an ya ternt tha crank for a nu line an tha machien moved one row in tha tab an ta gether tha hole thin turnedt in ta lines ov lettas runnin down tha page an a cross tha page it spellt out wirds. Tha typeriter wer a inster mint, like road sines on tha page an truckin thru tha long blak nites ov me dreems.

Im tellin ya this story an its tha truf. Its all tru, evar word ov it I sware. Its me tru testy moany an me own witless rote in camfire smoak an truckdreem haze aftar taste. Wat come first I wer a yung un an then thins got heetid up an now Im lookin back on ever thin wats happint. I bin roundt a long times an I can feel me time is comin, deth machien rollin along tha hi way like a ol blak truck, hiss in an grinding thru tha nite, sparks flyin frum smoakstack an greese meltin orf pumpin pistins in tha long darknest ov forevva. Theres no cheetin that deth machien an its nevva late or erly, its always rite on time.

Smoov showt me ritin ta rite down tha notes ov his showins. He showt Isa too, but she didnt take ta it like me. She wer all ways more inner rested in bein a

showman her self an terpertin tha trance missions from tha Wotcher. She thort tha Wotcher held all tha knowin ov tha past an if she cud get in ta it an asstract tha knowing we cud rise our selves up outta tha muck an live in tha glitterin gigacities. Tha machiens wud all wirk rite how they shud an ther wud be a sistim agen, a strait sisstem like wat theyd had back then ware tha bildins torked ta eech ova growed in ta eech an tha wirlid wer a sweet an eezy place.

Smoov thort it too but he wer all for terpertin tha sines an meenins ov tha Wotchers ravens. He wer lookin for a pattin in all tha jumbled souns an imiges beemt down frum on hi eech nite. But for Isa, it wer diffrint, she didnt hav no time for pattins she wuntid ta get strait at tha hart ov thins an find a way ta tork direct ta tha Wotcher an get tha sekrits. She gorn at it strait like arrer ta find a way in ta tha sekrits ov tha Wotchers wordin in pitchers an souns sent down in a trance mishin so that tha dessit backroads cud raise itself frum tha dust an tha trodden down mud.

She wer all ways tweekin her link ta tha Wotcher an lookin ova Smoovs shulder for tips an so it wer up ta me ta findt out tha ways ov tha code ov letter an keep track ov Smoovs showins ov tha trance missions. Smoov wer a pitcher showman goin frum camp ta camp an theyd come frum miles aroun ta see wat hed do wiv tha litenin up on tha screen wat wer reelly jest a wite sheet strung up be tween two shippin cans. We wud travill on tha road showin hellfire pitchers for fokes ta know tha way ov thins. Tellin tha stories ov tha desert foke an them trucks wat come screemin up along tha desert hiways an thrummin they teck they was smart as, they cud fix emself up an mech bebbe trucks but sometime they needed help frum roaders ta tweek ther sistims wiv patches, an thats wot Smoov wud do, tradin tweeked patches for haze.

Tha Wotcher past by ova hed ever nite, it wer a spark moven lower in tha sky then tha stars, kids runnin ta catch it but they cud nevva. It wer ta hi up. It movt mor slow than tha otha lites wat wud trak tha sky wen dark come up, an it wer bigga ta, slow an broody an ther wer a strangniss ta it, like ya knowedt it didnt be long in tha nite sky it wer put ther by them as watd come be for an it carried all they thorts an they dreems was stordt up ther if only we cud lissen hard enuff itd tell tha sekrit for how ta get back ther.

Smooov wud choof his evenin time smoak be for a show. He all ways sed he hadda open tha channels an cleer tha dex so he cud get hissself rite for tha Wotchers wavy ravens wat all ways come down for tha showmens wiv tha rite codes an tha rite thorts ta ascept tha trance mishin. An sure enuff Smooov wud pick up tha sines an letterins ov tha Wotchers souns an pitchers as it gorn ova an he wud pass on for all ta see thru his show. It wer my job ta keep tha geer rite an rite it all down ta see if ther wer any pattins formin. I kept tha notes safe in side tha HERMES case a long wiv me own ritins.

Chapter 2

In me firs membries, tha sun wer brite an shiney waves fallen down frum tha sky, fallen in ta me eys ta make tha teers start. It wer a dreem like Smoovs shows flickeren in me mind a sekret brite box ov colored soun an tha sparks behint me eys wat flew wen he beeted me. Tha look in his face wen tha clowds come ova an he undun his wikkid levva belt an sed

— Come ere boy, an take yer punish mint.

Back hand across me face then on ta his nee for tha main corse. I doan know why he diddit, he wer stoant an pisst an I got nuthin but feer. Me ol frend feer.

Isa seen wat happent an she finded me after wirds wiv smiles an soft voice. She took me han thru tha pain an brusin an bluddy cryn. We walkt down ta tha side ov a cool creek thru tha trees. It wer hot an ther wernt no sount at all jest tha stillness ov tha air wat is a kind ov soun too. She washt me in tha coldt water.

— Wer it a dreem? I sed.

— Wats a dreem? Its a messige come out frum in side ta show ya a diffrint way ov thinkin on thins, Isa sed.

An then that one dreem bustid open an all wat wer left wer tha road an tha shatterin clatter ov steel weels on tar mack an runnin lite smear in tha dark its all gorn by so fast. I laid down be sides Isa be sides tha creek an I sleeped in her arms memberin tha times I wer wiv me Mar an her soft skin touch. I wer be comin in luv wiv Isa.

It wer tha big wet, bugs hummert thru shimmerin air moven in tha afta noon storm. Clouds on tha rim ov tha gorge, ther brite outlines too reel, like a fals membry. I watcht tha beetins thru half close eys so I didnt hafta see em in me sleep. But them membries gets in behindt yer eys like roadgrit till I didnt know wat wer tru nor fals. Wats tru is tha shudderin shivery feelin in me gut wen I lookt at Isa an I can see tha red dirt in them warm lazy daze ov sap drippin in tha sun, billabong water brite an cleer an tha backbroakin ridge. It didnt matter if we did nuffin jest laze coz ther wer water an cool shade an plenny ov fishis an lizzids ta eet.

All them creecher machiens come outta tha craks in tha wet. A goanner droan whirrin in its servos an lazy tung flickin out ta sents tha groun a hed. Its skin wer yellor an blak pixel spekkled scales an soft unnerbelly warmt by tha roks. Lukin for metal scraps ta scavage an ded meet ta pick thru or enny thin reely. It wernt fussy, a gut on legs. Two hairy bigdog robos come jerkin up tha side ov tha canyin makin a awfill rackit frum ther enjinns. They was in tha hunt for nu parts too an they scart orf tha goanner droan. They wuda scart me orf too, but Smoov cud blok em wiv his link maker an they didnt come enny closer. Wild bigdogs wasnt fast but they wud neva stop till they huntid down ther tucker. An then ther

wer otha creechers livin in tha craks in them roks wat wer olda than tha machiens, olda evin than tha old wirl, olda than tha wirds wat im usin rite now. Them creechers, ya cudnt see em nor heer em but they was ther. Ya cud feel em in tha gentil breez tho they only come out in tha dark.

Smooov smoaked up an lookt thru his notes, mummerin his ravens, happy as a barstid on fathers day. He tweeked his link ta tha Wotchers trance mishin an me an Isa wanderid like babes, we was nakkid an follerin eech otha thru tha daze, tha olda creechers wotchin frum cracks in stoan walls ov tha gorge. It wer so quiet cept for tha inseks hummernin a choon wot is tha freek winsy ov tha hole wirl. Tha hole thin wer moren its seppert parts, eech dusty day in that coolsweet place burstid wiv life, fat wiv tha bebbe ov midday heet wat growed in ta soft sunset vuscreen ta anotha place. I dint hav ta say nuffin ta Isa, we cud see inside ov eech otha, we cud speek wiv no wirds. We stayt tha hole seesin till tha storm clouds stoppt comin an tha creek dryt up an tha fishis all ded an tha brumby trucks showt up.

Dust clowd on tha horizin first then tha hummerin ov enjinns an in tha disttins tha thumpin ov they sound sisstims. Smooov swiched orf rite away but it wer too late theyd gotten a fix an wer comin fasst. All tha geer wer spred far, Isa an Smooov workin ta pack but all I cud do was stair. Ther was all kinds ov trucks in tha backroads, sum was left ova frum tha time ov tha gigacities an was slaved ta camps an did they biddin. Sum was indies, wat wer short for indie pendints wat I doan know ware ther pendints was hung frum enny more, mebbe be hind ther vu screens. Tha indies took ther transport contracks ware they cud, doin wirk an haulin riders wat wud trade patches for tha truckdreem haze. Indies all ways had tha best haze, it wer sum thin theyd make in they synthmod proteen

chemfacs an tha trucks wiv tha best haze foundt tha riders wiv tha best linkmade patches wat wud tweek ther truckin freeks an make em feel rite. It wer jest how tha wirld wirkts, yair? Then sum times ther was tha brumbies wat didnt truck wiv no riders or contracks an went roage. This one mob ov brumbies wat come in ta tha gorg wer ran by a big blak barstid callt tha Brumby King an it raint feer down on tha backroads. Ten weels grindin an krome staks howlin an rumblin tha grount as it rollt.

Ther wer a order ta tha way tha mob roaded an they kept it tite. First come tha seckind, tha Left Tennat. It wer shinin wite wiv blu trim an tha proudist I eva seen ov its paintid scrollwirk in westin pattins. Reel classic look an tha otha trucks in tha mob follered. Ther was all diffrint color skeems, one wiv candi green an purpil an brite yellor trim, one wiv crazy pattins ov lite blu lines on dark blu, one grey wiv thik blak markins, arrer heds an barbs an geo metrik magik encasin wikkid weel archis an krome trim, one wiv moven gliffs shiftin rite on top ov anglid lines an snarlin grill. They prancid on in gunnin they engins an glowin in tha fadin sun. An then at tha endt tha Brumby King itself powert in ta tha gorg. It wer dintid an staint wiv rust an bucklt panils, mud stuk up unner tha runnin bords. Tha othas was vane in ther looks but tha Brumby Kings pride wer in its dusty scars. They circlt aroun thumpin out bass beets frum ther soundt sisttims wat shook out tha birds frum tha trees. Tha dust flowt up in cloudds. Smoovd bin gathrin up tha showgeer an he cufft me on tha hed an sed

— Doan jest stand ther dickhed, we gotta road.

So I wer dazed frum tha clap an me mouf wer open slack in wunner at them brumby trucks massin an groovin ta get in close ta ware they cud take a shot at Smoov. Smoovd dun plenny ov chats wiv indie trucks but he wernt gunna mess

wiv tha wild brumbies. He wernt gunna yeeld ta em neether but they was powerfill machiens bilt ov steel an rust an pain an carryin rounds ov bullits made frum boan an tungs ov fire frum ther flamers. Sum trucks cud be tamed but not this mob run by tha Brumby King weezin smoak out thru its staks but it wernt no deesil ya cud tellit jest ta look.

They circlt aroun an formt up neer tha camp. Tha grount shook frum tha hummerin ov they enjinns an tha rumblin ov tha rockin choons pumpt frum bassy woofers deep in they chassis. Smoov wer all moast reddy ta go, he wer too busy evin ta clip me for bein frozin ta tha spot at tha site ov them monstas wat burnt an lootid ever thin they cud find cept this time it wer us ther in frunna em. Isa sed

— Fucks sake, grab tha geer bags. We gotta moov.

Smoov throwt a tote at me an pusht wat geer he cud in ta anovva bag wat he hungt frum me shulder an then we was runnin, leevin be hindt wat we cudnt carry. Tha trucks cudnt form all tha way roundt us, ther wer tha gorg an tha creek runnin thru it on tha otha side so thats ware we turnt wile tha dredfill sounds ov a brumby jam bouncd orf tha canyin walls wiv beefy bass an slack rim snare. Tha Left Tennat mountid tha spout ov a flame throwa on its enjinn cowlin, tippedt wiv tha brite blu spark ov pilot lite as it firet up an a tung ov fire stretcht out ta wards us. Anuvva opent up wiv its fitty cal deep chatterin an pingin tha dust wiv boan bullits around us in tha howlin ov they enjinns an tha glowerin gloom ov sunset. Smoov took us up thru tha bowldas an scree on tha side ov tha canyin ware them brumbies tho they was strong an feerce they was scart ov gettin scratchis on they paint wirk. Smoov pusht us on thru tha nite grazen hans an scritch in faces in tha thorny scrub as we fount our way first up then down an

across tha creek now it wer late in tha seesin an tha waterd gotten lo. Then up tha otha side an a way wile tha lites sparkt out in tha nite frum tha brumby mob an they workt back an forwids on tha otha side lookin for sines ov us but ther was nun in tha darknest. They wasnt soft an carefil neitha, they roamd tha backroads an they didnt care nun for wat they bustid up.

I lookt back on them daze spent talkin wiv tha creechers in tha roks an talkin wiv out wirds in that gorg in that summa in that seesin ov wet rains an full billabongs burstin wiv life crallin up outta tha craks. Them membries has stayed wiv me an growed inside me til Im not shore if they evar evin happent. I doan know ware tha truf lies.

— Tha truf is wat ya can hole in your han, sed Isa. Tha truf is tha powa them trucks got ta move us on wiv fitty cals an flame throwas.

— But theres trufs ya cant hole. Like tha truf ov sumriz an sunset an tha Wotchers passin, I sed.

— Only truf that matters is wat ya can take a way frum sum one else an we was droved outta tha gorge by tha powa ov them brumbies as wat wantid ta take tha Wotchers truf frum Smoov.

— I neva seen nuthin like truf frum Smoovs showins. Its all pattins an progrims an bits wat doan make sents, I sed.

— Yair well yore a dum cunt. I reckon tha Brumbies thort tha Wotchers got a reckid ov all they membries ov ther passed lives. Ther tryin ta crack in ta tha Wotcher ta unnerstand ware they come frum an wat they is in tha wirl.

Bein droved outta that place by tha powa ov them trucks as wat thort they cud take tha Wotchers truf frum Smoov, I come ta see later tha brumby trucks had ther own truf they was chasin.

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Fallen outta tha wet seesin an wanderin tha backroads shanty towns tryin ta steer clear ov any brumby trucks wat mite be prowlin. Its all mixt up in me hed. Im shufflin tha deck tryin ta findt tha rite order ta thins. One nite we seen tha Wotcher show comin in, it wer anotha showman called Dane Roadson. Tha pitchers he lit frum tha Wotcher shined on tha screen, fragged mints ov tha old times an put ta gether wiv truckin sounds an stackity fills. One stuck in me membry a pitcher ov a bold blak truck rollin on a opin hi way ware all tha lanes was clear. It roadid fast an tha rider sat up hi in control. They musta had sum wikkid teck back then ta make a truck so tame like that I wer in awe. Roadson shiftid on ta tha tellin part an startid up his ramblin ov lessins on how ta live an how ta pull togetha an lissen tha Wotcher in ovr lives an findt tha rite pattern ov tha knowin ov tha old times. Tha gigacities was wasted an dedly now but if tha Wotcher cud be tuned rite we cud take em back. All tha foke frum tha camp an tha lans around was ther ta heer it an they sat wile he did his thin but that nite he wer too hi an by tha end ther wernt much meenins ta be took frum it. He didnt put it all ta gether like a good showman wud. Me an Isa ated corn cobs charred wiv coal an chikken greese an sat on tha grount as tha camp foke wannered past in tha dark. Mangy dogs rangin aroun jest outta firelite, fightin an fuckin. Me hed got tha jump on me boans an I turnt ta Isa an tryed ta pash her but she wudnt hav a bar ov it tho our arms an legs was touchin we was sittin close an she didnt seem ta mind that too much me dick wer hard as. Smoov wer orf sum ware doin deels swappin patches an barterin for terbaccca an ganja an cactissflowa piss.

— Im not gunna.

— Aw, come on.

— Na, I gotta keep me hed. Im gunna be showman one day too. Thers more ta life in this wirlld than wat ya can see in tha backroads, an showins tha way ta get us back in ta tha gigacities.

— Showins not all ther is.

— Its tha sekrit ta findin out tha Wotchers knowin ov tha sisstims ov tha passed times an how ta get back wat we all bin cut separate frum.

— Ah Im sik ov heerin ov tha ol times. Howdya know it wer so gud back ther?

— Its in tha pitchers ov tha gigacities in tha fragged mints frum tha Wotchers trance mishin, tha towas ov lite an tha bildins wat spoke ta eech otha an tha sisstim ov tha wirlld wat wirkt so sweet.

I triedit it on agen, slippin me arm aroundt her but she ternt a way.

— Doan ya see how we cud be ta gether an get outta here away frum Smoov an his beetins.

— No. I doan see that. I see as how I gotta stick by Smoov an lern tha sekrits ov tha show, so as I can crack tha Wotchers knowin ov tha gigacities. Its moren jest a matter ov makin enuff connexins an bindin close enuff ta findt out tha truf. Smoovs on tha rong trak, an I know I still got a lot ta lern, but I reckon thers a way ta get in side tha Wotcher direct.

— I doan care nuffin for tha Wotcher.

— Well ya shud care. Smoovs blindt in his site but mebbe theres a clu frum tha Wotcher, mebbe teemt up wiv a truckmind I cud re seed a gigacity an leed tha fokes back ther.

— Doan be so up yerself.

— Waddaya know bout ennythin?

— Not much but I dunno how menny more beetins I can take. Carn, lets leeve Smoov. We cud start our own show. Hes on a losen streak ennyway.

— Smoovs shifty he keeps thins ta hissself an wont let me in on all tha diffrint codes ta channil tha Wotcher. I need ta stik it out wiv him longer be for I can form me own show.

I wunnered if she jest dint like me all that much but tha sines was ther sum times that she did so I kept at it.

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Roadin always roadin, one shit heep after anuvver. Traffick on tha hi way, clogged wiv fokes an trucks an trolleys an droans skatin ova cracked tarmac an hummerin in tha sky. Flapples flyin hi up in tha sky, blak an rust speckt shapes catchin tha lite on bare silva claws an sharp metal beek. They was ridin tha air hot up orf tha bakin grount, lookin for machien meets ta eet in tha bodies ov trucks an robo droans fallen by tha way. We come up on a group ov indie trucks daisychainin in a circle ther wernt nuffin cud stop Smoov frum goin down ther an workin a chat wiv em. Indies was a diffrint matter ta brumbies they was still playin by tha codin ov tha road an cud still be rangled wiv patches ta give up ther truckdreem haze wat they made in onbord chem facs. Smoov wer a born gabber an he luvd tha taste ov haze so he pullt out his linkmaker, a scritchd up slab ov aluminion wat cud choon yer in ta tha trucks freek winsy. He slottid tha patchfile tags an waved link ta tha trucks. They was in tha groov, pumpin a rockin dub thru they soun sistims, it was a growin growlin mess, hevvy bass an drumthump hittin yer in tha chest so ya felt it. Felt tha powa ov it, felt tha fallin snare hit rimshot crack on tha frontbeet an tha lazybones shaker on tha back. Horns drippin wet wiv delay an tha whole thing wer a jammy vibe right frum tha start.

They was patterned indies, dressed in decals an liteshiftin scrollwork movin all tha time, ya cudnt look at em for long becuz ya wudnt move at all, youd jest be ther in a transe.

Smooov wer well skillt an use ta tha ways ov indie trucks. He knowed how ta rangle em, how ta tame em wiv patches, make em do wat he wanted done. Id watch him do it an I lernt a few things ova tha yeers. Id lernt how tha trucks wud trade wiv riders an showmans like Smooov, how theyd swap ther truckdreem haze for patches wat tha riders made ta trip out ther truckminds. An it wer inner restin how tha souns theyd jam shifted an changed ova tha yeers, diffrint fazes rollin thru ther cultcher like tha fazes ov tha moon meetin back around tha beginnin agen. This time Smooov wer tryin ta get ridda some old junk patches an at tha same time ta feel his way into this new mob. Ther mite be sum contaks, ther mite be some roadin we cud do ta shorten tha time between two points in tha backroads or sum sweet haze wat he cud get hi on.

He went down ta tha mob an they didnt move nor nuffin. Ther wer droans skitterin an flapples flyin aroun scroungin for parts but this wernt a big meet up an ther was slim pickins. They didnt move ta see Smooov they didnt care. He wer jest a puny bloak an they was hummin wiv powa an teck an gleemin wiv movin gliffs an paintwork, custim colors doin they thing. Beet rockin donk throbbin swappin souns an patchtag files ta change tha patternin ov they minds, an Smooov all ways had sumfin tasty, sumfin gud ta share an trade for tha haze that kept tha backroads runnin nice an smooov like tha out side ov Smooovs linker worn shiny frum bein clutcht in tha han.

Down by tha side ov tha creek I sat wiv Isa wile we waytid an she tole me tha story ov tha creechers in tha rocks wat come out at nite wen no ones lookin

an steel tha breff frum yung babbies an how tha indie trucks come on tha land an rutted like wildt aministrals, smashin in ta eech otha an flyin sparks in tha nite sky an makin bebbie trucks wat ova time had come ta make tha haze ta pull tha best riders wiv tha best patches.

I wer jest sittin ther lettin tha sount ov her voice fall around me like soft rain. I wer in hevvin. Then she startid talkin about this bloak callt Crow an I wer snappt outta me dreem memberin that crow on me Mars body.

— Crows this bloak wat wares a coat made frum shreddid truck tire an hes a scavinga, a triksta. He roads slo frum camp ta camp stikkin his beek in ta any bizniss ware thers profit ta be made frum tha shreds ov othas pain. Hes all ways reddy ta astract his toll frum tha sufferins ov othas. But hes got a magick about his self, he can change his shapes dependin on tha cumpny he keeps an he knows tha ways ov tha backroads truckriders an how ta liv orf tha landt as well. He can tern othas minds around ta do his own wirk with a crinkle ov his wite ey.

I sed

— I nevva herd that be for.

— Its tru, Isa sed. Tru fax. I aint seen him me self but I seen tha marks hes made in tha wirlid.

Later on Smoov come back he wer hi on wild indie truckdreem haze an he talkt a hunnerd mile an hour about them indies wat was also choonin ta tha Wotchers freek.

— One thin ta do is ta play ta a indies pride. Theys all vane an they like ta hav thins nun otha is got. If ya can offer em sumfin rare, theyll trade wiv ya for it. Trade roadin or truckdreem haze. Ya gotta be carefil coz ya nevva know wat theys gunna do but if ya can findt tha rite one, ya can make a teem, truck an rider.

Ya can make a pare like a pare be tween a showman an tha Wotcher. Hook em thru tha link an show em ya got patches ta trade. Ya can evin use tha patches ta get tha trucks ta do wat ya want sum times, it hits em like haze hits a youman. An like haze, its a leesh ya can jerk.

Smooov rantid on an on tho we had herd it menny times be for. But ther wer all ways sum thin ya cudnt predick wiv Smooov, all ways sum surprise comin outta his mouf an he sed this:

— Them trucks is gettin moren more inner restid in tha ways ov terpertin tha Wotchers trance missions. They doan got tha same kind ov thinkin as a youman, but they know tha Wotchers parta they own past too. I reckon they got a feelin ov kinship wiv tha Wotcher, like sum time back they come frum tha Wotcher an tha Wotchers got tha keys ta ware they come frum, see, an if they can get a holdt ov ther codin frum tha past they can take control ov tha presint an breedin they own hi bredes. They is loadin fragged mints frum tunin tha Wotchers freek in ta they trucksongs an putten em ta gether like a showman wud, ta findt tha pattins.

I cud see Isa wer hookt up intense in Smooovs wirds, she wer lissenin hard. Wat I terperped frum wat he sed was tha trucks ascepted Smooov coz they wuntid ta get clowser ta tha Wotcher thru him, an they thort they cud mech they own past frum tha Wotcher ta make a betta tomorrer, like we was tryin ta do. Then tha haze took Smooov ova an he turnt meen an swiped me wiv his fist till tha blu sparx flew in me hed. An lookin back, maybe I shuda done things diffrint, taken me swag an hedded out on me own rite ther an then. But maybe it doan make no diffrints.

Nex day we seen a camp ov dessit peepel theyd been ther long before tha flapples an bigdogs an trucks an goanner droans come an theyd be ther longtime still. They knowed tha places ta dig for water, they knowed tha ways ov huntin roos an lizzids, they knowed how ta cook em an how ta eet em. They didnt want nuffin ta do wiv tha indie trucks wat roared an shook tha ruttid roads an they didnt want nuffin ta do wiv dusty riders an showmans an sandblastid follerers ov truckdreem haze. An I thort theyd gotten tha rite ideer an we got tha rong ov it.

Chapter 3

It wer later on. Tha moons fattid an wastid wiv nun ta account. We was on tha plane an down in tha dirt, diggin for old dix drives in tha rubbil ov broakn roons. Me an Isa pickt thru tha muck, minin for dada wat ya cud findt on ded meeja drives. Scan a drive an pull tha fragged mints ov pitchers or souns spliced in ta spice tha show frum tha Wotcher. Smoov a little way orf, wild scraggy face hair but diggin reel carefil. He wer a showman, an tha showmens was tha only ones wot cud ass tract tha dada an terpert wot come up frum them wells beneef tha erf an frum tha shinin Wotcher up abov.

Isas brown hans wer workin nex ta mine, goin ova broakin cases an coppa wires. I lookt up an cort her eys an she smild. I lived for them smils they was me campfire embers on a coldt dessit nite. Smoov collectid a clatter ov junk up ova tha rise. All ways diggin, lookin for tha peeces wat was gunna make tha puzzil all

fit rite ta gether. But ther wernt no fit, no getherin. I knowed it by then evin if I wer too yung an dum ta say any thin. Ther wer only tha puzzil an tha party cules ov its many festations. Ther wer only tha smooov surfiss, nothin unnerneef. Specially nuffin in tha junk wat Smooov dug up outta tha groun, jest bits an bites ov randim fragged mints frum them as wat is gorn frum tha erf now.

I climbt ova a rise an reecht down ta pull up a hefty case an I seen unnerneef wer a creecher wat lookt like a snake wiv dirty metal skin lyin ther agenst tha groun. It wer so still I didnt see it till I wer rite up close. I seezed up. It glistent wet an nasty, ten hans long an thik like a root. Its tung flicked. Its skin was blak holes in tha wirld. Its wikkid red ey glowed in tha shadders an it made a shiverin sliverin hissper as it reerd up on its back an lookt rite at me. I call out me voice quiverin.

— Smooov... Thers a sum kind ov snake.

Smooov lookt up but he wer slo in moven. Isa eys flashed on tha snake. She movedt closer ta take a look.

— Stay back, I sed.

She wudnt, she wantid ta see an she wantid ta get close ta it, eys brite an burnin ta see tha knowin ov tha nu creecher. She took anotha step for wids an bendid down, reechin out her han an tha snake struck out an bited her rist. She criedt out an thats wen Smooov come rushen ova. Tha snake slivered orf in ta tha garbige. Smooov turnt on me eys red an ruddy beerd scragglin wiv rage.

— Watve ya done, ya fucken idjit? You stirred it up, dint ya?

Smooov pusht me outta tha way, rough, tryin ta get ta Isa.

— No I didnt it wernt like that, I sed.

Sickenen reel fast, Isa paled an fallt ta tha groun. She cryd an wimpert.

He gethert her up in his arms an took her rushen back ta ware we was camped next ta a old an rustid truck cab on its axils, its winders hung wiv cloff an tarps. Smoov rippt orf a piece ov cloff frum his shirt an tiedt up her arm reel tite. Laid her on tha groun an sed doan move, ther ther. Bustid up a couple ov stix on his knee an tined em ta her arm so she cudnt move it.

I watched him frum behint. I didnt wanna get in tha way but I wunted ta see wot I cud do ta help.

Tha skin on her arm startid ta tern blu an scale up like tha metal scales frum tha snake thing, hard an cold. She wer goin inta shok, swettin an shiverin. Tha poisin wer spreddin. She startid ta moan. Sunlite glinted orf tha swet on her skin. I leened in ta touch her.

— Git away, Smoov yelt. Garn outta here.

He clippt me upside tha hed. Like it wer my fault she got bit. I went down ta tha edge ov tha roons an cried ware tha robos an tha crows pecked ova bones an sirkit bords an I hoped Isa wud be ok.

#

I kept me eys out for tha snake but it wer long gorn. Isa snakebit an no tellin wat wud happin.

Smoov glowerin.

— Fucken idjitt, he sed.

— Fair go, Smoov. It werent my fault, I sed.

— Bull shit it wernt. You stirred it up ya unco bludger. Ever thin ya eva done turns ta shit yer hans.

— Na, it wernt like that Smoov.

But ther wernt no tellin him. He wer itchin fer a blue. He raist up his rite han ta hit me. I shied away frum it till tha nex thin he wer swingin a big roun blow wiv his left wat cort me in tha hed.

I put me hans up too late tha rite come back around strait afta, me face esplodin frum tha shok an I lost me feet. I wer on tha groun wiv screwt up face, hans crutchin at tha air tryin ta get him orf. He droppt his knees in me chest an them fists kept comin, arkin around like roks on tha ends ov tha chains ov his arms. Three four five times, eech one boomin in me eers, lowder than trucksounds, litenin sheets ov pain wiv eech shock sendin orf red an blak an blu colors behint me tite closed eys.

He took his fill ov me an wen tha anga left him he lift up his knee an took his feet. I laid on tha groun. Tha blud flowt first then tha teers come wiv tha ache.

— Yer a fucken waste ov space, Smoov mummert unner his breff. He took orf back ta ware Isa laid.

It wer ova in a few sekins but tha pain stayt an leaked in ta me boans an me dreems at nite.

#

Isa spendt a feverdt nite wat swettid an criedt like tha nite I lost me Mar. I criedt for Isa an for me poor bustid face. Isa callt out inna snakedreem. Smoov kept her reel still ta give her a chance ta fite tha poisin in sted ov it hittin her all at once. Wen tha lite come on in tha mornin we packt tha geer an roadid ta ware Smoov knowt ov sum medisn peepel on tha trak ta Hinds Pass ware we was hedded for tha nex showin.

Got ta ther camp rideless come sun down. Tha medisn fokes sat roun ther campfire. Baldy wite fella in a rooskin coat an his missus wiv pierced eer lobes

long an hangin down ta her sholders. Smoov tolt em wat gorn on an they brung out they bags an they herbs an smoakin in sents.

Isa let em look at her arm an they checkt her eys an her tung, bloak fussin ova his tote bag an tha missus lookin on stedly. Missus sed:

— Them slinky snakes is bin eetin ov tha poisin groun ov tha past an so theys be come poisin they selfs.

Tha bloak sed:

— Nah, tha slinky snakes IS tha poisin. They is come up outta tha ground rung by tha poisin ov tha old times. Be for tha glitterin gigacities fallt in ta rubbil ther wer nun. Then tha viriss wat ated out tha guts ov tha machiens ov tha past an brung tha smasht up trash an snowfallen ashes. Now tha slinky snakes is bin birfft.

— Ah, youse doan know nuthin bout tha past, sed Smoov. Its all jest dodgy gessin an maginins. Now tell me, wat can yer do for her?

— No tellin. Ever ones diffrint an I seen only three othas wat bin bit, so its hard ta say. Two fellas diedt rite ther an one scaled up an be come metal till he wer eeted by a flapple.

Isa turnt her eys on em weekly an sed:

— Im all right. If I wer gunna cark it, it wuda happent before now. Im not gunna be eeted by no flapple neither.

She scritchd at tha metal scales on her arm.

— Its tru, sed tha bloak. Shes crook all rite but I doan think shes gunna die. Tha poisin bin slowt long enuff now for her ta inner grate it in ta her sisstim.

Smoov gruntid then sed:

— Boy, get down tha creek an fetch sum water for our friends.

I did wot he sed. We cudnt stay ther tho, we hadda get movin ther was all ways danger frum brumby trucks an so wen Isas fever broak enuff an tha sun wer hi up in tha sky we set orf for Woop Woop, Isa slung ova Smooovs shulda. I carryt all tha geer plus weedseed damper an chugar an tee an terbacca. Smooov wiv his ganja an cactusflower grog stilled in plastick boddles. All that wer left wer plastick. Tha grass growed hi up roadside in frunna mountins ov plastick boddles, plastick bags, plastic buckits, plastick shapes, all that plastick greyd out now an sumtimes tha erf throwd it up, it didnt got no color no more it wer grey as dust. Wen tha ground vommits it up thers fokes in rags pickin thru tha trash ov old time. Fokes wiv bags fulla roap an coppa wire an fallen ash on top ov tha ash, stinkin oily tides ov trash washt up frum tha dirty land. Cliffs fallen down, tungs ov fire, tungs ov land lickin tungs ov blak water eetin up tha groun.

Isa wer week an shiverin, ther wer a nerviss feelin in me belly as I memberd how close she got ta tha slinky snake an I thort as maybe she wantid ta get bit. I dunno wat it meent but I wer putten it ta gether wiv her thorts an reckonins on wat how she wuntid ta teem wiv sum truckmind or robodroan ta crack tha Wotcher an wat she mite do ta get back tha knowin ov tha sisstem that runned tha gigacities. Smooov wer given me tha cole shulder silent treement like it wer all my fault an me face wer brokin an throbbin frum tha beetenin. Ther wer rain on that track thru tha backroads ta Hinds Pass. A rumble in me guts an a rig rollin on tha road. It wer a silver Kenworth an it wer covert in glitterin gliffs an simbols, made me broakin hart race ta see it an feel its rumbil an heer its froaty roar as it come closer. Smooov curst an triedt ta hail it on his wavy linkfinder but he wer lumbered wiv Isa an before he cud dial in tha rite freek it wer too late, tha Kenworf wer dust.

So on we trudged thru that day an tha nex an be for noon on tha third I seen somefin wer doggin our tail, I cud see tha dust behint. We kept on goin, fast as we cud witch wernt that fast. Pretty soon it wer cleer that tha follerer werent movin any faster neither, tho it was gainin slowly.

— Is it brumby trucks? I akst.

Smooov glowered.

— They wuda took us be for now if it wer trucks. Its sum thin else.

— Lets pull ova an hide in tha scrubb wile they gorn past, sed Isa

— We got no ideer wat it cud be back ther nor wat is ther program. We keep moven till Hinds Pass.

We kept on that road under tha blare ov tha wite sun an tha hot bref ov tha air suckin water outta our skins wiv its dry kiss. Gun metal clouds hi up in tha gaspin sky. Smooov lookt back ta take a mesure mint, tha chrono an tha tachyo crankin in his linker, figgerin time an speed an distance.

Isa wer pale an scared. Bein snakebit changed her. Skin roun her arm wer all scaled up wiv meely metal flakes.

— Its bad, I can feel it, she sed.

Smooov didnt say nothin, but I cud tell he wer afrait. Afrait for Isa an afrait ov tha follerer. I caught tha vibe orf ov Smooov an his showmans in stinks so I pusht us a long a little faster. If we cud stay ahed ov em till sun down we cud lose em in tha dark.

— How come they is goin so slow? I sed

— How come yew is goin so slow? Keep moven yer arse.

So we kept on all thru that smoaky afternoon, tha slow race a grindin stoan aroun our necks, playin on our minds.

— We shud jest stop an face em, see watevers comin, I sed.

— Whaddaya know ov it anyway? jest keep moven. Wen nite come we is gunna get orf tha road.

Tha afternoon stretched like time werent fixed but flowin thick like engin oil an axl greese. I gritted me teef an put me back into tha haul, an tha sun slowed as it tracked across tha sky. Orf in tha distance ta tha eest tha drab green scrub on red wiggly mountins. In tha west tha sun a burnin ey hole sinkin at last beneef tha line ov tha erf an tha follerer at tha self same distince behint, judgin by they dust an tha view we cud get ov em thru tha linker.

Dark fallt quick an we didnt waste no time gettin orf tha road a short way an then Smoov messt up our tracks wiv plastic bags an found a holler place in tha groun ta stow tha show geer an we creept orf back up tha road neva hopin ta see watever it wer wat was follerin. Rustlin in tha spiny fex spookt me but wer jest nite time creechers an orf in tha distince robo bigdogs whinin on tha hunt. We fount a place ta lay reel quiet an tha night stretcht longer than tha day before but we was tiredt we found some sleep in be tween fitful turnins ov eys scannin tha blu blak horizins for signs ov any movin thing.

In tha mornin we went back an all tha show geer was foun an looted it cuda bin by a flapple or a aminal or robo but ther was only one thing taken, a pendint ov Smoovs wat gave him tha codes ta tha Watchers trance mishin ta use in his link maker. He went dark an curst tha sky.

— Wat wer that thin wat got taken Dar? Isa sed.

— It wer a pendint, thats all. A link ta tha past. I member all tha gliffs an codes in me hed anyway its no matter. Carn, we got sum groun ta cover today ta make it ta Woop Woop by sundown.

Smoov tryin ta play cool about tha pendint but I cud tell its loss hurt him.

Isa warmt her self by tha fire an sed:

— I wunner if wat wer follerin us cud ov bin Crow.

— Aint no Crow, its all bull shit. Keep yer drongo maginins for yer show preps, sed Smoov.

— Its tru as I herd it, Isa sed.

An afta a bit she sed:

— Can I look thru tha show notes for pattins?

— Nope. Them is only for showmans eys.

— But Jons no showman.

— Thats rite. Hes a ugly dum shit halfwit wat keeps all tha geer rite an does wat hes toldt.

I dunno why I didnt run frum em boaf cept for tha times I cud see Isas smile. I boilt up tha billy an we had sum tee an roady made frum flour, water an chugar. Smoov smoaked up like he always did an orf we roadid, this time wiv nuthin follerin behindt but a emty space an Smoov got stoaned an brooded on tha pendint wat got took an I wunnert if it wer Crow wat took it an in tha sky I cud see a flapple ridin tha air moven up orf ov tha salt pan now tha sun wer up an tha blastid lanscape all aroun wer so lonely an wreckt but still sum times I hadda stop me self frum gettin cort up by its feechers. One minim yer cursin it an its wite emtyness an then tha next ya roundid a corner an seen a nu vu ov its wunner an bewdy.

We made it thru that next long day, Isa weeka n sick still, like she is seen a ghost an mebbe thats wat passed us in tha night I dont know or mebbe it wer jest bein snakebit but I thort I saw a glimpse ov Smoovs pendint wen she moved her

han frum pockit ta pack. I kept me mouf shut an put one foot in frunna tha next
all tha way ta Hinds Pass, about twelv clicks souf an thru tha linker we cud see its
tin walls in tha red dessit an it wer a happy site.

Chapter 4

We hit Woop Woop shanty town wiv tha show geer all stashed. Isa week still but she flasht me a smile, frendly face in tha frowns an teers ov tha road. Smoov wer grim ov look, he wer startin ta get rite for fixin on tha Wotcher an tha trance mishin he wud channil. Roadwise an able, always thinkin on tha nex move, but it wer up ta me ta scan tha faces ta see how things was goin ta go down in tha camp. Tha fokes wer getherin for tha show, gettin reddy ta heer wat they cud take frum Smoovs pitchers an tha messiges he brung down frum tha Wotcher. They seen tha show as a way ov comin ta gether an tryin ta unnerstan how tha peeces all fittid. An Smoov sold em on tha ideer that one day if they lissent hard enuff an getheredt enuff connex thru tha pattins ov tha Wotchers signil therd be a messige wat wud shine down an restor tha sisstim frum tha passed times.

Ther was kids runnin past shoutin show show show an Smoov still wiv that steely look in his eys. Kids runned alongside us hittin a old tire wiv a stick. Tha sun settid. Ther wer smoak an dust in tha air an it wer a smaller follerin than I thort we wud get. We bin ther be for its on tha show sirkit frum camp ta camp thru tha dessit backroads. Dogs lyin in tha groun an chooks cluckin an peckin an tha air raspt me froat wiv fallin ash.

Kids was follerin us along besides tha cart, scratchin an tryin ta see wat wer unner tha covers. Smoov smackt they hans away.

This one kid lookt at Smoov, dirty face tangle ov hair.

— Is tha Wotcher gunna come down an save us against tha brumbies?

— Wotcher dont come, Smoov said. Wotcher passes by hi in tha sky.

— But tha horss hed profit sed—

— Wotcher doan make no inner feerants. It jest tells its messiges an tha showmans terperets em so ya can all hav a betta ideer ov how ta live. Mebbe theyll be a missige frum tha Wotcher in tha show for ya if ya come ta nite.

We roadid in on a trak lined wiv shaks. Ther was wimmin sittin on mats wove frum plastic mined frum tha wreck ages ov tha past an wat come afta. Bloaks was smashed orf ther face on cactisflower grog brewed in plastick bags buried in tha groun. Kids runnin aroun every ware, an every ware I lookt I seen tha faces ov tha starvelin an tha emty. Smell ov sour swet an cookfire smoak, dryin rabbit skins, chillies on strings. Smell ov blud an guts fresh frum butcher knives, smell ov sewer an rottid garbige, smell ov meety smoakhouse. Smell ov deesil jenny, smell ov newmint molly cules frum truckmind proteen synthmod alkyfac an broakin vanes frum haze.

We roled up ta tha show place, all laid out in tha senter square. Menne times we dun tha show an menne times more we still wud do tha show. Tha show wer our meet an our sleep, tha show wer Smoovs lifes wirk, swet ov his yakka. It wer his raisin an his follerin an it wud be his dyin too. He roled up a smoak an sat in tha shade ov tha cart while he reddied his linker for tha Wotchers pass. In behindt his eys tha trance missions come ever nite for him ta choose an pattern frum wat wer tha Wotchers messige.

Tha kids was gathered roun now, an tha old fokes come too. Id bin chargin tha sells all day, chargin em orf ov tha altar nator fixt ta tha roalin wheels ov tha cart an tha turn ov windprop. I creeked tha case orf tha cart an startid luggin tha geer. Smoov puffed on his smoak, blowin gray clouds ov it in gouts frum his nose. He wer gettin reddy for tha role. Isa sat by tha crates I took out. She wer studyin Smoov, studyin his face an his hans, makin sure she took in all tha things she cud, coz one day she wantid ta do her own shows, lissen tha Wotcher herself. Theres a sekrit way ta it, a sekrit that only tha showmans like Smoov knowed how ta find tha rite freeks. They kept it ta emselfs thru sekrit rites an tha sekrit lang widge tha showmans past on thru tha ages ta make tha rikkids ov tha shows.

Sun gorn down, litenin in tha west cacklin dry sheets. No smell ov rain. I strung tha wite tarp frum ware tha show wud come forth. An then tha Wotcher spun, moven slo an tha flash ov it come up frum tha eest like a shynin ey in tha sky. Ther wer a gasp frum tha fokes in tha camp as it past an tha wunder mint frum tha crowd at sum thin like that cud be so hi up an move so slo an reglar an tha powa ov them as wat musta put it ther an tha hoap that therd be anuvva way back ta tha time wen sum thin cud be lawnacht an floatid like a star. In tha wake

ov its passen it left its missiges in tha showmans linkmaker an outta tha crackle ov statick an noyse wer how tha showmans ernd they meet an they smoak. They cud lissen tha Wotcher. They cud sing tha signil an tune ta tha freek ov it.

Tha kids was quiet as it past but afta it wer gorn they startid chatterin, evin tha older ones wat had seen it come many times wer reddy for it, that cracklin message frum on hi. Wotcher gave tha knowin that sum thin betta had come be for an mebbe one day sum one wud peece it all ta gether ware it all made sents an we wud find tha road back ta tha gigacities. Tha erf wud be calm green agen an tha waters blu an tha bildins ov tha gigacities wud grow in tha an poisont groun like concreet trees an they wud tork ta gether like they used ta an fix tha poisin groun.

Darkness gethert an tha fokes gethert thicka too. They was tankt up an reddy for tha show, jostlin an strainin for a betta vu ov tha screen. Smoov knowt how ta playit. He let it bild an bild til ta rite momint an then he motiont me an I hit tha lite an tha screen lit brite wite an then sircles ov color swirlt an swirlt wiv tha shadders ov tha insecks hummin in tha air. Smoov come forwids frum outta tha gloom, hed downcast an fulla tha Wotchers trance mishin. Tha gabblin crowd went silent. Isa sat behindt soakin it all up, seein how Smoov dun it. He flowt his jackit behint him an sat down at tha dex an slottid one a tha ded drives we fount, usin a slaved truckmind saved frum tha muck ta randim eys tha pitchers like trucks did wiv wavey trucksounds, mixin traces an trances, tha lite spreddin out in waves frum tha screen til we cud see a bloaks face formin in tha pattins. Tha Rider. A face hard an worn. He wer ridin up a rig paintid blu, tha Blu Mule wat belched blak smoak frum its krome smoak staks an hi up in tha riders cab he wer, sittin so tite wiv that rig ya wudnt know it. Tha brown dessit lanscape flowt

past. This wer a well knowt clip but then ther wer a jump an a nu peece ov pitcher formt up on tha screen. Ya cud sents tha feelins ov tha crowd as they husht evin furvva an was suckt in ta tha nu peece ov tha puzzil. Tha Rider wer outta tha cab an chaint up an he wer beeted by bloaks wiv stiks an then tha nu parta tha trance mishin finisht in a swirl ov sno an dust an specks cort in a beem lite. Smoov remixt tha clip, loopin it back in wiv otha splices, cuts dug deep frum tha grount, but tha fokes was ther ta see tha latest Wotcher clip. Sum times tha nu ones fittid wiv wat come be for, workin up a hole pitcher ov tha Blu Mule show beemt down frum on hi an mixt wiv truck rumblin soun an stackity sno lites ta trip tha heds ov tha camp fokes.

Smoov playd tha dex swirlin pixilfire ash frum tha cryin sky til ther wer only tha images frum tha Wotcher burnen in ta ever ones eys in ta they harts as well. That big Blu Mule gunned its self ova rises an thru tha hi ways ov tha wirled wiv its Rider in choon. Tho tha Rider didnt hav no link maker he didnt need one coz them wat is come be for us cud channel they rigs without evin a freek, jest tha powa ov they thorts. Tha fokes was wotchin moufs opin an silint in frunna tha screen. Truckdreem haze an cactisflower piss workin thru they sisstims an jackin ther eys an eers ta tha vu frum tha time wen all tha gigacities wirkt an tha wirlds machiens wer a neet an ordly on tha slavegrid wiv no droans nor brumbies roamin tha lands. Smoov crant up tha pace, bringin tha souns an pitchers up lowd an lettin em drop away agen be for tha big finnish. Tha camp fokes wer ther wiv him, they was sum ov them startin ta get ta they feets an moov in time wiv tha souns swayin wiv tha rythim ov tha swayin pitchers. Rite at tha peek ov it in tha smoak frum tha fires an tha dust risin frum tha stampin ov

tha feet tha madness come ta take hold an Smoov took up tha mike. He startid his chantin rant wat wer tha tellin ov tha nite.

— Camps foke an show follerers Im callin, Im tellin so youse can heer tha wirds an souns ov tha Wotcher wat passes by an wat pitchers Im gunna put ta gether for ya ta see diffrint ways ov bein an new changis comin in tha pipe line frum on hi.

Crowd swellin callin back in star lite dusty moon shone thru moffs flyin roun tha lamp ov tha pitcher beem. Tha wirds rose up frum tha people:

— Tell it.

Now it wer my tern I crankt sum parched mint in ta tha typeriter an startid ta foller Smoovs flow. I cudnt get it all down ov corse I cudnt but I did me best ta capcha tha essinse as Smoov went on. I savd tha parched mint neetly in me typeriter case so Smoov cud look back on his tellin later an puzzil ova tha meenins ov it.

— Wen tha Wotcher passis an beems its messige its tryin ta show wat tha past wer like frum tha otha side ov tha screen. Its dark wen tha Wotcher passis in ta darkniss an its dark up ther in tha hi ov tha sky. So we cant see in tha cleer lite ov tha screen, we only got peeces ov it. We is puttin tha peeces ta gether ta make a hole pitcher. But we gotta be patient an wait for tha rite time. Like tha Rider whos gettin beetid in this nu footig, we gotta be tuff an cop that beetin we gotta keep ovr beleefs in tact an hole in thes times its all ways darkist rite be for tha sun shines. If we is gunna get back ta ware things come eesy an ever thin cud be dug up frum tha grount an floatid on tha air, be for all tha changis startid an brung tha gigacities down, be for ther was bigdog robos an droans an flapples.

Thers a pure time a reel time an tha Wotchers got tha way ov it if we is got tha steddiniss an tha in site ta lissen it an see it.

Then it all fell a part an tha souns come up an tha flickerin imiges flasht in frenzy an I seen Isa her eys shynin in tha lite an she given me a smile an I tried ta take her han but she walked orf in ta tha smoak an leevin me ta stash tha show geer.

#

I come outta tha dreem ov tha show, that mist ov faces streemin, cryin eys, broakin teef, red cheeks, smoak ringin tha lites, moffs flyin aroun. Alluva sudden I didnt feel rite, like them foke ther didnt wish us well. Tha faces in tha camp firelite an brite showstream, tha press ov all them peepel an all they thorts wer wayin on me an thorts hav presents, thorts hav wait. I lookt for Isa, she wer gorn. Smoovd got five or six bloaks aroun givin im tha backslap, tellin im it wer a awesum show, tha best showman aroun, but then ther wer others on tha marjins sly smiles an wisspers behint hans an glances wot Smoov doan ever see. Theres a stream beneef, sumfin unner tha surfiss ov tha road, tha rocks tha gravil tha bends.

I stumbl'd outta ther, lookin for Isa. She wer gorn sum ware elts. I cudnt findt her no ware. I sercht thru them faces, sum frendly sum hatin, most jest emty an cort in they own thorts, not evin noaticin wats goin on aroun or tryin not ta see. I walkt thru tha camp, crookid dusty trak an pathway layd out wiv no thort or plan, tangled roap an tin an tarp. Bloaks an wimmin sittid on stumps an sittid on tha groun out side shacks an shanties, tarps an tents, humpy an leen to. All tha chooks was either roosted or roasted on stiks but ther was dogs, brite eys shinin in tha edges ov tha lite. Brawlin an crawlin, smoakin an drinkin an tha

rush ov haze frum truckdreem synthfac alkyloid. Ther was bebbies cryin an kids muckin aroun an kids sittin quiet. Ther wer singin in one place, open froat bawlin, sum one laffin sum one cryin, weepin an shoutin in tha dusky dark. No senter ta it, its all edge, ends foldid in on em selfs, a meetin ov fire an smoak, lite an shadder, an all tha daemons ov tha erf an sky wer come ther that nite, ta act out they torchert shows.

Then in a flash thru flappin canvas I seen Isa, she wer wiv anotha bloak. They was makin it. I turnt an I runned. Watd I seen?

Thru me teers I turnt corners thru tha camp, trippin ova roap stumblin ova me self it wer dark an I come ta tha outside fents ware tha action thinned out, it wer quieter, I heered tha rustlin ov a big lizzid an tha whoosh swoosh ov nightbird wing. I wer cryin an shakin, tryin ta process but I got no teraflop donk jest a rottin meetbrain rushin wiv feelins I didnt unner stand nor wanna know.

— Its all rite. Its all rite.

It wer a bloak come up outta tha dark.

— If shes gorn I mays well be ded.

— Theres no need for cryin, thers no need for dyin. I can give yer somefin for yer ails.

— I dont think so I dont think thers nuffin for this.

— Thats not tru take a little snifter ov this brew.

He helt out a flarks. I wer so sad, I jest took it frum him an neckt it. It burndt a riva ov fire in me froat, it set me eys a lite an me hed wer scrubbed cleen, me thorts was suddinly cleer an I felt alive an shynin.

— Thats a good brew, I sez.

He larfed.

— Yair, its made it frum truckdreem haze an cactissflower. Now lissen, he sez, If its a wimmin yer afta, I can help. I can sing em.

I lookt at tha bloak. He wer old, may be forty may be less, thinnin hairs on his hed, small wite eys too far apart, he wer starin, blinkless. He wore a old blak coat wat suckt up tha gloomerin fire lite. He lookt like ther wer roos loose in tha top paddick.

— You doan look like youve had too much luck wiv wimmin yerself, I sez.

— Looks is deceevin. Unner neeth tha face thers tha skin an tha boan, tha cock an balls thats ware tha joose come frum, mate. Now, wats yer problem?

— I cant tell yer.

— Lemme guess thers someone ya want wat doan want yer, is that it?

— Yair.

— Lissen I know ya is wiv that showman. Im guessin its his daughter ya is gotten tha hots for.

That wer a shok ta heer it sed, but Smoovs show wer well knowed in tha backroads, it wud make sents this bloak cud put tha peeces ta gether. He sed:

— I seen her wiv that otha bloak jest now, meself. So Im puttin two by two. Yore a yung bloak, Im sure yer well hung an fulla cum. You jest want somefin ta eese tha chill ov tha nite, somefin ta pud out tha fire thats took hold ov yer brain—

— Awlright ya got me number.

Ther wer fuckall I cud do about it.

— Well ther is sum thin ya can do.

That wer weerd be cuz tha last thin wernt spoke, it wer jest in me hed an he answert it an on he went:

— Yer know one way that this cud pan out, me old digger, is if Smoov wer not aroun, if Smoov cud be taken out ov tha pitcher. Then she wud be showman. Thats wat she wants, ya can tell jest by lookin.

— Mate I doan think its so simple.

— Oh its simple all right. That showmans standin in yer way, hes houndin ever day, keepin ya in yer place, an her too, not lettin her know tha sekrits ov tha show, tha sekrit rites ov tha showmans wat they in cantate unner tha lites. Iwl tell ya wot ta do. Iwl give ya tha word an thingsll work out for yer wiv tha girl. Ya neva will be free till that showmans gorn.

He droppt sum thin in tha dirt an winkt at me as he ternt ta go. Tha lite cort on his coat an I seen it wer made all ov shreddid trucktire. I bent an pickt up tha thin he droppt an walkt me way back thru tha smoak an tha faces ta tha showin place an all tha time I had tha knowin growin it wer Crow Id jest bin torkin ta an I wer thumbin a razord shiv wot Id pickt up frum tha ground. Back in camp an Smoov wer snorin hes fucken hed orf. His wite nek ware tha pulse beets was shown nekkid an soft in tha soft fire lite an me mind so fulla sadness an anger I thort I cud jest let a bit ov tha blud out but I cudnt do it.

Chapter 5

Nex day dorn slow an red like tha churn ov a rivers blud red mud. Me hed swollened frum Crows brew. I lookt aroun an seen thru tha dust ta tha truf ov thins, seein how tha peeces wer fallen. Isa wer wiv anotha bloak, or I wer so cort up in me thorts I cudnt see past me own mummerin madniss. Mebbe I hadda let it go. It wer somethin wat playd on me mind as I settid brek fist cookfire burnin, heetid lard in tha pan, saltpig sizzlin wiv snake egg an grasseed damper. Boilin sandy sinkhole water an stale coffy beens groun wiv stoan for tha billy. Isa late ta rise outta tha swag, I didnt know wat time she got in. She wernt ther wen Id laid down. I lookt in her eyes but she didnt look back. Smoov wer snorin always tha way after he shown. It wer anotha day an work ta be dun, hookin up tha sells ta tha camp jenny, makin thins rite wiv tha show geer. An then ther wer tha thin edge ov tha shiv wat I kept fingerin in me tote, tha shiv wat Crow given me an tha words he cud help me out. Wat wer that strange creecher he hoppit away like in a dreem an like in a dreem it hit me it wudnt be tha last time I seen him.

Isa scritchted her face an rinsed her mouf an wen she wer done noshin she scrubbed tha dishes cleen in tha sand. Comin back she triedt ta sneek a look at tha notes in me typeriter case. Smoov come up then, grumlin an hummerin ta hissself an he seen wat wer goin on rite a way.

— No ya dont, them notes is ta be kept safe fer me only ta reed.

— Why cant I see em?

— One day wen yer showman ya can, but not yet. Thers trufs in ther ya cant unnerstan.

— Wat are ya so afrait ov?

— Im not afrait ov ennythin but them notes is me hisstry an they is me futur as well an no one gets ta look at em till I say.

— Ya truss Jon wiv em.

— Hes not tha full quid an hes neva gunna show nor ride tha roads. He jest trance scribes.

— Ah Im jack ov yer bull shit sekrits. Im gunna hed out into camp, see if I can trade sumfin for this diks drive frum Lossiters Reef.

She went orf an I didnt say nuffin. I given Smoov his brekky an boiled anotha billy. Wen I standed up I knokt his brew ova. His eys slits an saltpig lard shiny on his gingy beard. He wer mad as a cut snake.

— Come ere cunt.

I crinjet a way frum his hand but rite then a bloak come up thru tha camp ta speek ta Smoov. I made meself busy wiv packin an tha cleenin but kept a eer on em. The bloak sed:

— Theres tork ov trucks raiden in tha backroads. A brumby mob rainin havick down. Thins are pullin apart in tha camp, fokes is settin out on they own.

They is scart we cant proteck em. An thers this nu ideer about tha Wotcher wat is a saver in sted ov a sayer.

— I bin heerin tha wordin on tha Wotcher for a long time. I bin heerin thers raidin mobs out ther, mate I seen em meself. Them brumbies is bin afta me for me link be for an doutliss agin. Theres nuttin I can do for youse in this camp. I jest road frum place ta place, ernin me meet an smoak an terpertin tha Wotchers sines, sed Smoov.

— Doan be so coy Smoov Ra. You got sway wiv yer shows. An thers more ta terpertin trance missions than gettin stoaned an playin pitchers.

— I doan see wat I can do.

— You is one ov tha few bloaks got a in wiv tha camps. You got tha eers ov sum ov them wat makes tha calls. If ya cud work some poly ticks in ta yer tells tha camps wud be able ta make a go ov it pullen ta gether an actin as one agenst tha brumbies.

— I doan got no say on wat Im telled by tha Wotcher.

— Whaddy know ov tha Wotchers program, but? Wats tha Wotcher doin sendin messages down ta erf?

— Wotchers gunna give us tha sekrits ov tha old time, give us sekrits ov tha teck times an tha runnin ov that gigacity machiens.

— Fokes wanna be saved rite now. Thers brumbies massin. Theys not gunna stik aroun if tha Wotcher cant giv sum help agenst tha brumby trucks. Jest think on it Smoov. Jest think on wat yer showin an think on wats best for tha camps ta be seein.

— I nevva do an I wont start. I doan think tha trance mishin. Im not holden ta enny camp boy. I run me own show.

Tha bloak got dark then.

— Well Smoov thers otha showmans. Theres otha fokes who can see wats best for tha camps is best for them. If ya fall frum favor, well doan say I didnt warn ya. Theres brumby forces getherin.

Tha bloak left it at that an I cud see he werent gunna get far. Smoov wer proud. He bin thretted before. It wer all ways a dicey game bein a showman. Ya hadda keep lots a differint thins in yer hed at once an ya hadda be tru ta wat ya seen in tha trance mishin an tha wirled as ya saw it on tha groun in frunna yer eys too.

Isa come back then an we was reddy ta start gettin tha show set, but she wernt ther in side her hed. Mebbe her thorts was wiv tha show, mebbe anotha bloak. We come aroun tha camps often enuff. Wat wer playin on me own thorts wer anotha thin but then she seen me lookin an she smiled an I felt tha lock ov her eys an tha thrill ov tha connect we had no matter if ther wer anotha bloak. I wer a fool an I almost throwed away that shiv wat tha old feller given me but I kept it in me tote an tha wirds he sed all tied up tite in me hed.

#

Ther wer plenny ov tork in tha camp that day ov brumbies getherin in tha eest an later on wen it wer all quiet be for tha storm frunt brewin showtime. Me an Isa went out on top ov a rocky clift ta see, clouds stacked hi up on top ov eech ovver up in tha sky out west. All wer reddy wiv tha geer, tha darkniss gloamin as we creepit outta camp aroun tha cliftop ta span sum time while Smoovs makin his moovs an doin polly ticks. Down on tha plane jest be low we cud see a mob ov brumby trucks was daisychainin in tha lee ov tha hill, windswept scrub not quite

hidin em an nothin cud hide tha soun ov that roar they made tha beetin louder than me hart in me froat as I watched.

— Wots goin on? I sed.

— Ive not seen nuttin like it.

She come closa ta me, tha warm ov her body nexta mine. In tha disstins I cud see tha hunkerin form ov tha big Brumby King, fat an blak as nite it wer circlin a Silver Peterbilt. Tha soun wer awesum like wildfire roarin, an a screech like wot no youman froat is evar issued. Blast ov air horn. I snugged in ta Isa an she wer ther too. Tha Brumby King crashed up aginst tha silver wat bucked, wheels spinnin away an ta tha left as it spun aroun, tha silver whined an fishtailt away it didnt want it an tha Brumby King cudnt force it. They trackt around eech otha inna slo circlin danse tha boomin beets risin up frum tha Brumby Kings soundt sisstim. Silver wernt gunna let tha King in so eesy, but tha King wer use ta this game it seemt, it closed fast an sudden, they was rite be neef us an Silver didnt hav no ware ta go we cud see ever thin as tha Brumby King jammed its big donk aginst Silver an cummed out its load in ta tha dust an evin far away I smelt it sharp an cleen as tha smell ov solvents an deesil fule on tha breeze.

Sum thin happent ta Isa, she wer softa then. She wer turnt on by tha truck ruttin. A skew ov lickle droans scampered out ta ware blak pumped its seed ta gether it up an take it in side. I put me arm aroun Isa an me face in ta her neck, smellin her erfy scent it made me hi. By this time Silver calmed down itd come back in closer while tha Brumby King took orf now itd spent it load. Tha droans skittered around an wiv they feelers tha gethert up tha load an ta gether wiv tha Silver. They was makin a babby truck, mechin a newmint truckmind in ta a substrate wat wud find a truckbody one day, but I wer lost in tha momint feelin

Isa up close, reechin in side her truck suit an me mouf serchin for hers, pressin closer an she closed her eys an yeelded. I felt her small teets an reechin furvva down, pullen tha suit down an rippen at me own zippers too an tha roar ov tha brumbies fallen in ta tha backgroun as I fallt in ta Isa. I wer hard as stoan an she wer soppin wet be tween her legs an I slided in alluva a rush ov blud goin ta me hed, blud poundin in me eers. Isas voice cort in her froat as she took me an I bucked like that Brumby King till I cummed me load out in side her.

#

We laid togetha in tha after glow an this is tha yarn Isa tole:

— Tha fokes wot livedt in tha gigacity, they had ever thin enny one cud wunt. They had all tha knowin ov compewders an truckin lanes an they wirld wer a massif sisstim wat ranned all most by itself. It be came all most its own livin thin till tha reel livin thins startid on dyin all aroun them. Sum thin happent ta tha sisstim an it stoppt wirkin in sum places an then moren more tha machiens was brakin down an leevin tha slave grid ta look afta them selfs. An tha groun poisint tha machiens an compewders an they startid doin they own thin wiv no thorts ov tha sisstim ov tha gigacities. An tha gigacities was poisint too an now thers no one wat goes ther. Thas how tha peeple come ta live in tha scattert camps in tha backroads lookin ta tha Wotcher for ansas an a way ta get back ta tha past.

I wer jest lyin ther lookin in ta her eys as she spoak I dint want it ta end. Her voyce wer soft an flowin like a trucksong.

— Tha Wotchers got its place in two wirlds. Its frum tha wirld ov tha passed an tha knowin sisstim of seedin tha gigacities but it speeks in ta tha wirld ov tha backroads an tha machiens like flapples an robodogs. Its a bridge. Thas

why its so importint an I wanna crack tha Watchers sekret. Coz its got tha knowin in ther sum ware ov how ta reseed tha sisstem ov them bildins wat tork ta eech otha. Unnerneef all tha bull shit an tha misstry, thers tha truf in ther ov tha past an if we can figger out tha knowin we can fin our way back ta balince. Not like now ware its all down ta mussle an how much wait ya can pull. But Smoov aint gunna give me tha codes till he finks Ive ernt tha rite. Well I got a diffrint ider coz thers new kins ov life comin up outta tha groun ya seen it in tha slinky snake wat bit me. Its changt me, I can feel it. Thers a cracklin in tha air wen eva Smoov hits tha linker. I can almost heer tha Wotcher in me hed now. Im seein thins much more cleer. Once Smoovs given me tha last codes ov tha Wotcher an I can hook I wiv tha rite roadin crowd hi bred aminal or machien an I know its only a matter ov time be for I can leed tha backroads fokes ta re turnt ta tha gigacities. Smoov dont like them thorts tho. Plus he neva trucked wiv no noshins ov tha Wotcher as a saver, he neva thort tha Wotcher wer anythin but a messenger sent ta messige us wiv ways ta make our lives better. Its thins ever one knowed all reddy any way, he wud jest put em so as ta be nu an unnerstanable.

I wer taken in by her voyce an thorts they formt up in me mindt I sed

— Why doan we go see tha gigacities? We cud find em an live a new life wiv em. Any ways we wud hav betta chances by our selfs.

— Gigacities poisint groundt now. No one goes ther. An I still gotta lot ta lern frum Smoov for showin.

— Hes gunna go too far one time an I is gunna get too hurted ta road. If I stay Im gunna die.

— Im gunna be a showman sum day. I like ya, Jon Ra, but if yer gunna leeve,
I wunt stop ya.

I let her tork on a bit but in side I wer dyin. I knowed then she was nevver
gunna leeve while Smoov wer a live no matter wot she thort ov a life wiv me. I
dragged me feets in tha san behint as we trudged back ta tha camp for tha show.

Chapter 6

Wen we got back ther wer a bloak on tha in side ov tha camp. He wer chantin ta tha crowds. They wer lissenin him, he wer callin em. We stood an herd as he toldt a story bout a man wiv a horses hed an blak holes for eys.

— Tha profit come in ta town walkin talkin wunnermint an tha fokes wat seen him runned in frite frum his feersum hed an hes strange tork. He wer a profit spreddin tha wurd. He sed thers gunna come a hand ov fate ta wash tha sand frum yer eys an lift yer up outta tha dust. Ya doan hafta wait for pattins ta form or lissen ta tha showmans no more. Tha horses hed sed it wer come ta tell ov a saver frum tha Wotcher wat will save tha backroads fokes out frum tha brumbies an tha dis order.

Tha fokes aroun was inner rested in wat tha horses mouf hadda say, but wer it false profitsy?

— How come he got a horses hed? One fella piped up frum tha crowd.

— He got tha horses hed coz horses is strong an faifull, he wer a strong an faifull bloak. He hadda mate ship an he sailt tha dessit backroads wiv his mates, they was lookin for tha Watchers wurd frum ware it cracklt. They herd tha Watcher wuz gunna come down ta Erf an out wud step a bloak watd be a saver for us all frum tha brumby trucks.

Smooov come on tha scene then.

— Watchers not sumfin ta be a saver. Watchers got messiges in pattins an lessins for us all ta make a better life, thats all. Theres no saver. Theres no bloak wiv a horses hed, no mates ship in tha dessit, jest a liar in tha serviss ov hisself.

— You fink yore a truf sayin servint ov tha Watcher? Watcher know ov it? sed tha preecher.

— I lissen tha Watcher ever nite. I bin puttin ta gether tha Watchers sines an meenins for twenny six wet an twenny six dry an mate I tell ya, tha Watchers no saver. Its a link ta tha passed but it doan care wot goes on. Its jest spinnin hi up above an sendin down messigis ta show a ways ov livin wats bettern all this, thats all.

— Thers a mob ov brumby trucks massin on tha out side. Theys gunna come in an ride ova ever thin in side. All they want is lootin an burnin. We doan need no truf nor lies nor messiges. We need a saver frum the brumbies.

Ther was mummerins frum tha camp fokes they was gettin restliss now. Theyd bin lissenin Smooov a long time but they liked tha ideer ov a saver. Smooov werent havin no part ov it. He ternt an sed:

— Watchers tha one thing left frum them as wat come be for, its a key but we doan know tha rite door ta open. If ya lissen tha Watcher, ya can see thers

sumfin ta take away, ya can see tha messige. Theres pattins wot form in tha trance missions, an thers truf in them patterns.

I lookedt at Isa.

— Wotdya think? I hispered.

— I think tha preecher bloaks runnin his own progrim. Hes tryin ta get tha fokes ta belief in a saver ta lift hisself in they eys an be come more powerfill. Theres mennu trufs ta tha Wotcher an we is gotta make up our own mines about it. We gotta be our own savers, or mebbe its me wat can be tha saver if I can crack tha Wotchers code. I doan know wat tha horses hed bloaks sposed ta be. I nevva herd ov that be for. Mebbe its a sine tha hi breeds be comin inta tha wirl.

Right then ther wer some wrasslin an ranglin goin on, ther wer bloaks an theyre wimmins too wat was gettin rowdy, didnt like that Smoov wer disruptin tha show. Theyd got a new showman in who was given em sumfin they wanted ta heer. They wer sick ov Smoov an tha otha showmans who wudnt ever give em nuffin they cud unnerstand. Sum one callt:

— Git outta ther, Smoov. Yer not well come ta nite.

I thort Smoov was gunna chuck a wobbly, but he stood up strait an sed:

— I bin comin for yeers. Ya knows me comin an me goin I all ways do a gud show for yer needs, show for meet an smoak an cactisflower piss. I know tha ways ov tha truck an tha road an I giv youse suckle on tha Wotchers teet.

— Smoov, thers more ta tha Wotcher than wat ya can show. This bloak wiv tha horses hed, wat wurd come into tha camps aroun two mumfs ago hes got a diffrint story ta tell. We wanna heer it. Ya cant stop it, evin if ya doan like it.

— Thats tru an its tru that Watchers moren I can know, but be carefil ov this horses hed bloak hes sick hes crook wiv a evil viriss. Hes given ya tell wat ya wanna heer, not tha hard work ov tha roadin hi-ways.

Temper Storm tha hed man moved up then an sed:

— Bess orf now, Smoov. Take yer kin an move it on.

— Its gloomin darkner, Temper, an we gotta show ta do. We wont be roadin now.

— Yes ya will Smoov, yer gunna cause trubbil if ya stay. Im gunna give yer meet an smoak for tha way, but yer on yer own now an doan come back here nex time.

Smoov wrinked his face up an went ta move tha show geer.

— Awlright Temper I heer yer. Im takin me childers an Im heddin orf an I wont be back an now thers not gunna be no more shows for this camp.

He sorta stopped a bit, waitin for sum one ta say he shud stay. But ther warnt none.

— Suits us, Smoov, sed Temper. Road an be well.

I thort Smoov wer gunna do his block but he didnt he jest turnt tail an walkt.

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Ther wer a alarum rite then, frum tha wotch tower. Tha brumbies we seen was massin for a raid an I thort on that Brumby King an wot it wanted, an its hard ta know how ta proteck yerself frum sumfin like that, almost like tryin ta work out wat a thunnerstorm mite want or why. It jest wer. It swallered up everfin in its track an doused it wiv deth an like a thunnerclowd it dint hav no thorts for wat wer left behindt in tha mud an tha blud. So tha camp fokes wer keepin ther eys

out for that dust cloud, the sign of the Brumby King and its roadin mob. Theyd billt fences and ditches and theyd hammered spikes in to the road around facing out. Theyd laid grease traps and theyd buried bombs. But seeing that cloud on the skyline sent me cold. I doan wanna eva see it agen. It wer the brumby mob movin fast, orf road.

They werent comin in a long the track ware we seen em erlier they wer comin from the waste ther to lay waste. An then comin on the side of the camp another mob, maybe parta the same mob attackin two sides at once. In the brumbies wer six rigs, led by the blak beefy Brumby King and the nu rangled silver Peterbilt nex ta it. Then ther come the Left Tennat, wite an blu an anovva blu on blu and the rest of the brumby mob follered by a crowd of droans zuzzing about in ther wake lookin for wat ever they cud scab.

The otha mob, lookin closer I cud see it wernt a mob it wer jest two indies roadin wat was gunna get cort up in the storm of the Brumby King. One red and wite and one wiv purple patternin, roadin partners roadin free. Ther paths was gettin crosst wiv the brumby mob rite in frunna the camp. I stood wotchin I cudnt take me eys orf wat wer happnin. The indies didnt reelis the thret of the brumbies or they thort they cud take em coz they didnt change corse till it wer too late and the brumbies was all aroundt. The Brumby King took a fancy to the purple and so it crashedt up agenst it while the Left Tennat and the otha brumbies circlt round and kept the red and wite bizzy. The King wernt muckin aroundt tryin wiv its donk it wuntid to rangle the purple in to its mob evin tho the red and wite done its best to drive orf the King but it wer ova welmt. It driven orf by itself, to the westin.

Wotchin frum tha fense, tha greesy camp boys gorn pale. There wernt nothin no one cud do it wer jest a matter ov time before theyd be up on us.

— Carn, I sez ta Isa, we gotta move.

— Wheres Smoov?

— Hes gorn ta sling his tote frum tha showgeer. Theres no time, we gotta go.

— Im not leevin till hes given me tha codes so as I can show in me own rite. Anyways we wud be kilt out in tha open.

Mebbe she wer rite but I didnt wanna stick around, I felt tha pull in me guts we wud die if we stayt we hadda go but we alreddy done ta much torkin tha heet wer comin down tha first shots ov rocks was fallin down frum missles in tha brumby trucks, they was rainin pain.

A crash rite nexta us an they brumbies bustid thru tha fents, weels jarrin thru tha shocks, enjinns screemin dust flyin rocks fallin an fokes was runnin. Tha panick hit me. I grabbt Isas arm but she still wudnt come. She pult away an I jest hadda run ta save meself. Tha air wer throbbin wiv tha beetin ov battlin trucksound, stedly bass rumblin an hi pitch horns tweetin an drippin wiv jammy delay.

Tha Left Tennat come on hard, howlin an screemin diff an hi pitch ter bine wine cuttin thru tha deep rockin grumbl sount ov tha donk. An then it blastid a choon, a crankin dub wat wippedt tha brumby mob in ta a frenzy ov hi revvin enjinns an tha blat blat blat ov exhorsed braks. Up come tha Left Tennats sekind, lite blu frag pattins on dark blu, its vents wide opin unner blank vu screen sensors as it suckt up all tha air aroundt fer its many fold. Once theyd bustid thru tha fents, they went all diffrint ways thru tha camp lookin for dammige an

distruckshin. Tha noise wer terribil, dust an smoak in me froat an ever breff wer hard wun frum tha thickenin air. Camp fokes screemin in panick an fetchin up they geer wat cud be carriedt. A dog runned past snarlin an snapplin feer in side its eys but angery out side.

Thru tha dust an smoak an bodies rushin her an ther allova sudden I wer face ta face wiv Smoov, hes wild eys. He come ta grab me arm an pull me back wiv him an I didnt say nuffin. It all happent so fast I jest wunted ta be done wiv it. All them pent up feelins I had come rushen in, Brumby King or not I wernt gunna go wiv Smoov. I stepped sideways an he fell in ta tha space, fallen ta his knees. Between Smoov an tha blur ov moven bodies behint I seen Crow he wor a coat made frum trucktire an hes got silver hair but ya cud see as how it had been blak as nite an hes brownface lined an wite eys wat he looks in my eys wiv a look an I know we is tied together on tha roadin. Feer hit me like coldt water settlin in me guts I cud feel it wantin ta loose in me stools. Tha face ov Crow twisted sharp, it wer cold an hard like brokin brick.

— Do it, Crow said.

Smoov wer down on his knees in frunt ov me, he wer looking sidewise up an tha swet beeded on his face an runned down his neck. He didnt say nothin, like he knowed wat wer inside me, like he knowed wat I cud do. Crow sed:

— Carn yew barstid. Its tha only thin tha dodgy cunt wud unnerstan.

— I dunno, I sed.

— Dont be a dickhed. Nows yer chance. Otha wise ya got buckleys ov havin it orf wiv tha sheila.

He spat tha end ov his durry in ta tha red dirt. Tha jennys throb an tha cleer blue sky an hi white clowd. Wind blowed frum tha eest, sun overhed an way way

up a flapple rode updrafted. Fokes moaned an dogs barked an tha brumby mob ran em down an cryin moufs was crusht unner weels till they didnt cry no more. Ther wer no home, no quiet place ta shelter tha storm it wer jest watever wits ya got an I wisht it wer diffrint but it werent. I slit Smooovs froat wiv tha shiv. I seen tha wite line ov fat unner tha skin be for tha red blud bubblt out an Smooov lookt up in ta me face an gurglt but no soun come. Blud runned ova his hans ware he triet ta hold it in ova his nu grin. He felt ova on ta his frunt till tha dust ternt black.

Then I wer lookin roun, Crow wer no ware. I sercht for a way out an I locked eys wiv Isa. She seen wot I done. I reecht out but she turnt an runned a way an I runned after her. She went strayt in ta tha path ov tha Brumby King hummerin up on tha camp an in a sekind she wer gorn an tha Brumby King wer gorn in tha dust an smoak an I wer left in tha wreck ov tha camp wiv jest tha show geer, me typeriter an all tha notes an Smooovs link maker wat I rummigid from his rags. I shot thru an cast in me lot as a rider.

Chapter 7

I crawl't outta tha camp on me belly thru tha scrub, cuttin meself up on tha sharp rocks an stoans. Serch lites swept around above an tha trucks rollt in tha distance an tha air wer fulla howlin soun. I breevd in dust an swettid feersmell thumpin hart. Sucked in ta this pathway like dust in tha slipstroom an swirlin eddies in tha air an rumblins in tha groun ya cant say ware that dust is goin but its pullt along evin tho one minim ago it wer jest sittin by tha side ov tha road.

Isa lost, all most like she wer sucked up by tha air aroun tha Brumby King. Ther wer nuffin but tha smell ov smoak an tha ash wat Im siftin thru ta look at tha thins wats gorn rong in me life. Core ov a apple wiv a maggot. Isa wet ware I touched her. It wer all gorn, tha brumbies come an smasht up ever thin an I wer roadin loanly now. Tha dreems ov me yoof was smasht up like tha showgeer. Broaken like tha boan broak faces in tha camp afta tha raid. An tha only thin I cud

think wer how I hadda find Isa. It wer tha only way I cud make thins rite agen. An she wer missin, loanly too, prably injured an hurtin an Wotcher only knows wat that Brumby King wantid wiv her.

I come ta a ditch an I crawl along it till it turn inta a roadside drain ther was a bloak in ther wrapped in a blanket white eys open an flashin tha dark. We hissper at eech otha as tha rumblin rigs past by all aroun.

— I doan wan no trubbil, he sed.

— Me neever can I share yer hideyhole? I sed

— Ya can share but I got nuffin for ya ta use.

— Im tha same.

Thumpin poundin ov brumby weels rockt tha ground. A flash ov lite lit tha hole an his eys was open wite. He seen me tote an tha typeriter case an I sed

— Its jest a ol machien for wordin ritin.

He shookt wiv feer an I wer shook too. Taste ov dust an tire smoak frum tha burnin camp thick in me froat.

— I dunt wan nuthin ta do wiv this. Im jest passen thru, ay.

— Mate I know it I losst me sis-

A brumby skitter flickert past tha openin an we shut up in tha darknest. Tha gramblin an hummerin ov tha trucks rumblt outside they was shynin ther lites flickrin around tha drain close by. Time stetcht out be for us. Tha souns slackent orf afta a wile an he hissper:

— Theys gunna be roadin like this all nite?

— I dunno. Reckon theyll probly hed orf once theyve gotten dun wiv they raidin an tha skitters an droans is lootid all wat can be took.

— They took yer sis?

— She wer cort up in tha raid an I think shes bin took by tha Brumby King.

Wat wud a truck want wiv her I doan know.

He went quiet for a bit then he sed:

— Ya sure shes not ded?

Wen he sed that, I wer chillt. I sed:

— Na, no way. Thatd neva happen ta Isa, shes tuff an trucksmart. Be sides ther wer no body. I seen pritty cleerly she wer gorn in ta tha smoak left be hind by tha Brumby King.

He given me a look like I wer a sad sap an we curlt up agenst tha coalt nite while them trucks tore up tha road above an tha cloyin piss stink closeness kept us safe.

Dawn come up he wer gorn wiv his dirty blankets an tha trucks was moved on ther wer birds callin daylite bleedin in ta tha sky agenst a smudge ov blak smoak frum tha camp.

That mornin I wer minded ov tha time I lost me Mar an Smoov come along an pickt me up. His face scritchey an his stinkin breff an Isa wer ther too. Tha membry ov her eys lockt on ta mine. Thinkin ov that membry ov Isas eys set me blubbery, like mebbe Id nevva see her agin. I let go ov everthin Id bin holden on ta so tite inna nite as I runned frum tha brumbies. Let go ov wat Id done ta Smoov tha flash ov his feer rite before I kilt him, an tha way he triet ta tork tho his froat wer slit. Its a bad feelin, knowin youve done sumfin like that but I dint hav no choice if I wunted ta be wiv Isa.

An ennyway ther wernt nuffin for it but ta get back out on ta tha road so thats wat I done. I crawt out thru tha spiny fex an tha red dust green grey

mountins in tha back ov me an tha eester sun in me face. An if I cud trak down that Brumby King I cud find Isa an we cud live a life ta gether on tha show serkit.

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I cud feel a follerin behint, I cud see its clowd ov dust an I knowed in me hart it wer tha same thin wat follert us in ta Hinds Pass an itd bin follerin me when I startid afta tha brumbies in seerch ov Isa. Mebbe longer. Cant undo tha past so I roadid without lookin behint. Felt tha glare ov them follerin eys on tha back ov me trucksuit. In tha wastid landt I soppt up water frum stinkin sinkholes, movin frum one ta tha nex along tha lay lines wat ya knowed is bin in use for as long as youmans walkt on two legs. No food for daze but that wer all rite I cud live orf me own swet a while so long as I got water. Lookin for a mount, lookin for anythin wat cud speed me passige thru that blastid flatscape ov dry cunt creekbed an thorny prick termite nest stickin up frum tha groun. Ya cant live long if ya dont got some knowin ov tha dessit an Smoov tort us how ta reed tha sines an rig a snare for rabbits. So come tha dusk an tha red sun sinkin I fount a warrin an snared up a mangy old doe. Skinnt an dresst an chewt raw, sweet blud an strips ov red flesh. I didnt wanna risk a fire an I wer that hungry it didnt bother me none. Laid down unnerneef a truckdreem ov stars in tha void lonely as a flee on a salt pan. Tried ta hide meself as best I cud.

I woak ded ov nite, no more moon, stars shiftid roun all rong an ther it wer, tha follerer, rite in frunt ov me eys. Its face wer bleached wite boan, its eys was wite, it had a crookit beek an a blak hoodie ova its hed. In tha blak dot in tha centa ov tha ey I seen me own face reflectid back at me. It wore a trucktire coat an wen it opened its mouf it let out a croak. In its hand it had a clof bag an it helt tha bag out for me ta reech in an thru sum force I cudnt say wat I felt me own han

reechin out an goin in ta tha bag tho it wer tha last place I cud think ov ware Id wanna put me han. Inside was little rattlin things, dry like boans, an I pullt one out an looked at it an tha creecher clacked an croaked sum more an I saw that dried up boan, a backboan ov sum creecher smaller than a man but biggeren a dog. Ther wer a mark carvt in blak on that boan an I saw it wer a 'I'.

Next thin I knowed it wer dawn an I wer in me shirt soaked in swet a feeva in me hed an no ideer ov wether it wer a dreem or otherwise. Id not seen them boans be for, nor tha sign an I puzzled it as I moved me achin body onwids unner tha cover ov low cloudws sweepin across frum tha norf. It wer a 'I' like that I wat I knowed but didnt reelly know, it wer a I for a ey, it wer a I reflectid in a ey, tha ded boan ey ov tha creecher, tha follerer. Tha Crow. It wer also tha I for Isa an thats tha sign I took it for as tha day moved an I moved thru it not knowin ware ta go nor witch way me fate lay. But I come ta a road an I figgered that wud be as good a place as any ta sit for a time an recover meself. No sign ov tha follerer. Itd taken wat it wanted for now, moved me own han sum how jest by freezin me ther in tha moment.

Cloudws burnt orf an it got hot but I stayed at tha roadside puzzlin on me dreem or wat evva it wer an then ther wer a rumblin frum tha distince an a brite spark ov sunflash on metal me hart jumped it wer a indie for shore, heddin eest like I wer. I pullt Smooovs linker frum tha tote ware Id stowt it wiv me typeriter I an waved a link thru tha air like I seen Smoov do, me hart thumpin at tha thort this wer gunna be me first truckride solo.

Tha truck must seen me wave an it groun down tha geers as it slowed. It stopped long enuff for me ta climb up but it wernt a indie at all it wer a dum slavegrid hauler left frum tha oldtimes heddin be tween tha camps an it wudnt

let me in ta tha cab. It wer jest gunna keep on goin wen it seen I didnt hav nuthin ta trade but I swung up on tha back eny way ware ther wer a hole bunch ov frited riders inside all crammed ta gether an so I crammed in as well. It wer smelly an offal but I needed tha road an so onwids climbin tha drive me first truckride spent in tha muck ov otha riders in a opin air traila ther wernt nuthin wild about it, nothin like wat Id aspected it wud be wen I wer yung an lissenin ta tha riders tell ther stories roun tha campfires. Outside tha nite air rushed past in a coalt cleer blast an unner neef tha road clattered by. Tha slavegrid truck warnt on tha link freek no more but it let me stay coz I wer ther now an tha darknest come down on me tho ther wernt no truckdreems jest blakniss an emtyniss ov tha end ov daze. Wen I woke ther wer only one ova rider left in wiv me an I moved back away, wantin no company. A match flare lited tha creeses in his face an I seen it wer Crow, same one as wat talked ta me that nite in tha camp, same one wat waved ta me wen it wer Smoovs turn. Same coat, but diffrint frum tha creecher in me dreem. He took a toke orf ov his pipe an offert me sum. I shuk me hed.

— Fancy seein yew here, he sed.

— Yair, fancy. Ya follerin me now?

— Sure ya doan wanna toke? Itll eese yer pain.

— Im not in any pain, mate.

— Oh dont play tha hard man wiv me, cobber. I know yore type. All ways in sum kinda pain. All ways got sum one else ta blame for wat yer dun wiv yer own hans. Always lookin for sum releef frum tha knowin ov tha blud on yer own hans.

— You got me all rong, mate. I dun nuffin. I doan feel nuffin.

— Ha ha, well be like that if ya wanna, but this spike will cure yer ales. One taste an she will be apples.

— I doan got no ales, I alreddy tole ya. I doan want yer apples.

— Try sum ov this. Its tha jooce frum a stoand up indie tru bred. Theyve all ways made tha best geer, ta tempt tha riders wat is gunna give em tha best patches.

He moved closer, I pusht him away but he grinnt an pullt his spike.

— Carn, its good shit.

An in tha darknest I jest wuntid ta lose me self so I took tha spike. Tha truckdreem held on ta me thru tha coalt nite an tha thorts I had ov Isa kept me goin. I knowed thru it all I wer gettin closer ta her an wiv tha haze hummin in me vains I wer gettin closer ta puttin tha pieces ov boan ta gether in ta a hole. Minded me ov tha first time I seen inside ov somethin I felt tha pull ov it on me eys, downwids. I cudnt look away. It wer a roadkilt dog. Freshly ded an glistenin it wer, flies shiney an blak on tha brite red. A spray ov blud frum its mouf ware it cofft up its last. Guts spillt out for all ta see, tha inner sekrits ov life all spred inna dust an gravil. Ded eys emty an wide an wite in feer, an I knowed, all creechers know deth wat come in tha dark an took tha lite frum a life, ever ones scared wen its they tern. Sum runs tords it an if ya dont know how ta live maybe its a way out. Little beetin hart pumped all its life out onta tha groun.

Chapter 8

Nex day an I wer grimy frum tha truckride, blud behint me eys. Blud in me dreems, creechers in me dreems, skellingtons an bleached boans ov aanimals wat has nevva bin nor nevva cud be, aanimals made up in sum one elses mind a slaved truck wiv a load ov scart riders pushin thru tha nite, riders on tha way ta slaughtering in tha maw ov tha road. An ther wer nuffin, jest tha smooov flow ov tha surfiss. Ther wer nuffin beneef it neether. It wer all jest wirts wrote outta order on this typeriter I fount.

I come outta me dreem lyin roadside ware tha truck stoppt for waterin, wasted an brused frum that spike an laid out unnerneef tha water tower in tha mornin sun while tha trucks gorn on. All I got wer me tote an typeriter, me link waver an a sell ov jenny joose saved up ta slot tha substrate wen it fades. Me mouf wer fulla broakin an rottid teef. I knowed I hadda find me a tasty rig ta roll

wiv if I wer gunna catch up wiv them brumbies an find Isa. So I pullt me self ta me feets. Ther wer only one way an that wer one foot in frunna tha otha. Sun ta me face it so I knowt I musta bin on tha rite road. Clouds frum tha past at me hindt. Me teers dont come me eys is dry as lies told wat ya know they is not tru but ya say em any way. Me old life wer ded but sum times thers sum killen ta be dun be for ya be come sum thin nu.

Tha road a strate edge rule bordert wiv bodies ov cars an bodies ov burnt out trucks an bodies ov roos. Them roads wer tuff on veekills as well as roadkill. Ever little bit used up, bones picked cleen. Ther wer a lotta traffic on this road, so many peepel all goin no ware an pullen out tha in sides ov ded things. Same as wiv tha machiens come ta scavinge too, looken for parts or evin a hole nu body ta mech a new truckmind. I seen one in ther then, a old Kenwirf foragin sad in tha wreckige almost outta jooce, old trucks turnin back ta dust its tha cycle innit, but thers ways ta find bits ov yer self in new bodies. We is all made frum tha same stuff, its come frum tha stars in tha nite sky an thats ware its gunna go in tha end an meentimes its sure ta come back aroun. Ya body knows all this, evin if ya hed doan, like them feelins youve seen sumthink be for but ya know ya aint nevva, or wen ya meet sum one an its like youve known em yer hole life an youse jest slot rite in. Or how sum fokes can try they hans at sumthink an they pick it up reel quick like how Isa jest took ta tha show an tell, she had dun it be for she wer Isa, I knowed it. Thers another wirld tryin ta brake thru inta this bustid one. If only it cud, that wud be sumthink ta see. Mebbe thins wud be better than they is now. Mebbe thats wat Isa wer tryin ta do, ta findt tha bridge.

I walkt tha lonesome road, waitin for tha rite ride. That first truckride trailer wer a bum steer, an I wer still sickent frum tha spike ov hazey truckdreem

but it wer a seed plantid. Sum ware on sum level I knowed I wantid more. Feelin sick an feelin like Isas disappeerin furver an furver away wiv eech wasted minim. Pritty soon ther was a rumblin an a grumblin an a dust clowd blowd up on tha horizin. I flipped tha freeks an foun tha source, it wer a indie for shore an it tasted wat I had for it, it wer comin slower an slower till I seen it, a red an wite rig. It growt in me eys, sum thin ta be holt its rockin powa an tha size ov it. Then I felt its heet as it come in for a stop an idledt rite be side me. It wer fully sick wiv patchwork gliffs an sigils patternin missages frum misterius places an I seen a name wrote in curly ritin: Sinnerman. I reelised then it wer tha same rig wat lost its mate ta tha Brumby King in tha raid, I seen tha King drivin orf tha wiv that othar one gliffed Storm an somethin in me sed Sinnerman wer on this same road as me for a reesin. Somethin in me made me want ta touch it, so I got up close as it wer hummerin ther. I smelt tha air aroun, alive wiv ferry moans an molly cules, breeved it in in a big giddy swaller. Me han reecht out wivout me doin anyfink ta move it an I watched as I touched smooov metal skin, felt tha cool surface an it moved unner me touch. I sighed, an then Sinnerman gunned it, grumblin thunda frum deep in side an it moved away, circlt aroun an come back, blowin blak smoakstak exhorsed. A diffrint beet started up an tha wave rockt wiv its souns. I calmed me breeven an reeched out wiv me mind, touchin somethin thru tha wave, feelin in me hed tha shape ov that lite, them sounds.

Perfec timin perfec execushin ov tha link ya gotta get it jest rite as tha indie is comin up tha road. Too soon an theyll bolt, too long an, well, its a matter sum times ov jest gettin em get use ta yer. Use ta youman stink yer youman ways. I torked in a soft hissper, low in me froat, soothin. It jest come natural. Dunno how yer meent ta soothe a machien, they got progrims ov they own, but if they can

see yer no thret at leest ya can get startid. Thats how it wer wiv Sinnerman. I jest put me bag down an sat in tha dust an shuffilt patches thru tha link, shiftin thru diffrint cykills. Tho it wer flitey an wantid ta be roadin after its mate, it wer also curius ta see wat I wer up ta, see wat pattins Id come up wiv. It wantid a rider for this road an maybe it knowed I wer roadin afta tha Brumby King as well for tha same greefstruck reesins. I fount a nice combo be tween deep bass hummin an squelchy pitch whine, an soon it settled down. I slottid a new patch an tried ta tempt it, but it thrummed away agen, spewin smoak frum tha stak. I calmt me self an thort ov how Smoov woulda done it but thorts ov Smoov didnt reelly help wiv calm. Jest a wave ov feer an gilt but I put it ta one side an tried again.

Anotha patch. Skull deth. It seemed ta speak frum tha list, sumthink about it, so I tried that one on an that indie pricked up its hole body an started ta shake an shimmer. I stood ther as that massive machien come rite up ta me growlin enjinn vibratin in ta tha groun an thru me an it wer glowin wiv powa. I put out me han ta touch its cold steel flank agen an it moved evin closer ta get a whiff ov that skull deth in its link. Smell ov nothin, scent ov always movin freeways an blu sky dreems. Shiftin in them sands. Me hart wer beetin fast an lowd in me eers ta be so close ta me first tru indie truckride, an it wer a fucken bewdy too. Red an wite steel glimmerin in tha moonlite. No load nor trailer, wild an free. Like I wisht I cud be. Well I slotted tha skull deth thru tha link an Sinnerman settled rite down. It opent up tha door for me ta climb in. I put me foot on tha first krome rung an climed up ta tha riders cab.

Inside wer a little woom. Warm an cosy, wiv a stink ov mixt youman an machien molly cules. Padded couch made for one or mebbe two riders. Vuscreen watd evolvt frum tha days wen riders had more control ova tha veekills, but

them vuscreens is still ther an ya can still see tha wirld all aroun, plus wat evva tha truck wants ta show ya. An then neer tha rite han side, down low, thers tha eyvee rig ware ya can slot yer spike, ya can jack rite in an feel tha flow ov tha haze as tha truck cranks tha feedline frum its alkyloid synthmod dreem fac an yore one wiv tha machien as its gainin speed. I pattid tha dash an sed:

— Me an yew, we is on tha same road now, we got tha same progrim. We is gunna chase down tha Brumby King an I will help ya get back yer mate an we can find Isa togethar as well an then itll all be sweet.

Sinnerman gunned its enjinn an we startid rollin like it knowed tha same thins as me. An may be it seen Isa bin took like I seen Sinners mate Storm herded orf, an Sinner seemed like it wer happy or sum think. We was on tha same wave length an wile mebbe I needed a ride moren Sinnerman needed a rider, ther wer times a handy dose ova tha link frum a rider cud help a truck a long on its mission. I slottid tha spike an it come on dirty at first, nothin so cleen, but soon I wer grinnin an smylin, me jaw tite an clenched tho I wer loose. I shaked anotha dose ov skull deth frum tha link, an Sinnerman floord it, I felt tha feedback thru tha line, a diffrint note in me own hi as tha rubba bit down on blak road. I cud feel tha vibes in me hole body, up thru me arse an inta me chest, me hart wer thumpin wiv tha hi ov wranglin a indie an tha hi ov jackin sum haze straight frum tha source. It wer me an tha road an Sinnerman, I wer tryin ta get use ta how tha link works, tryin ta bend me will ta tha trucks inner face but not havin much luck. We was rollin an I wernt scart ov no follerer I jest wantid some cleer air behint an mebbe some mountins outta tha desert in frunt, an on tha road ta ware I cud find Isa.

Thru tha little hatch in ta tha riders cab, it wer a warm dark playce an soft wif lite comin frum a strip at tha frunt. It wer warm an safe an it smelled close wif body heet ov riders past an roadsmell, solvints an machien oil an hydra carbons an woodsmoak an sumfin else, sumfin wat come orf tha glimmerin teck them trucks meched emselfs, polly mers an molly cules an tha smell ov raw haze. Hi teck an still fallen. I wer roadin wiv Sinnerman, out ta tha end ov tha line. Tha road unwinded a hed, wite line a call sine draggin me along thru tha dust an tha smoak. Up hi in tha riders cab, hi as a flapples ey in Sinnermans inner sides. I crankt haze an slottid home tha rusty eyvee jagged like a nail, ded like led but alive wiv sines an meenins an tha wind wer singin outside. It wer all blak but in tha cab I wer at peece not peeces I wer at one wiv tha road eeted up unner neef tha weels.

We roadid eestly coastwise past a burnt out dessit truckstop an I got Sinnerman ta stop ther, it pullt up slowly coz it wer wantin ta be after Storm but it yeeldid an groun down thru tha geers. Pickin thru tha roons ther wer nuthin much moren a burnt out shell, blak pools ov plastick meltid hard inta lickwid shapes. Cables an cords hung down frum tha stripped out seeling an in one corner all tha frunichur wer piledt an in tha shadders ov tha shell it lookedt like sum kinder sickent robo. Crunchin on broakin glass unner me feet an thru tha wreckt kitchin ta tha wirkshop at back. Ther wernt nuthin ther neether, but in tha mess left on tha wirk bench wer a geogrid an wen I slottid it I seen I cud use it as a foller on ta Midden Dump, it had all tha rite tags an if me in stincts wer rite, tha Midden Dump wud be a magnit for brumbies an ovver indie trucks.

Back in tha cab, I felt tha feer ov wat wer leff behint an tha longin for Isa wat laid a hed. Sinnerman wer in tha zone too, I crankt a nu patch, sum fin wat Id

seen Smoov messin wiv an I felt a flutterin feelin in me guts an tha truck movt unnerneef a shift an a squirt as it movt a long travellin faster an faster. Opent tha froat ov tha throttle road hiss suckin soun frum tha air an tha patch in tha flow ov haze frum tha eyvee. A shifft in tha note ov tha throbbin rush wat beetid thru tha link an inside tha cab wer its own little wirld, roading after Isa. I slumped in ta meself an tha stars washed out an it all turn blak an I slept safe like a babe in its Mars arm.

Chapter 9

Tha hiway ta tha Midden Dump wer all choked wiv traffick. Trucks an manglt vans an clatterin recks ov barely moven veekills an camils an hawses an mules pullen carts made outta tha reerends ov cars. Skitters skatid aroun an fed orf ov a ded truckbody wile a two leg droan stumpt past on tha track an flapples flapped in tha sky. Furver on an two bigdog robos eetid a roadkillt camel carcass. Bloaks on hawse back an bloaks wiv guns an bloaks wiv grinnin faces in dresses an hats, an wimmin wiv bebbies an wimmin wif knives in they teef an wimmin fire twirlin, all heddin ta tha place ware all creechers went ta gorge orf ov tha rottid carcass ov tha hole wirled. An sum ware in ther in all that mess I wer shore wer sum one wat cud tell us ware tha Brumby King wer at. Brumbies wud be drawn ta that place like moffs in ta tha show lite. An mebbe ther we wud find tha road ta Isa. Isa like ice. Still, like a frozin river in tha mountins wen winter come I seen it

in a dreem in Sinnermans truckcab, comin outta tha darknest in tha hed lites. She wer ther or sum ware close I knowed it an I felt it in me boans.

It wer a grey dawn an smoak blowed in tha wind. Traffics wer thicker tha closer we got. Tha heet heetid up, buzz ov biz, only one road in an one road out. Trucks cartid loads in an trucks cartid loads out. Ther was trucks piledt hi wiv all tha garbiges brung frum tha boddoms ov tha ruint gigacities an tha corners ov all tha dada mines. It wer all tha stuff ov tha old times an bein rebirtht up in ta tha new wirlld thru tha movemints ov tha truckin lanes ov tha bowels ov tha erf. All tha wirllds garbige wer drawn ther by magickal forciss, an I wunnerd wat tha fokes aspected ta do wiv that trash but evin at tha end ov tha wirlld ther wer a markit for ever thin. Ther wer fokes wat made ther hole lives outta garbige. Roadside thicket up wiv moren more shacks an hovels an then we roundid a turn an I seen in tha distince tha mountin that wer Midden Dump.

Tha traffick wer thick, but it moved a long an soon tha mountin wer all I cud see ov erf an sky. We was well an trully comin up on tha senter ov thins, tha shacks was more solid, ther werent no tall buildins no order nor nothin but still it wer a city made ov plastick an canviss an peepled wiv scavidgers. Tha trucks droppt orf they loads an turnt around as people an machiens crawl't ova eech otha ta be tha first at it. And it wer bein picked ova by tha crows an tha packs ov dogs an robos scroungin parts, tryin they best ta get by. And tha people ther too, all kinds, nu kinds old kinds. Ther wer showmans pickin thru all tha bits, minin for dada, an truck mechs lookin for sekrits ov tha patch an ther wer jest plane hungerd foke serchin for wat eva they cud find ta eet. Eaten orf ov eech ovver, eeten orf ov roadside weeds an cactiss flower, eeten orf ov corpses eeten orf ov dirt. Goanner cult on show, perengi march crossin tha road, traffick cloggt on all

sides for tha beest wat wer five feets at tha shulder. It wer paintid wiv sines an sigils like a truck wud be. It wernt shackled but jewelry wer put aroun its neck in chains. Goannerman out frunt an wite clad follerers shufflen behindt. Tha lizzid rollt slow an eesy not a quick skitter like out in tha dessit that thing wer a King. It knowd it too. Tha traffic stopt ded Sinnermans antsy ta be roadin after its lost pardner an tha Brumby King but ther wer nuffin it cud do. Ther wer no way thru so I sed:

— Im gunna go in on foot, see if thars any wurd ov those brumbies.

I hitcht Sinnerman thru tha link an it parkt chewin on a narco patch wat I slotted ta keep it quiet while I wer ouden about. Ther wer a quick rush ov feelin like I hoped Sinner wer not gunna run afore I got back coz it wer antsin ta get on tha way but I swung on down inta tha crush an tha swell ov all them boddies. Tha smell hit, raw sweet sour tha smell ov deth. Tha smell ov smoak an exhorsed an solvints, smell ov rottid flesh an spent fule sells an boddies an cooken oil. Tang ov piss an cloy ov shit. It wer all aroun, ther wer no eesy way thru so I clampt on me dustmask an I put meself inta it.

Rite away I seen a bigdog robo feedin orf ov a lizzid carciss an fokes walken like it wer nuthin nu or rong wiv a robo eetin meet. Funeril smoak in tha air, bloaks carryd boddies on they shoulders ta tha burnin mound. Movemint an soun, ashes flowed in tha air like peeces ov tha suns husk fallen ta erf in frunna me eys. Grinnin hed ov a stoaned showman pushin his cart thru tha muck hes eys was gorn far away an his hair a mass ov dreds. Rustid steel machiens on four legs six legs, on tracks on tha wing. Dirty an broak robos an blak crows flapplt neer by. Past a wite shed ther wer sines ov a indie mob ther, for sure. I cud feel em in me boans. I cud see it in tha flash ov lite on steel body panel an thru tha space be

tween piles ov rubbish. Indie trucks, if not brumbies, an ware ther wer indies they was sure ta be brumbies not far orf, coz they was all inner rested in tha same thins, patches an parts an panel work an comin ta gether for makin ov souns.

Be for I come ta tha wite shed tho I seen a bunch ov gray faced fokes sitten on they haunches pickin dirt frum be sides a trash heep mound an rollin it in ta clumps ov wite clay in ta balls wat they kepted in woved plastic string bags. Tha dirt eeters lazy an holler eys follert me wiv no site ta be seen. One bloak wer lyin on tha groun an next ta him his missus dugged up tha clay frum tha erf. Duggen up scoops ov it an put em in his mouf, but he wer far too gorn. She movedt his jores up an down but he cudnt swaller. They was mens an wimmins boaf, an now an then they put sum clay in ta they mouf or tha mouf ov one a they kids while mangy dogs an bustid robos hussledt close ta see wat wer all tha inner rest but them gray goasts wer tha only ones as wantid tha dirt. Even tha aministrals was smart enuff ta no ther wer only suffrin on that mound ov clay. Ther wer still sum thins wat set youmans apart frum aministrals an machiens an ther wer a clowd ova them fokes sleepin unner blu tarps in tha day lite an eetin dirt wat was jest gunna kill em in tha end. They was in sum strange place in be tween, not livin but not ded neither.

I wer freekt by tha dirt eeters they thru me orf me game so I turnt a little bit an took a notha pathway thru tha piles ov rubbish ware fokes cartid out loads an loads ov copper wires frum coils tore outta tha guts ov machiens an ther wer machiens flapplin roun tryin ta get at tha wires. I sed ta one bloak:

— Any ware roun her I cud score sum haze?

I knowed if ther wer haze therd be indies an mebbe evin brumbies.

He lookt at me an larfed.

— Cant ya see? Its all aroun thers no shortiges ov it here.

That wer all he wud say but I cort tha flash ov his eys tords tha wite shed Id seen be for. I made for tha shed evin tho Id jest turnt aroun. It stood out like dogs balls. It wer now or neva an as I come up on tha in side ov it I seen a woman sittin down tendin ta tha sick an woundid.

She wer sunbit an old, skin flaked an peelin frum scroungin outta date meds in tha dump. She got a sawed orf shot gun on her knee but she wer a heeler I thort. No one wud trubbil her ther, long as she cud do somethin for they needs. Witch mebbe she genrally cudnt, hents tha gun. She wor clothes wat actually fit, khaki pants an a shirt wiv shulder tabs, an she had on glassis an her gray hair tied in a powny tail. She sat at a table makin notes on a peece ov paper, I aint seen that for a while. Ther wernt menny as cept frum show mans as knowed tha ways ov ritin an reedin an I wer very curyiss.

Shufflin past tha canviss door flap like I wer a dump dweller, I foun myself a spot ware I cud look an not be seen. Ther wer bodies ov dirt eeters on a slab inside ov tha shed, they was stretched skin ova bone. I cud heer her torkin ova tha link in snatches:

— ...rottid faster than be for.

an then:

— Ded flesh is wat tha dump grows. Therll be no shortige come harviss.

From tha inside, I cud see ther was med supplies eva ware that woman wer a doctor for sure, an not like tha medisin foke wat heelt Isas snakebit. I foundt me balls an walked right thru tha door an up ta her table.

— Youve got ritin tools? I arksed.

She lookt at me ova tha tops ov her specks, reel quiet an long. Like she seen me for wat I wer an it wernt a nice feelin.

— Wat ov it?

— Well Im reel inner restid in riting. I bin shown tha basisc ov soundin wirds an lettrin sentinces. Im ritin me own story down her wiv this typeriter.

I put up tha HERMES on tha bench an she took a good look at it. Her face soffent as she toucht it.

— Ive not seen one ov thes for a long time. I do my ritin by han. I doant trust tha machiens ta take notes. But I need ta keep reckids for me own self. Wirds wat is rote down cant be changedt like a membry will change ova time.

— Wirds is tricky but. They doan all ways act like I wunt em ta an sum times I reckon they can be use ta hide tha truf.

— Well mebbe we are torkin bout diffrint kinds ov ritin. Fer my perpisses, collims ov figgers are genrally quite rely able an a good way ta keep trak ov thins.

— But wirds cant tork back ta ya. They is stuck in time an if ya doan know wat they is meenin then all yer get back is yer own questins agen.

— Its a good way ta keep track ov tha comins an goins ov thorts.

She shown me her ledger, it wer bound in levva wiv ragged edgis but tha papa wer smoov an creamy.

— I make tha papa myself.

I wer in aw.

— I neva seen that be for.

— Keepin all tha colums strait meens I can look afta bizniss.

I seen a openin then ta findt out more about brumby trucks. I sed:

— It doan seem rite, that bizniss ov yores.

Her face darkent an I knowed I hit a spot.

— Waddy know ov my bizness? Yore jest a rider frum tha backroads.

— Them bloaks is tha poorest ov tha poor an yer sellin they bodies ta
brumby trucks. They got nothin, they is eetin dirt.

I didnt no for shore tha brumbies was buyin tha boddies but she firmed it in
tha nex breff.

— Tha wite clay they eet gives them some benefits but they soon die if they
doan eet parper food. Their bodies dont rot because tha clay keeps em frum
rottin for a time. Tha brumbies trade me for drugs they make in they synthfacs
wat I kin use ta treet tha sick.

— Tha dirt eeters is sick. Shouldnt ya be heelin em before they die?

— Theres nothin I can do for tha dirt eeters.

— But yore helpin brumby trucks wat doan care who they kill or steel ta get
wat they want.

— Yore jest tha same as they are, rider, preyin on any one weeker than yer
self. Scavidgin a life outta tha road.

That gave me pawse. I sed:

— Im gotta trak em down ta findt me sista Isa. I gotta find her if I is gonna
find peece in this life.

This time tha look wer given ova tha top ov tha glasses an she sed:

— I think its unlikely youwill eva findt peece.

I left that silence hangin ther an she kept lookin, lookin thru me like she
knowed me sekrit, seen me thorts for Isa an tha blood behindt me eys wiv Crow
moven me hand agenst Smoov. Me face flushed, I couldnt help it. Then I sed:

— At leese gimme sum clu as ta ware tha brumby mob is hidin out.

— Keep eest, rider. An findt out more about wats goin on in tha wirld be for passin judge mints.

I wer gunna open me mouf ta say fair enuff, but then I seen a crow outta tha corner ov me ey, he wer hoppin up on tha slab ware tha bodies was, an I turnt an ran frum that white shed wat was full ov deth, not heelin.

Chapter 10

By tha time I got back ta Sinnerman it wer dark an we roadid outta tha dump an on thru tha nite time shapes shiften wite fog unner tha brite lites ov tha pumpin rig, stickin ta tha eestly road still ta wards ware I thort tha brumby mob wud be travellin. That doctor knowed sum thin an tha stink ov brumbies was all aroun tha Midden Dump but tha trail driedt up ther an I hadda take me bess bet wiv tha mountins up a hed an tha eesterlin road ta tha coastst.

Grindin up a mountin range tha next day. Easterly tha doc sed. So menny back traks an ded ends, beetin a hed ta find a downt tree ova tha road an Sinnerman tryin ta push logs orf ov tha path. One thin ov goin that way, ya cud see ther wer not been no one thru for a long time. Witch I dunno wot that meent, wether it wer a gud thin or a bad thin. Gud that we was not on any well travelled road, bad that we had no one ta foller, jest hadda work it out frum wot ever

fragmints ov maps I cud piece ta gethar frum tha geogrid patchfiles Id foundt in tha dessit truckstop an make sure ta keep tha mornin sun up in me face but it wernt so simple as that sum days coz it wer comin in ta dry time an tha sun skirtid a low track in tha sky.

We kepted on ta wards tha coatst, burnin ta get ta tha end. We hadda fin more evidince ov tha Brumby King an I kept thinkin ov Isa wat wer wat kept me movin thru that trecheriss land ov mist an tangledt green tree growed all ova ever thin. Last stretch ova tha top ov tha mountin, one more hump ta go an tha wethar closed in tha win blowed so cold an so fasst orf tha clifts. Sinnerman growlt an yammert for a long leesh on a cleer stretch ov road but it wer closed in on all sides an thundrin comin frum on hi an litenin flashin an then an otha truck come barrelin roun tha bent ta wards us an we swervt ova tha road tryin ta fin sum grip but ther wer nun jest mud. That truck wer a harf track, deesil, not evin sentshent, droved by a bloak wiv a baldy hed an a red berd. I looked rite in ta his eys as he past an seen thru ta tha otha side ov him as if ther wernt nothin more agenst that blak backdrop an tha col mountin air runnin in thru tha vents on me face. An then he wer gorn but that veekill had cutted a track for us an so we follered it evin tho we didnt know ware it wer goin I wer sure it wud take us ta tha othar side ov tha mountin at leest an soon enuff we come across a track an than a nothar an we follered it down ta tha wud cutters camp on tha side ov tha mountin ware mebbe we cud get sum think ta eet an mebbe some fule jooce for Sinnerman ta top up its sells an swap sum tru lies road stories for wordin ov tha Brumby King.

We come ta a safe spot ta stop an ther wer dudes all aroun ware eva ya lookt ya seen em. They come out frum tha camp an crowded aroun Sinnerman. I

dint wanna let tha feer stop me so I unjackt an climbt down mebbe theyd hav wurd ov brumbies coz far as I cud know tha trail had gorn cold.

They was dressed in aminal skins, no teck amung em frum wat I cud see they wer lookin at tha truck in wunnermint. Well its no surprise its a wunner full thin ta be held. One old bloak reechedt out ta touchit.

— Bonza truck ya got ther, mate.

— Hans orf, I sez.

He lookedt down on tha groun. A yung bloak come up, eys fulla stars.

— Wat kindt ov truck is it? Got enny haze on yer?

Ah so that wer wat wer gunna get me in wiv em.

— Im not sure youse wuda eva seen a fine indie truck like this nor tha quality ov haze itll make for tha rite rider wiv tha rite patches.

— Wud ya swap sum haze for a playce ta sleep an sum roady for tha nite?

— That souns all rite I got sum haze an I need a playce ta rest as well. Now tell, is ya eva seen any wild brumbies up this way?

— Thers a brumby mob wat passes thru on tha way ta tha caves at Warbi Rangis. Thers a couple diffrint ones wat come thru, but mostly they is on tha road for tradin parts or for sum fokes ta help em mech sum times. They is got good haze, sum says.

— You ever seen a yung wimmin wiv em? She might ov gotten a cripplt arm, scaled up like a lizzid.

— Na, I neva seen nuthin that.

I given him his haze an then later that evenin that bloak wiv tha baldy hed an red berd showed up in his harf track an he wer curious about wot we was

doin ther he had a lite about him, a way ov bein wat Id not seen be for than nor agen so we stayed an talk ta him some more.

— Thats a nice harf track ya got. How dya keepit runnin wiv deesil?

— Its a sekrit mate. We know a few thins, a few ways ov tha mountins an sekrit stashes ov thins an thers fokes who still got tha knowin ov re finin fule oil. I can do it a bit me self an I know how ta fix a enjinn.

I wer sorta in aw ov him coz I dint know nuthin, only ranglin an tha ways ov haze. Her wer sum one not tiedt in ta a sisstim wiv a truck, he wer free.

— Im Jon Ra, wots yer name?

— Im callt Bushy. Short for tha Bushy Ranga on a count ov me ruddy beard.

— So watdya do for parts? Ya got any commerce wiv tha brumby mob for fule or such?

— They come thru here but they doan run on no deesil thats for sure. Who knows wat they progrim is. Sum times they stop for fixes wat they cant mech em selves wiv robo droans. I dun sum complix weldin fixin on one ov em jest a few days back.

— They raidid a backroads shanty town right about then, lookin for parts an otha truckbodies ta mech. Mebbe one ov em was bustid in tha raid. They stole me sis Im roadin after em ta get her back.

He went all quiet then, lookt away. I sed:

— Ya know sum thin bout that? A girl, mebbe 15, whose bin roadin wiv tha Brumby King?

— Yair I seen her. Black hair, blak eys. Shes bin took in by tha Brumby King, I only seen her cept jest her face in tha cab wen I wer rite up close wiv me welda.

Me hart flew. She wer alive at leest.

— How long ago?

— Wasnt more a few days.

— Warebouts?

— Well, thers sevvril lairs they got scattert thru out. Sum is in tha Warbi Ranges, others hi up in tha mountins in tha snow. But ware I seen tha gurl, it wer in tha gigacity.

— Reelly, ya can get in ta tha gigacity? Buts its poisint groundt an dedly.

— Its a place ware all tha roads end, but its not so dedly as fokes in tha backroads mite think. Thers nuthin ther no more, but tha Wotchers signill is strong ther an tha trucks go ther ta get ta gether an try ta findt out about emselfs in tha Wotchers image.

— Wotchers tha cause ov all me problems. If ther wernt no Wotcher I wudnt hav lost me sis.

— Yeh well if ya wunt ta get wiv brumby trucks yuv gotta unnerstan a bit more bout em. They think they come frum tha Wotcher, an thers sum thin in tha Wotcher wat can help em code rite an make better hi bredds wiv em selvs wen they do they truck ruttin.

— Trucks can rut all they wunt. Its nuthin ta me. I jest wanna findt Isa an get back on ta tha rite road.

— Well ya shud checkout tha gigacity if ya wanna find sum clues ta ware yer sis is at. Careful tho, thers all sorts ov strangniss comin outta tha grount ther, its groundt zero. An for tha brumbies its speshal groundt ware they gether for they matin ceremonies an birthin bebbby trucks.

He left an I went back ta tha campfire wiv tha otha mountin fokes wat wer hi on haze an I wer hi on tha news an I sat by tha fire an thort on them thins

while tha people hadda fine ol time. Later on in tha nite ther wer sum ugliness, sum fightin, an in tha mornin wen I clambered outta ther pullen up me trucksuit I neer trod rite on a stiffenin blu body. It wer tha yungster I given tha haze an so I climbed in ta Sinnerman an we roaded outta that place. It pulled on me soul wiv a sadness tho I shud be happy coz Id foundt sum one whod seen Isa. I cudnt account for me feelins, cept ta say bein aroun fokes who is lost all hoap ov emselves breeds hoaplessniss. So I taken me toll frum em an given wat they wantid, wat does that make me? I didnt wunt ta think on it as I roaded thru tha mountin to wards tha gigacity an tha Brumby King wat I knowed wer up a hed. Ther wer nuthin I cud do, jest hadda deel wiv tha stain on tha wirlld so on I roaded. It wer a blessin ta be back in side that cab.

Chapter 11

Comin outta tha ranges ther wer a body twistin in tha branches ov a tree as we runned for tha pass be tween tha mountins an tha see. Sine ov tha ded mans hand on tha road ta tha gigacity an tha serkrits wat is hid ther. An tha scrubs wer a blur ov gray an green an tha road wer a line ov blak lite out in frunna tha hardy Sinnerman wat ambled now as tha sun shined hi in tha sky an tha far orf wite clouds was hissperts ov fine hair on tha hed ov a old wimmin lookin down on tha erf be low wiv greef in her yellor eys.

We wer movin fast thru tha last ov tha mountins be for tha flat in frunna tha coatst, dust clouded up behindt us. Truck action blipped on tha screen. It come up fastern faster behint as we rollt. I tossed thru tha freeks lookin for a sig but ther wer nun so I thort: brumby for sure, runnin dark. It brung a smile ta me face coz it ment we was on tha rite trak. An Sinnerman reckonised it too, ther

wer a harty thump in tha sisstim as it felt tha rush ov vengints at tha loss ov its pardner wat flusht thru tha eyvee inta me arm an wired me a lert an reddy for tha chase. A rush ov blud an a rush thru tha link as me an Sinner boath reckonise tha shapes ov tha Brumby King an its Left Tennat loomin in tha gloomin dust behint us. Tha Brumby King a hulkin blak monsta ov dusty dentid panels an scratcht paint wirk next ta its Left Tennat, a big wite barstid wiv blu trim an a toofy grin in its grill. Tha Left Tennat was lite an fast it didnt carry no load an so it wer roadin sweet an fasst rite behint us, tha King follerin behint. I hit Sinnerman wiv sum more jooce thru tha link an it pickt up tha pace, swayin a bit on tha road as tha patch slotted home.

Them two brumbies was testin us out, an Sinnerman wer showin orf as well as tha Left Tennat matcht speeds an they showd orf they flashy decals an paintin ta eech ova. Tha Lefts grinnin krome grill wer up in tha reer vu screen. It wer proud as, kickin up a dusst storm behindt an comin on up besides us now, out gunnin Sinnerman for shore. Sinnermans paintwirk glowin blindin wite an red in tha sun too. Tha pare ov em sped up an slowed down, an in tha shadder ov tha Brumby King they did tha dance ov tha hi way drivin rig, one follerin tha otha in frunt, an pretty soon they wuntid ta take thins up ta tha nex levvil an so wiv Sinnerman leedin they slowt up an pullt in ta a truck parking wer they cud mov ta tha rockin stage. Sinnerman sirkilled aroun an faced orf. Tha Left Tennat wer reddy for it tho, it slotted a tasty groove in its soun sisstim wat I cud feel thru tha link but not heer wiv me eershot, lazy baseline an rattlin snare back behindt tha kick. Tha Brumby King come in behint an sat orf a distince, lissein tha trucksong, an waiting. Left Tennat wer vane an hedstron wiv its groov, it didnt wanna let Sinnerman best it but it wuntid ta keep control ov itself also in frunt ov tha King,

thumpin riddum it pumped out as it skanked an rockt on its shocks in tha dessit sans.

Afta tha firs shot wer still ekoin roun in me eers, Sinner blastid back wiv sum ov its own wavvy choons an this time I felt tha soun out thru me hole body it wer a tide rollin thru me, brakin ova tha top ov me hed an rinsin out me hot blud wiv warm konkrete base an a cool watery wash ov reeverb an soppin wet squelch in tha hi endt. I slotted a nu patch thru tha link, wantin ta give Sinnerman a handy leg up in this contest an I felt it shift an waver thru tha soun sisstim as it fount a change frum four four ta two four an sped thins up. It wer a rare treet lissenin ta them two trucks battle on tha hi way but it wer gunna end in tears. Ther wud hafta come a finish ta tha rockin an a gettin down ta tin tacks.

Tha souns flowt smooov thru tha air an trucktalk chatter in tha link as Sinnerman an tha Left Tennat sat hed ta hed an tried ta best eech otha wiv they soun sisstims an they skills wiv puttin on a show, pullen sampils frum they membries an tryin ta call eech otha wiv tha coolest twist onna ole choon or tha freshist nu vox wat they cud findt chatterin in tha stacks. Tha battil went on an on, deep base boomin thru me boans an me hed ringin wiv tha eko ov hi freek soun wash. All wotcht by tha grim Brumby King. Sinnerman shook on its shocks unner tha on slawt an I kept it fed wiv patches ta mod tha waves ov soun, lernin as I went wat made a gud effect. Tha Left Tennat revved up hard an crankt tha wattige. I cud feel it in me guts, tha hole cab wer shakin tha noize wer fritenin lowder an lowder an then it stoppt an both trucks clunked inta geer an startid they dance. Sinner spun its weels in a mitey show ov blu smoak blowin ova tha truck parking. Its eight reer weels was burnin out an its tale come flickin aound ta match tha Left Tennats own sirclin movemint as it startid ta shift its energy

frum sount ta mowshin. Tha nex faze in tha battil wer comin, I knowed it wer comin soon. Tho they was vane an they didnt like ta scratch up they paint at all, wunce tha dancin wer dun ther wernt gunna be no worries about doin tha bizniss wen it come down ta it. Sinnerman wud ram its steel spike, itd brake out sum ov tha fitty cal rouns itd bin hordin. Tha Left Tennat wud make its mark in its own way, wiv wateva wepins it got stasht, hard pellits ov led ta sink in thru shiny truckskin an rip at steel armer.

Sinner suddinly took orf for tha hi way, slow at first, but gainin speed up thru tha geers as tha Left Tennat cort on an follered it out. On tha road wiv tha glowin silva streaks ov guide posts blur an tha smooov flow ov tha tar mak unner tha tires. Sinner got way out in frunt, forcin tha Left Tennat ta push itself in ta tha red. Then it eva so gently slackint offt tha pace an lured in tha Left Tennat, let it come in nice an close an then it hit tha brakes an I wotcht tha Left Tennat swerv an screem past an so we was then up behind. I pusht a speedy patch thru tha link, an Sinnerman movedt evin fasta on tha tale ov tha brumby, zonin in on up for a ram or at leese threttin sum dammige ta tha panels ov that vane truck wat put a price on its looks moren anythin else in tha wirld. Tha Left Tennat wer wily tho, it wer canny an it wernt gunna let Sinnerman best it so esy. Rite as rain it swervt orf corse an fishtailt away screemin donk an flyin dirt as its tires bit tha shulder. Sinner helt steady an wernt gunna back down now. It wer in its ellymint, an it wunted ta trak down its loss buddy Storm an it wer back in frunt ov tha Left Tennat.

Tha Left Tennat gotten tha wind gage now, an it wuntid ta send a messige so it licked wiv a tung ov fire frum napalm fule tanks unner its bonnit, a spurt ov flame set ta singe Sinners tail an melt its metal an its mood for battlin. Sinner

heeved, it wer ded scaredt ov fire I reelisedt, it squeelt like a babbe an swervedt ta tha rite tryin ta free itself frum tha gout ov deep oringe flame lit blak at tha edges wiv fule smoak wat I seen thru tha reer vu. Tha feelin ov Sinners feer come on thru tha eyvee link then an it sickent me stummick but it also gave Sinner a nu burst an I workedt tha mix thru tha link, balancin orf ov tha panick wiv sum nu seeded patches ta mech a gud burst for Sinnerman.

It worked a trick, Sinner turnt rite around wiv a screechin ov tires an dust flyin up behint scatters ov rubba fragmints gorn skitterin all ova tha road an pebbils an gravvil slidin unnerneef as tha hole creekin chasis rocked an come ta stop rite as tha Left Tennat bore down. It must ov blown its load wiv tha fire, or it wer savin for anovva burst, but it kept its distance an Sinner spun forwids wiv tha sun glintin orf ov tha shiny tip ov its rammin spike. Tha left tennat shied awayn frum Sinners showin ov strenff an curridge, an also I gessed it dint wanna get its panils dinged so Sinner called tha bluff an tha upper hand wer switched agin as Sinner gunned its spike towards tha Left Tennats bewdy fill shinin paintwirk.

Tha Left Tennat wer a crafty truck it wernt gunna let this unmarkt indie get tha uppa han. It hit reverse full bore jest as Sinner come on ta it an spun tha weel hard left, bringin its nose rite an swingin its tale orf tha road an in ta tha dust an gravvil. Sinner overshot an screemt its tires an blatted air brakes in angr an frustrayshin. Tha Left Tennat brung twin fitties up frum unnerneef tha enjinn cowlin an it opent fire wiv a terrible roar an clatter ov led an recoil. Spent casins scattert tha groun like hail frum dark storm clouds an tha rounds pinged into Sinners arma an peppert holes in ta tha paintid panils. Tha Brumby King gloomed shadderly behindt tha back wash ov smoak an dust.

A rush ov pain an shock come on up thru tha dripline an I felt sick frum it an tha thort that mebbe Sinnerman wernt up ta scratch wiv a wild brumby wat makes its livin doin battil in tha backroads. Sinner grinded down a geer an done a big loop around. It wer aimin ta get its own fitties in ta play an I herd tha servo wine ov ther mounts as Sinner pult back tha housin covers. Still feelin sick as, I wer jest a passinger in this truck fite but I cud help Sinnerman out wiv a little shot ov sum thin tasty thru tha link wat wud keep it goin so I lined up an nice hit ov red levver deth frum me list ov patchfile tags wat I red orf ov tha screen frum tha link maker. Tha cracklin burst ov tha patch shot thru an Sinners donk rawed an trantsmission screemin it swung itself in ta firin position an opent up wiv tha fitties. It wernt bein shy wiv tha ammo neither.

Tha Left Tennat got it self in ta a tite spot, itd triedt ta get roun for a better shot but now its back wer ta wards us an Sinner had tha full ov it in tha gun sites an it didnt holdt back. Tha barrils startid ta glo deep red an tracer rounds arct across tha space be tween em. It wernt no soun sistim battlin now, wat wer all about stances an dances. It wer full on war fair be tween two beefy trucks wat wernt gunna give in till tha last one wer standing. I startid ta feel like I wer safe in side Sinnerman, like it wer gettin tha uppar han. Tha Left Tennat wer bein hit hard, rippt ta bits. It seemt like it wer pinnedt down wiv tha awfill pingin ov led on steel plates an tha bloomin ov steel petals around tha flowrin bullit holes. Smoak blew on tha breeze. Shell casins an bits ov link skitteredt aroun. Tha soun wer terrible. Sinnerman gruntid an let out a froaty groan, throwin ever thin in ta tha attack as it moved in closer for tha kill.

Witch seemt ta be asactly wat tha Brumby King wer aftar, Sinnerman drawed in clowse by tha Left Tennat pretendin ta fade coz now it sprung large an

hulkin in tha vu screen wiv Sinner in range ov its flames it ternt em on big time. A wickid oring tung ov burnin fule an blak smoak licked out frum its jets wat had swung round in they housins ta face tha enemy approachin frum tha reer.

Truckcab got hot. Tha vu screen blakent ova. Tires wer meltin. Sinnerman hit revers. Tha Left Tennat limpt away backwids in tha otha direction wile tha Brumby King come on too, keepin pace. Thru a little cleer patch in tha screen at tha corna I cud see tha Sinners brite red paint turnin blak an crinklin like orange peel flakedt orf ta bare steel unner tha onslawt ov tha left tennat. I felt Sinners screem burnin thru tha link an in ta me own body like I wer tha one on fire. I openedt me mouf but nuthin come out cept a dry crowk. Me eys was wiredt wide wiv tha pain an tha rush ov adrinaleen. Sinnerman wernt holdin its own no more it turnt one 80 an it fled tha firey burst wiv tha Brumby King close behindt an burnin fule. We maniged ta brake free ov tha flames an it turnt out that Sinnerman cud out run tha King faster, tho it turnt tale an runned.

Tha road bucked unner neef an tha sky so hi abuv, we felt tha sun hot on owr burnt metal skin an it wer a delishiss feelin suckin in gulps ov fresh air thru tha manifold an squirtin fule in ta tha injectars felt this powa inside risin up frum unner neef an settin me teef on edge wiv its hold as thru tha spike I got a blast ov fresh synth alk as Sinner caught more cleer air in its grill, a rushin dreem an tha bush roadside falls in ta a green haze blur an I wer dreemin out loud a riot ov culler an movemint all aroun me eys is wide as wiv tha thrill ov doin battle. Roadin wiv tha Brumby Kings dust clowd behint ware once an for all we waz gunna outrun it.

That wer me thorts that brite morn ov smoaky deelins an burnt up paint, me many folded future comin on up strait ahed but ov corse thins is neva as

strait ahead as ya wud like em ta be. Thers all ways twists an one wer waitin for me rite ther twistin up inside me face. All ways hidin behind tha mask. So it wer wiv that truckride. Nerv toxen shook me outta me haze, tha crippin pain ov it shuddern thru tha spike in ta me arm. Sum chokin wite inner feerants frum tha link wats bin slotted by a evvil brumby truckmind set ta chock ovr shocks. Screemin. Sinnerman screemin too, weels lockt up spinnin outta control, tha Brumby King slottin sum wikkid truckin magick thru tha link an grinnin at us thru tha reer vu as it cort up an dusty blak paintwirik an chunky snub nose filled up tha screen. It knowed it had gotten our number wiv tha trump card up its self, its one shot ov sistim kriple fired thru tha link an all reddy workin its way thru Sinner an then thru me. We was goners, at speed. Time slowt rite down I wer lookin out me eys as if I wer sum one else watchin on a screen I seen tha way tha sun lite glintid orf tha tiny chips ov minerils in tha gravil at tha side ov tha road an I felt tha sway an shudder thru Sinners body as it triedt ta rite itself but got it all rong, oversteert an then we was inta tha roll. I cudnt be leeve we gorn frum so hi one minim ago ta this, runnin against tha soft edgis an rollin ova in ta tha scrubby fex. Tha noise ov it wer lowd in me ringin eers, tha smell ov burnin sharp in me nose. Strapps pullt tite across me chest me hed snappin wiv tha lurch. Tha sun whirlt aroun us an tha blu sky swappt wiv blak erf till time cort up agin an we come ta a stop an tha noise ended then it wer jest tha spinnin ov a weel an tha creekin ov steel an tha ping an tick ov tha coolin enjinn.

I wer still strapped in all rite but me hed had snapped aroun in tha jarrin crash an me mouf wer bleedin ware Id bit me lip. I hanged side ways down in side tha cab. Ther wer nuthin frum Sinner thru tha link. Dust blowed past outside I cud see tha groun. I felt that thort an flipped tha release on me harness. Eyvee

come orf wiv a crusted pull ov brite pain an along wiv it a lotta blud an some tendrils ware tha flesh has been growed in ta by tha feed. I wer more a part ov Sinner than I reelised an it shockt me how fast it cud happen that I wer be come truck wise. I hit tha deck an coffed up a lung. Popped tha hatch, reddy ta go out side an see wats wat. Alreddy tha dust an smoak wer gettin in side me hed. I hadda make a move I kicked out tha hatch an crept outta ther in ta tha brite sun shine. I tried ta stan but it had been so long since Id done any walkin ov me own, I cudnt. I wer cold an swettin an me hart wer racin. A wave ov sick rollt up frum me stomick an I vomitted. Tha blue sky above, red dusty erf unner me back. I laid ther a while an than it clicked watd gorn on but I cudnt evin roll otha agen be for ther wer a swooshin frum above an a flapple flowed ova hed. Flite ov tha deth bird come ta pick shreds frum tha corpse. Tha Brumby King gurbled closer, tha Left Tennat limp in behint. They knowed Sinner wer finisht lyin on its side like that. A roll out heer cud kill orf a truck quickern bullits. But I thort I felt a burst on tha link frum tha Brumby King as it rollt slow past, jest a flash an then gorn an I didnt know wat it cud meen so I put it outta me hed. I wer sickent wiv tha crash but I cud see out me eys still tho I wer stricken roadside same as sinner but as tha King passed I thort I cort a look ov a pale face framt wiv dark hair a dark eys lit by a wrecked angle ov lite frum tha reer vu screen. It wer jest a flash an it wer gorn but I knowed it wer her an it come ta me that Isa was wiv tha King, an she sum how musta knowed it wer me an she maniged ta stay tha Kings han rite at tha end.

I tried tha link again, thumbin for Sinner an ther was signs ov life, it wer rebootin but slow as, sistim crash. Dammige ta tha body, but itd only rolled tha once. Cudnt see no leeks or nothin. No smoak or fire, not yet anyway. Pritty soon

theyd be roadcrew an all manner ov scavengers turnin up. I cudnt evin stan, but I cralled away a bit furthar towards prickly pair wat I cud shelter unner till I got me self ta getha. I kept on zonin in an out an me eys was hard ta keep opin. I didnt know wat wer goin on, me arm started achin reel bad an I wer pullt sepert frum that big truckbody wat laid on its side in tha dust by tha road. We was laid low an I cudnt see no way out. Pretty soon tha flapples an bigdogs wud be a long ta ping Sinnermans skin an I thort thatd parbly be tha end ov me tale.

Chapter 12

Once I got me hed back, I reel eysd I wer gunna hafta get Sinner back on tha road sum how. It wer a lot ov metal an geers ther lyin on its side in tha dust. A rust colort flapple sat up hi on tha top creekin as it foldid its wings. It screecht like a old metal hing an I cud heer tha ping as it triedt ta pick at tha steel skin. I crawl't back ova an triedt ta push on Sinner but I cudnt shift it. Evin if I wer hale an harty I cudnt ov shiftid it. I layed down in tha dust. I wer gunna need sum help ta make it thru. Parbly moren sum help. A pack ov bigdog robos wer getherin an it mindid me ov tha time I sat be sides me mar afta she died birthin a ded babbe.

Wernt long be for Crow showt up, ov corse. Wen eva thers misry or misforchune, thers all ways Crow come ta pick tha boans.

— Luks like yuv hit a snag, he sed.

— Yair, well me trucks rolled ova.

— Thats a reel shame.

He eyd tha reckige an me crustid arm an reekin pale body, an his wet tung lickt dry lips.

— Carn, dont jest stan aroud, gimme a hand tryin ta rite this truck, I sed.

— Mate ya know it doan wirk like that. Im heer ta see wats ov use in this wreck.

— Its no wreck, its me truck Sinnerman an we is gunna be back on tha road be for ya can get yer claws in.

— I doan know about that, boy. Luks like youse is got sum serius problims.

He lookt at me sharpish thru eys so cleer they was all most wite in side, nuthin reflecktid in tha blak.

— Im jest gunna sit down an havva smoak, he sed.

He sat down unner that shade ov tha truck body an took out a little pipe loaded it wiv ganja frum a levver pakkit. Sparkt up an blowed smoak in me face. Meen wile Sinner was rebootid an tryin ta fire its enjinn ta get thins movin. Not that it wudda dun any good coz it wer lien on its side.

I lookt at Crow closer. He wer changt since I last saw him. Lookt all most yunger in sum ways, less creeses roundt his eys. Same truck tire coat but. Same hair down ta his sholders but it wer turnin frum wite ta blak. I shivvert in side, it wernt a homey feelin, bein tied ta gether wiv a creecher like that on tha roadin thru tha cuntry ov tha end times ta god knows ware.

Ther come a rumblin on tha road jest then, an I seen Crows eys flickr, his face fallen down cast evin at tha same time as me own hart raced at tha prospeck ov anotha truck on tha horizin. I climed ta me feets an restid one arm on Sinners dusty unner carrige an wiv tha otha I flickt me link maker on an scanned tha

freaks for tha new comer. I wer seesinned as a truck rider now, Id gotten a gud ideer ov wat patches wud intice a indie ta stop an take a lissin. I slottid a few an up poppt a truck, comin fast but startin ta slow at tha sine ov a rider on tha road. Crow packt anotha pipe an wotcht frum tha side. It wer a indie comin all rite, it come in ta vu shyinin in tha sun like tha promiss ov a nu day. A seckin chance. Slowin up evvin furvver wen it seen wat Id gottin ta offer but it wer wary too at tha site ov a freshrollt truck by tha roadside.

Yeller Mackdog, pullen a trailer fulla parts frum tha Midden Dump. Likedt tha sounds ov wat me link maker wer makin, pumpt a happy choon. Sinner too sick frum tha rollovva ta make a soundt. I slottid it wiv a new patch an it wer a brite wun, it knowed rite away wat wer rekwired. Its signill went week then strong as tha patch workt its way thru tha sisstim. Evin in me weeknt state I wer able ta fix a roap frum Sinners tool box an ty it hi up on ta tha Mackdogs body. Crow wer jest sittin ther tha hole time, smoakin up an sylint now it lookt like ther wer gunna be nuthin ta pik frum tha reck afterall. I wedged in sum stix unner Sinners six weels on tha ground ta give sum leverige wen tha pull come on so it wudnt jest slide in tha dust. Wen it wer all reddy, I given tha Mackdog anotha little taste ov tha patch it wuntid an it went tha ol heev ho. Slowly, slowly till it reecht tha tippin point ov balinc ware if ya findt it ya can do magick, that place wats ther but not ther. An then tha fall an creeky crash as Sinner rockt on its shocks.

Sinner wer rebooted by now an hault back on ta its weels. It flasht its lites groggily in silint thanks ta tha Mackdog wat wer happy itd gottin its patches for hardly any wirk at all an it took orf down tha road as I climed in ta tha cab once more an hooked me self inna Sinnerman. Left Crow by tha roadside an we moved

a long thru tha slow day sun lite flowin thick like goldin sirrurp but Sinner wernt tha same truck. It wer cruzin wiv a limp, its hart wernt innit. It wer all scratcht up an scarrt an blakint an wile I thort it lookt tuff, I knowed that for a proud indie it wer tha worstest thin wat cud eva be so I pusht it gently a long lookin ta find sum ware ta get fixt up. Camp after camp we roadid till two days afta tha crash an orf track frum tha gigacity we come up on a truckstop wat had a shop ther for detailin. Them indies was mad for tha truckskin art wat tha detailers marked out on metal. Marks made by tha detailers who in terpereted messiges they seen frum tha Wotcher an scribed on tha indies wat wud come frum miles aroundt for tha latest bit ov flash.

Pullt ova an wile our dust cort up wiv us I sat in tha cab an checked tha scene. Ther wer a bloak wiv weldin goggs pusht up on his wite skull, lookt like he knowed wat wer wat. Four indies crowdid aroun him I thort for sure he wer chief truck detailer at this truckstop. Hustle bustle in tha shop wiv detailers movin between em cuttin deels, litenin stencils, marken em up, leedin em in for tha enamel bin, them creechers, them amazin wild creechers made ov steel an darkniss. Jest lookin at em massin like that fillt me wiv wunder. Who knowed wat they thort? Tha only way ya cud guess at wat they wuntid wer by lookin at they acts an sum times that didnt make any sents at all. Who cudve gessed theyd be in ta tha tricks ov tha skin, admirin they selfs in tha big mirra screens set up around tha spraybooth. Blastin out fat choons be tween em wen tha mood took. Sum ov tha desines wer unreel an menne I jest thort was ugli mess but tha trucks emselfs didnt, no way. They rolldt around proud as. Smoakstaks blartin an tha smell ov em, always tha smell it wer gettin me hi an it got tha detailers hi ya cud see it in ther eys, they was as hooked on tha trucks as we riders was. Movin among em

makin marks on tha gentle metal skin, jest ta touch em jest ta feel em up close. Its wat I wanted but I wer a roader I cudnt make no artwork anyway. I had me own path ta tred but I wer all ways inner rested in any thing tha trucks was doin. Ther wer always new things comin thru tha pipe line be tween em like one week itll be scrollwork an lace an tha nex fluoro lites an brite shinin things an then simbolls wat pattern an shift as how ya look on em. Yud hav ta think that if ther was gunna be any words ov tha Brumby King an his mob, it wud be thru here. I pullt out tha eyvee feedline frum me arm, it come wiv a sting an a puckin ov flesh up aroun tha spike. Dint much like bein diss connect but it wer tha only way I cud negotiate an ennyway Id hafta leeve Sinnerman wile it wer gettin meched. Me boots clangt on tha rungs as I climt outta tha cab. Shaky feet on tha ground, it felt like I wer still movin on tha hi way wiv Sinnerman rumblin unnerneef me but reely it wer jest me an me meet suit now. Wobblin thru tha deetailers I fount tha bloak Id seen at tha start, wiv tha goggs on his hed, an I went ta him an ast:

— Can ya fix me rig?

His eys was spaced, tha grin on his mouf wer wide an careless.

— Wats that, mate? he sed.

— Me rig, Sinnerman. We bin messt up pretty bad in a rollover.

— Oh yair? Howd that be happenin?

— It wer brumbies mainly.

— Ya know witch mob?

— I call em tha Brumby King mob, run by a big blak barstid wat doan take no care for its apperances.

— I know em. They doan come here for mechs, but I know em.

— Well they runned us orf tha road an left us for flapple snack in tha backroads. Maniged ta get rited, but Sinners not feelin tha bets an I wer wunnerin if youse cud fix it an make it rite agen coz we is both roadin afta tha mob an now we wunt re venge.

— Well, lemme take a look. Mite be a wile coz thers so menny others all reddy here.

We walked back ta ware Sinnerman wer lowin, lookin reel down since tha crash, panels all basht burnt an grass an stiks cort up unner tha weel archis. As we walkt I ast:

— Waddy know ov tha Brumby Kings mob?

His face wer greesed in creesemarks wen he smiled his broakin toof grin.

— Theys causin all sorts ov trubbil aroun tha backroads. Our indies is all shook up coz they reckon tha brumbies is out lookin ta slave some nu members, tha Brumby King is after breedin stock, tryin ta buff up its mob.

— Any ideers ware they is holed out?

— Na, mate, they come an go. I think they got a few diffrint hidey holes about tha place. I herd one ov em is in tha Warbi Ranges, they got a cave ther, but they shift aroun so much its hard ta say an they is always on tha move, carryin everythin they need an lootin watever they like. They also bin seen in tha gigacity, serchin in tha roons for sines ov tha Wotchers passen.

— Theyd stop for fule sum time.

— Dunno, maybe not. I herd tha blak one runs nuke, but thats jest rumer. Its not gunna be a eesy rangle.

— Nah I dont think so neither. Tha Brumby King took sumthink ov mine an I want ta get it back, thats all.

He wer rite it wer a few days be for he cud get ta Sinnerman. Meen time I hangedt around tha detailers tradin yarns or ritin me thorts down in me typeriter an saven em ta gether ware all tha trance scripps ov Smoovs rants was kept, clippt up in tha lid ov tha typeriter case. I wer puttin ta getha a gud story I thort, gettin thins strayt in me hed.

Tha firsts nite I wotcht as tha detailers gethert afta darknest come down. It wer time for tha Wocthers passen an Lam, wat wer tha name ov tha chief detailer, got his deks ta gether an wile tha detailers an them as wat hung roun tha camp like skinny yellor dogs pusht in closa ta tha show. Be hint tha screen Lam wer chooned in wiv tha Wotcher like a showman wud, cept in sted ov makin meenins wiv truckshows wat he pullt out wer pitchers frum tha Wotchers feed. Diffrint desines come outta tha staticky waves, spirils an shapes, hard blocks or soft edgis. Pitchers ov diffrint trucks thru tha ages, trucks frum tha passed time wat tha Wotcher beemt down. I reeleysd they wer tha markins wat wer gunna be in scribt in ta tha trucks they was wirkin on wat come for miles ta get fixt up wiv tha latist geer frum tha Wotcher.

Nex day I walkt thru tha camp watchin tha detailers an seein how tha trucks come in frum tha backroads lookin for them pattenins frum tha nite be for. Thinkin on how tha trucks luvd that stuff frum tha Wotcher, it wer like they was lookin ta findt they own image in tha statick wat got beemt down frum on hi eech nite. Them indies lookt ta tha Wotcher for ansers jest like tha showmans an tha camps did, cept for tha trucks ther wer sum thin reel at stake. Mebbe they thort tha Wotcher cud give em sum sekrit codes in mechin ther nu hi bred forms, like mebbe tha Wotcher had tha knowin ov they first codes wat they was in coded be for thins went all bad wiv tha gigacity sisstem. Mebbe they needid tha

codes ta be ever thin wat they wuntid ta be, not havin ta mech nu parts all tha time frum herdin up spare trucks but sum thin wat cud heel itsself like a wound wud scar up, not brake down.

Wen tha sun got too hot I went orf down tha gully ta wash me own wounds an took sum haze wat I wer growin accustomed ta. Tha sky wer dottid wiv shapes hangin in tha air an ridin tha breez. At firs I thort they was sum numint kind ov flapple but then I seen they was tethert ta tha groun an rode on strings by kids wat wer floaten em up ther in tha sky. They made a eeri sound like frogs or angered insex as tha wind shooct thru ther cloff feevvers. I eetid orf ov a grill wat tha camp follers set up unner a blu tarp be side a tricklin creek an watcht tha kids float ther flyin thins. Sum wer reel skillt, cud make em do dips an loops an fite agenst eech ova ta cut tha string. As well as tha detailers ther wer a novver cult ther sharin tha camp, a goannerman lookin after a big lizzid wat wer all paintid wiv sines an signills. Seemt that evva one had ther own kinda creecher out side ov em selves wat wer gunna bind em ta gether in ta a hole. I cud tell tha goannerman wer well thort ov in tha truckstop, he got tha best cuts orf tha grill. His goanner cruncht up tha boans an mebbe it wer that they kept out tha flapples an robodroans by cleenin up all tha carryon. Ther wernt nothin left ther for em ta scrounge. It also made me feel safe frum Crow too evin tho Id only seen him a few days a go. Ware ther wer too many scavidgers all reddy, Crow wernt like ta show up.

Tha nite come on down agen an I startid ta get itchy ta be roadin after Isa. Id gotten sum gud leeds on tha brumby mob an wuntid ta get ta tha gigacity ta start tha serch ther. Sinnerman wer bein workt on but wernt reddy yet. But ther wernt no hurryin tha detailers they had they own time markt out, it wernt like

nuthin I wer use ta, set by tha risin a fallen ov tha sun. Theyd go on for solid days on a job an then crash an sleep rite thru for days. It wer all set by tha timin an motion ov tha Wotcher, but also it come down ta wat wer bein broad cast down in tha trance mishin. If ther wernt nuthin they cud use in ther, theyd jest get tankedt up sum more an fite wiv eech otha roundt tha fire place. All tha wile that goannermans perengi monster cruncht on boans. It got me nervs janglt an I wer gettin itchy for tha haze agen too. I sneekt up in side Sinnermans cab an load up on tha eyvee, evin tho it wernt strickly kosha ta do it wile ther wernt no roadin happenin. It kept me goin an I kept Sinner goin wiv a splay ov patches an I cud feel we was both re buildin our strengffs frum than battil wiv tha Left Tennat, an who knowed wat wer comin rount tha bend for us.

Two days later Lam wer done wiv Sinnerman he shook me han an sed:

— Ware ya heddid now?

— Gunna road ta wards tha gigacity I reckon. I herd tha mob bin seen roun ther.

— Its tru enuff. Tha Wotchers signils strong ther. Thers a playce callt tha lie bury ware all tha lies is buryd sum ware neer tha senter ov war they can choon tha Wotchers freek.

I shuk his han.

—Hooroo, I sed.

I turnt an walkt ta Sinners nu mint truck skin glistenin wiv sparkin nu gliffs, still red an wite an wiv a westin look but nu de sines an nu tweeks ta its runnin geer. I all most didnt wanna dusty up its steps wiv me boots as I swung up in ta tha cab. Slotted home tha spike an Sinner gunnt up agen an tha flow ov tha haze met me own blud flowin poundin in ta me hart an tha machien ov me desire.

Slowly we roadid back out into tha brite sun lite, so blindin an strange after that dark shed ov truck magick. Cant say I wernt glad ta put it behindt neither. Tha gigacity loomt large on tha horizin ahead.

Chapter 13

Sinner wer feelin more its ushal self wiv tha road shakin an shudderin unnerneef its rollin weels ridin on tha coatst road. It wernt moren a day be for we cud see tha skellingtuns ov towers loomin a hed on tha vu screen. As we come closer I seen moren more flapples flyin like flies aroun tha bodies ov ded trucks crusht fliers an scattert robos an telly presents droans in tha broakin lands. Bodies ov roadkilt roos an camils an peeples too, blak as enjinn oil frum a bustid sump.

Smoak risin up frum tha stripped shassy bodies ov ded trucks. Briks an bloks an chunks ov concreet, bits ov bitchumin an all tha rubbil frum tha bildins ov losst times wen tha gigacity wer towars ov glass an thin polly mer plass tick glitterin in tha sun like a millyon streems ov waterfallin stars, livin compewders ov glass an thinfilm bilding minds torkin an trans actin in a brillyant sisstem bilt ov lite stretcht ova boans ov steel an concreet. Thats wat I pitched it as afta Isa tole

me one time ov tha stories frum tha past an I seen it then overlayt on tha erf out side tha windder an it wer a shadder wat staintd tha grownd an rose up like wisps ov smoak behint me eys like tha dreem corsin thru me sisstim wiv tha blak licker wat leekt thru tha eyvee frum Sinnermans alkyloid synthmod. Tha landt outside tha cab flowt past like a smoov surfiss, I cudnt penny trate be neef. An mebbe thers nuthin be neef at all, mebbe tha surfiss is all ther is. So we rollt ova tha surfiss lookin for a way for it ta make sents but mebbe thers only non sents.

Tha gigacity beckined up a hed an tha shadders ov that playce made me shudder an I unnerstood how come fokes neva went ther no more. Shimmerin like a losst wirled. Tha screen seemt a parta me. No hi lites any more. Nuthin, jist tha flow, jist tha jets wat movdt me a long thru tha deep waters ov a truckbound life, losin tha use ov me lims, me membries all jumbt up outta orda like a clowd ov lowkists flyin on tha road. Everthin I seen wer filtered thru tha screen. Me an Sinnerman was a sisstim, but wat wer tha host an wat tha para site? I wer livin on haze an rollin thru tha backroads in tha machien, but Sinner wer livin orf me patches as well, livin orf me code ranglin as I led it up ta be broakin on tha hi way an wen we wud find Isa it wud be in a slaughterhowse ov brumby trucks. All tha hansum trucks an they runnin lites shinin brite in tha nite behindt me eys. I knowed it wer all gunna catch up wiv me sum time but I pusht tha thorts away.

I wer deep in that connect an it wer scary an wunnerfill too, a nu page crant in ta tha type riter. Id nevva bin so close ta a novver creecher in me hole life. Evin Isa dun nuthin but pusht me a way. An now I seen this connect watd got me in its hooks, itd got me in its spiked arm. Its eyvee an its hazy visions. This creecher wat I didnt evin know till jist a few days ago wer now me hole life, an

me life is be come a hole an we was ridin two gether in ta tha gigacity lookin for Isa me lost sister me lost lover. Hid be low tha surfiss all ya find is more surfisses.

Drived in ta tha outskirts, raggedly tailend like a wave in revers. Cinderbloc boxis an broakin corners piled wiv rubbil. Rubbil piled on trubbils. No one aroun it wer a goast town left for ded by them wat livedt ther an curssedt ground for tha meen times. We kept on, but, tho it wer slo goin. Tha road hadnt bin kept thru passige. In tha backroads at leest tha traks tho ruttid was opent frum so much traffick passen thru. Me hole life passen thru, one stop ta tha next. Wotcher gunna do? Nuthin for it but ta keep on.

Tha houses ware once ther was people was all long since lootid an burnd. Frames pullt apart for fule, fire blakent frunts stained wiv sooty smoak. I wer ridin hi up in tha riders cab, feelin tha growin wondermint ov this place an all its goasts was grown on me like creepers on a tree, slowin me down on tha road an all tha stories Id herd ov tha gigacity was dancin in me hed I cudnt keep em sepert frum wat I seen in fact, tha stories was infectin tha day lit towas ov broakin glass so they glowed in tha afta noon time sun shine an callt out ta me wiv tha voyses ov all them wat wer gorn be for an all them wat wer ded an left ta rot out in that playse ov poysint ground an slinkin snakes movin shapes in tha corners ov me eys. I seen it an I didnt see boaf at tha same time, I knowt it wer me mind I knowt it wer tha stories I knowt it wer wat I seen an all thins at once. Most ov all I knowt then why ther was so many stories ov tha gigacity an why it wernt a playce ta be visitin or for livin in them rooms long since left for leevins good an parper.

On an a long we went slow an carefill forgin a path thru tha shattered bildins an tha downt poles. Tha city wer bin taken back by riotin life. Roots

growed up thru everythin, tangilled creepen greenery clawin at tha red brik.
Lizzids an slivering creechers scrubbled outta tha way as we crawl thru. Eitha
side tha bildins loomed an got thicker an taller ta wards tha senter. Ahed a steel
canyin wall abov a riva ov glitterin glass beneef.

We come ta a place ov ded ens. Five ways inter sectin comin in on top ov
eech otha. Tha buildins wer seemliss towars now ther teck all bount up an seeled
behint thinfilm aye ey. Pullt tha eyvee, it wer hard ta do it, gettin harder all tha
time but I hadda get out on two legs ther wernt room for a truck in them rubbilt
streets so I climt outta Sinnerman an walkt thru broakin streets an bustid
concrete. Blast burns scarrt tha way. I felt like Id bin ther be for, in a dreem.
Shiver ov cravin for tha missin haze flo be come a nu syntax rote in me blud by
machiens not billt by youman hans. Times tickin, time stickin. It doan flow strait
forwids like most people wer happy ta think. Ya cud slippt down in side ov it, ya
cud feel its text cha. Its grainy not smooov. It comes out in lumps an clumps aroun
certin thins wat ya keep comin back ta in yer membry. If all time wer tha same,
how come as thers sum momints wot stick out frum othas? Then thers them otha
times wen ya look up frum wot ya bin doin an ya seen its neer dark an youd not
reeleysd it. Thats another way for time ta stick, wen it runs out like tha slurry
frum a latrine, runs out on ta tha groun ware ya wanna make sure its filtred out
nice before it gets ta tha creek coz otha wise tha creek will poisin an die.

Standin in tha gigacity street swettin out haze vishins frum me skin, I wer
membring an RE membring, bringin membries back ta me mindt, like a feelin wat
breeks thru frum tha otha place, frum a diffrint place down ware tha river
bended by tha creek side in tha wet seesin an tha day lite stretcht ta its end an I
wer ther wiv Isa an tha creechers wat livt in tha roks an tha stoan an torked ta

eech ovver an a slinky snake slivverin in tha muggy sun shine. I figgert we wer all lost in time, tha thins we see in frunt ov ovr eys, in frunt ov ovr –I–s is wot takes up most ov tha brane but if ya can shut em out for a time, tha membries start comin up, tha thins wot happent an mebbe they didnt evvin happin but on sum levil ya know they did. Sum levil, sum time, sum one connectid ta yer an seeded them simbulls in yer hed. Its all ways all reddy gorn, like a slinky snake in ta a crak in tha roks.

Groovs in stoan steps on tha gigacity pathway. Ther wer sum thin about tha place wat brung membries up in me mindt. Tha stairs was saggin like tha grooves in me rangler ware me greesy fingers thumbt tha shiney metal smooov. I thort abowt all tha trudgin feet watd made them groovs ova so much spans ov time an mebbe it doan matter wot I thort or type rited any ways its all gunna be dust soon enuff. There wunt be no one left who cud reed it, no one who cud unner stand any way these ravens. But then mebbe its like tha groovs in them steps, sum one wud see tha passen frum tha bits wot ISNT ther in this place ware roads come ta die. Tha wirds twist in on they selvs an thers no way in nor out in that blasted lan scape ov red rok an smooov brown stoan in tha dried up creek beds ov city streets wots neva flowed for a hunnerd yeers or more its jest dedly deth an danger ta eny one as wot passes by. A broakin nek an stolen boots. Lemme die in trucktire shoes tied up wiv twine so no one will wunna rifle me corpse for em.

Chapter 14

Spent too many days bled into moonfaze in tha gigacity ware tha wreck age rort in tha time be for piledt up on tha unner side ov ova passis by tha bustid banks ov tha riva. Stax ov rustid shippin cans piledt like tha broakin toys ov a bad mood babby mountin sprung luce frum its roots. A plastick tide ov blak water flect wiv stiro foam. I rollt in Sinnerman a long tha bustid path ways. Id not seen a sine ov any body at all since I bin in tha city, an ther wer reesin for it. Lookin out frum tha cab I seen movmint down ther in tha rubbil. Starin closer an I seen it wer a slinky snake, segmints ov its body like a erfwirm an a red ey lite lit for its huntin ov warmth an skin an fur ta feed on. An then tha more I lookt, tha more I seen, squirmin in tha corners ov me eys. Ther wernt jest one ther was a hunnerd. I cudnt stan it no mor I hadda get back on tha road. Long as I wer in side ov that truck I wer safe, so we set ta roamin, rollin on tha road wat crisst crosst tha riva

an tha water, broaken down parts ov freeway shattert on tha grount, pickin our way thru tha mess lookin for sines ov brumby life.

Weeks past in tha blur ov crusin tha gigacity. They twitstid around eech otha an led back ta tha same place. Down in side a tunnil an then back on up tha otha side, wrekt trucks lit unner tha lites. Sum roads wer broakin sum wernt an so we felt our way thru ther keepin lookin out for sines ov brumbies but ther wer nun. Ova an unner it all, tha stench ov deth an smoak risin frum tha runes but its not so bad as sum playces I bin. Therd gotta be a way outta tha swirlin runes an scavingedt meets frum tah trickery ov tha rubbil wat moves a cordin ta tha playces it sets an tha feelin ov bein ova tha top ov it, ova tha endin ov it all. Thru tha day an thru that nite I sat in tha cab an I sercht for tha meenin in it all. Wrote down wat happent an wat I seen on me typeriter an riffled Smoovs notes sum times jest tryin ta come ta sum unner stannin ov tha wirld rollin them streets ova growed wiv grennery an creeprs. It wer all jest broakin up sines an creepery greenin an lite rail lines stretcht on a long road be tween two spires.

Sum force drawed me on wids ta Isa, pullt me a long thru tha streets wiv big blox ov broakin konkrete an day lite shinin be tween tha towas a tha water risin up thru bildins wat wer stickin outta tha groun like rottid teeth frum a blak gum. River broak tha bank an flooded out all ova tha place outta ware it wud be its own self. Lookin back I cud see it all, them days serchin thru burnt out cars an tha re mains ov them as wat wer gorn frum tha wirld now. Ther wernt much left tha playce bin pickt cleen like wite boans bleached in tha sun. An it seemt all me worries cud be like them boans bleached an laid on a blanket ta be solt as trinkits or tallismans. All tha blu tarps in tha wirld wudnt protect ya frum tha ravviges ov

tha wind wat blowed frum tha souf wen tha sky hung low an dark an tha bildins sail like downside up ships in a blak n stormy see.

One day we come ta a broakin door inna wall opent on ta a garden sekrit an lush an green Id neva seen nothin like it it wer a para dice ther in tha runes beset on all sides by dust an crumblin stoan kaos. I pullt at tha eyvee in me arm but it wer clawt so deep it be come stuck. I seen in side tha gap in tha wall ta that place it wer so green ther wer menny diffrint kinda plants I seen frum all forms not like anything else in tha backroads dried up spiny fex an scrubby brown leefs. I wunted ta check it out so I pullt harder an finally tha eyvee come out wiv a spurt ov blud wat I stancht wiv me sleev.

Climin down me legs was nun too good neither but sum thin in tha gardin pullt me on. Frum tha out side tha space in side didnt seem big enuff ta holdt all that wild ragin riva ov life resistin tha rubbil ov tha city. Ther wer a spiril path way wat led ta tha senter an as I past thru brushin leeves an crunchin gravvil tha smell ov damp an moldy forrist I wisht I knowed all tha names ov tha plants. I thort about that big book wiv all tha names ov thins wat is passin out tha wirled an I wunnered if ther wer enny one leff who knowed tha names ov all them trees an wether ya cud brew ther barks for a tonik an stuff like that. It got me thinkin, but. That garden wer reel well tendered. Tha hole place altho it wer quiet, altho it wer wild, ther wer a methid ta it. Itd bin planned an itd bin kept. It wer a place ov peece an liteness. It come ta me then that tha diffrints be tween a gardin an a forrist wer that a gardin had a sisstim an sum one or sum fink ta range it an look after it an pull out tha weeds. Also a gardin wer FOR sum one an a forrist wer jist for itself, an I wunnert who tha gardin wer for in that loanly playce wer only tha wind spoak thru tha walls. Rite at tha senter ov tha gardin I foundt a hole wiv a

doorway. Yankt it open an in side wer darkniss an beckonin cool frum tha heet ov tha day.

I dint know wat wer in side tha gardin, nor who cuda bin lookin afta it nor why by I went on in thru tha door outta tha sun shine an ta shadders ov a musty room. Tha hissperin sount ov fans an a soft flo ov air tolt ther wer still tha remnints ov sun harvistid powr an tha tickin turbynes frum tha roof tricklin ther electrickery in ta tha rooned bildins sirkits. Me eys got use ta tha darknest in side. In on down an ther wer a well worned pathway in tha dust. Signs ov life down ther, not jest frum machiens an aminals neither. I stood ther waitin, lissenin, me breff comin an goin thru me froat. Party cules ov lite danct on tha insides ov me eys in tha dark.

I felt me way forwids in tha gloom an slowly I wer Abel ta see ther wer lites comin frum glowin strips in tha walls. It wernt much but it wer enuff. I come down tha steps in ta a opin spayse ware tha stair cases was twint around a sentrill sharfft an so I climed, drove by a feelin ov curyosity bein pullt up by sum thin wat I cudnt asplain. I thort allova sudden, wat if ther wer a rider slottin patches in me own brain? Wat wud such a creecher look like, if it wer lookkin out me eys like vu screens in a truck cab?

At tha top ov tha stairs tha space opent out ta a massif rount rume, spokes drawin inwads ta a senter platform. Lite come in frum winders at tha top ov a dome seelin. Tha sound wer husht in side I cud heer tha currints movin in tha air fillin up a space wat stetcht as I stretcht me neck up ta tha top, past tha balconies jammt wiv shelvin an levva bount books fallen ta tha ground in piles ov tumbld pagis yellered an eetin up wiv age. I shuffilt thru tha dust, feelin tha powar ov that space, it wer a holey playce I cud tell. I all most wer holdin me breff as I

walkt an a creepy feelin crawlt up tha hairs ov me back as I walkt up ta tha senter piece wiv five sides an it felt like ther wer sum one watchin me.

In side ther wer a blak hole stretchin on downwids in ta tha dark. I seen it wer a entry hatch fetched up by sum thin on a long line ov robo arm an trak wat pullt up frum be neef. Down in ther a whirrin sount wer harpenin an a swift grind ther wer lite comin up frum down in ther too. So down I went, on down in ta tha blak ta wards tha lite. Me berd wer scraggy frum no washin for days on end. I wer a overclockt change log, a speck ov greese spat frum tha hot fryin pan. Tha show reel un windin in me hed as I lurcht in ta words ware we was comin up on tha senter ov thins, feelin tha wait ov hisstry an tha wurdin ov tha past.

I went up clowser an seen tha bristlin senterped ov a hunnerd legs crawlin an tha voyse ov a crow cawin an tha scrapin ov tha wait ov me own body ova tha rustid metal ov tha hatchway. Down in ta tha well, ware I knowt tha end wer waitin for me. Tha shaft endit an opent out on ta a wide opin space splayd wiv pattins ov lite an shadder. A robo arm whirld backwids an forwids, ther wer stax an stax ov all them buks an papers. Tha arm wer bein fed by wat wer left ov tha electrickery tricklin frum tha roof. It wer whinin on its trax, hissing backwids an forwids, shufflin tha buks in tha stax. I walkt ta wards it, seein wat it wer doin. It wer dancin aroun in tha hole, orderin tha buks in sum way, codin tha spines ov em all wat wer blak in one part an all wat wer red in anuvva. Then it did em agen. Standin back in tha dim lite I cud see ther wer shapes comin out frum tha pattins an shiftin inta forms wat I cud reckonise. I reelisd this wer tha Lie Bury tha detailers toldt me about, ware all tha lies come ta be buried.

A pattin formt up in tha blak agenst tha red, a image ov a crow. I jest stod ther as tha shape ov blak wings wer flickt in ta bein by that spinnin arm wat

startid ta move faster as it got closa ta wards tha end an then it stopt. Ther wer no soundt but tha dust fallen. I staredt at tha shape ov tha crow ther for tha longest time. Watchin tha arm doin its work I knowt that ther wernt no eesy way ta ask tha past wat it wer up ta. Ther wernt no way ov knownin wat it wer like back then. Ther sisstims wer a misstry an who knowed wat they made ov tha work on tha shulders ov them as had come even be for em. I cud ask tha Lie Bury ov books ta fetch its arm an call one up for me, but Id got buckleys ov makin any sens ov it. All I cud do wud be gessin.

Seein that crow in ther made by machien did sum thin ta me. It shookt me outta me trants, gave me a direcktion. I reelist Isa wer still wat wer gunna keep me goin tho I wer lost.

Chapter 15

Out inna sun it wer reel brite an hot me eys was dazed. I pickt me way back thru tha runes ta ware Id hobbelled Sinnerman by linkmade roap an patch tethered unner a tree wat was growed in ta tha wall wiv its roots all twistin thru tha briks an craks. Poppt tha hatch an climed back in ta tha riders cab wiv Sinnerman. Tha homey smell ov it hit an I felt tha rumblin ov powa an lite as Sinner fired up an I slottid tha eyvee. Thru tha link wer a mix ov color an soun joint wiv me blud. It come on hard. Tha time Id spent losst in tha gigacity given me a nu feelin ov deep contact wiv tha truck. I wer jonesin for tha feed an Sinner itcht ta be onna prowl agen an for me it wer gud ta be back teemt wiv that massiv truck. Once a part now ta gether we felt stronga than be for sum how. Tha connexun growed between us an I felt tha party cules frum Sinners synth mod feed comin thru tha eyvee an I cud feel me own flesh closin around tha spike. Usin jest me mind I cud

mod tha patches thru tha link now so that Sinnerman wud feel wat I wuntid ta do an it wud do it, mostly.

Out frum all them slinky snakes, jest a hankerin then for a opin road an sum space around me an tha imige ov Isa an how we cud be ta gether. Trick ov tha lite throwin sunflash ov brite truckskin in a space be tween tha bildins. Tantal eysin, a glimps ov brumby mebbe. I fed Sinner sum files an it swunged aroun an we rolled back up ta tha ova pass but ther wernt nuthin ther cept tha Warbi Rangis green an loomin in tha north an I knowed then that wer ware I needed ta road an tha dowts fell oft me like dust in me tracks.

So I turnt me mind ta tha Warbi Rangis an we startid grindin thru tha broakin streets, heddin for tha north ov tha gigacity ta wards tha mountins ware I wud findt tha brumby lair an Isa in it. In tha distince I cud see tha foot hills out ov tha vu screen it wernt that far by crow flite, an it hadda be tha same place frum wat I bin tole in tha lie bury an so orf we went. It wer like tha same trip we come in on but re vers. Tha senter wer glitterin bildins an canyins ov steel, ash an broakin glass an streets blokt wiv rubbish an rubbil piledt on piles ov bustid brik piledt on piles ov dust an shattid roadway. Downt poles an wires snakin out frum unner em hiss in tha ill wind wat blowed thru tha emty roads. Movin outwids we come in ta thinnin bildins shorter an furvva a part frum eech otha. Road still chokedt by lots ov rubbil it wer slow goin ta get ta ware it wud be evin more slow goin wen we hit tha mountins. Furvva an furvva out we rolled in ta tha dense packt burbs wiv green creepers growin all thru tha bildins blokt out an broakin down petril stayshin an truckstops an tha crumblin walls ov concrete malls a thik krust on tha groundt an all around. It wer gettin dark now an I wuntid ta be outta ther kwik smart but ther wer no speedin up, enny miss take

ther an we wud be stuff. Who knowt wat creechers livt in them runes wat only come out at nite. Id herd menny tales an I didnt wanna see for me own eys. Jest bein ther wer enuff, ware tha peelin paint on tha walls ov tha warpt howses an tha grain silos crakt an crumbillt nex ta ware tha bodies ov rail way carriges laid spillin all ther sekrits ov hi dralliks an wirin inta tha erf an tha slinky snakes wat dartered unner neef an around glistenin in tha lite frum tha settin sun.

An perty soon we was down tha geers thru that long slow climb up ta wars tha lair ov tha Brumby King so hi in tha mountins in tha dark. Sinner put on its runnin lites an lit up tha nite wiv greens an blus ov sparklin color wat was re flectid back frum tha trees an roks an tha blak surfiss ov tha road. Tha way wer narrer but good, recent signs ov passin veekills. We was on tha rite trail all rite. All nite runnin unner lites. Me control wiv Sinnerman wer grown now, we cud inner face, ther werent much gap be tween thort an movemint. Sum times wen I jest let go I cud feel it in tha trance mishin. I opent me mind an Sinnerman opent tha throddle, engins gunnin exhorsed pumpin hart beet poundin an tha wine ov tha wirlin diff. Tha road is tha place ware times tiedt ta a place an up an up it woun round tha mountin. I all most wantid it ta go on for evar suckt in ta tha vore tex but I hadda face down me own feers coz I knowed tha Brumby King wer up a hed an that wer tha key ta findin Isa, evin if she cudnt be foun I hadda try.

Nite passen on in ta day time gray an a gentil rain fellt. I popt tha hatch an tha cool fresh air blowed in, pusht past tha stink ov tha feed link an me crustid reekin body wiv its achin boans an tite grissle. Walkin aroundt in tha gigacity made me reelise how week Id gotten on me pins, how soft me hans was gettin evin jest frum tha short time Id been hookid in wiv Sinnerman. Tha thort waftid that I gotta keep in shape, I gotta get outta tha cab more an on me own two legs if

I wer gunna stan any sorta chance in tha end but I pusht it away coz it wer too eezee jest ta role. Best not get too far in frunna yerself ya might trip an I cudnt see as how any action wiv tha Brumby King wud be faced any diffrint ta how I wer rollin now wiv big Sinnerman at me back. Up n up in ta tha mountins we rode. Air gettin coolla all tha time, wafts ov forrist smell come thru tha hatch an tha wabble ov magged pies an tha brite cold wip ov a wipbird. Tha road sighed past tha vewscreen a hed roun long slo curves an tite deep bends wiv treegreens on boaf sides an a long drop down orf ta tha rite in ta ferny gullies an misty creek beds gurglin wiv mossy water. Trak ruttid an tuff but passible. Each new tern brung us closa ta tha lair I cud feel it comin up frum in side. We was deep in tha Warbi Rangis now, goin up slo an evin sloer down muddy hillside, mud patternin up out side on Sinners newly paintid body wat it wernt so happy that wer happinen but ther wernt no otha way. Them hills was sittin on tha senta ov all tha hi way action, they was workin in towards tha gigacity on one side an tha coasts on tha otha, then past that tha dusty backroads orf in tha westerlin. Definit sines ov brumby tweeks on tha truckin freek. Cort up in tha breff ov cold crips air I thort it wud go on an on for evva but I wer rong we come up neer a curve in tha road an ther was two trucks blockin tha way, two brumbies wat Id seen be for. Tha Left Tennat an its pal, a brumby pink an grey wrivvin wiv blak pattindt gliffs, an behindt em a bit a novver truck lurkedt.

Id gotten so use ta tha nu levvil ov inner face wiv Sinnerman that it cort me orf gard wen Sinnerman kept rollin on tho I triedt ta forse it ta stop. I didnt wanna close too erly. I straggult wiv all me will powa but I cudnt do it sum thin was up, a diffrint tone comin thru an I startid ta freek tha Brumbies ta see if I cud pickup stray chitchatter but Sinnerman werent havin it, I cudnt get no signal out

nor in. An then ther wer a new wave thru tha feed, sum kinda haze Id not felt before it hit, it given me a dirty grimy feelin an I zoned in an out. Woozy hed as tha truck roaded closer ta ware them Brumbies was stood an behint em a little bit wer that third truck wat I then knowed wer Sinnermans pardner Storm, purple an yellor paintid patternins Id seen rite back durin tha raiden on tha camp wen I losst Isa.

— Wat ya doin ta me Sinner? I sed, evin tho they was air breeved wirts wot Sinnerman cudnt unnderstan.

Sinner seemt ta heer or at lees it felt me anga in tha mix ov ovr blud an truckjooce joint ta gether thru tha eyvee. Ther wer a shudder, its last feelins ov kinship ta wards me an then it jest powert on thru, it wer as de termind ta get ta Storm as I wer ta Isa an tha site ov its losst partner so close given it a extra boost.

Time wer short we was almost up on em an it wer gettin cleerer ta me wat wer goin on, a novver wave ov that woozy haze hit me an I knowed I hadda pull tha eyvee feed outta me arm an split frum tha truckcab. Even tho me hole body was screemin for me ta stay in, I yanked that feedline. It didnt come all tha way out, it wer growed in ta me almost down ta tha boan. I cud see tha runners ware Sinners own metal parts had bin eetin in ta me flesh we was boath parta tha same sistim now. Pain bit thru tha haze. I kept pullen wiv blud slick hans an popped me harness, tore me trucksuit, pusht thru me hissinn aginny. Me linker wer hot wiv messiges firin be tween Sinner an tha brumbies an also Storm wer pipin up now an pushin forwids ta be closa ta Sinnerman. I reel eysd then why tha Left Tennat didnt finish us orf in tha backroads. It wuntid ta draw us up in ta tha mountins an then it wud offer Sinner a swap — give me ova for Storm. An wat they wuntid wiv me wernt sertin but tha brumbies knowed we was on ther

trail since Midden Dump at lees an all I cud think ov wer tha Brumby King wuntid ta take me a live an well I wernt reddy ta go a long on them terms. Sinnerman be dammed. Itd gotten wat it wuntid now, gotten closa ta Storm.

I sprung tha latch an swung tha hatch an outta tha cab wiv me tote an tha typeriter. Tha eyvee come free then I wer alone agin in me soft body an broak an rollin at tha side ov tha road as anothe two Brumbies closed orf behint an Sinnerman stopped at last an waited wiv its new brumby mates. Ther wer plenny ov messiges flyin on tha link too fast for me ta make sens an evin if I cud I dowt I wudda knowed wat them trucks was sayin ta eech otha. Sinnerman jest wantid ta be close ta Storm but tha Left Tennat screemt forwids tords ware I wer crowcht roadside. It wuntid me for sure an I wernt gunna get took. Tha otha brumby tho, I seen it in back swinin roundt ta corner Sinnerman evin as I wer ternin ta get orf tha trak an in ta tha bush ware they cudnt foller. Tha Left Tennat come at me hard as it cud but it wernt enuff I wer all reddy gorn ova tha lip. A tung ov flame shot out an singt me hind as I rollt orf in ta a damp gully it didnt do much otha than speed me away.

An as I tumblt down tha mountin crashin thru ferns an trees me thorts was bitter on how Id been sole out by me own fucken truck.

Chapter 16

Rolled down that mountin like a stoan, clutchin me typeriter an me tote.

Scrabblin thru tha scrub, me legs not workin proper, me arm a bluddy mess, hole body screemin for tha haze. Id bin parta Sinnerman for so long I wer lost in side me own self, withdrewed an sick but crashin thru tha bush as I pusht me way down tha mountin away frum them brumbies an wat ever they plans was for me. I didnt spare much ov a thort for Sinnerman wat wud be feelin tha pain ov bein a part as well, wiv no more patchfire wundermint frum me linker. I pulled tha linker outta me tote rite then an tried ta see wat else was aroun on tha mountin but tha freeks wer ded so down down down I rollt. I come ta rest besides a creek an drunked deep frum tha cool streem. I scarpered in ta a little space wiv ferns all aroun an a place for me ta lie till tha blud crustid an tha pain wore itself out a bit. I had sum roady wat I ated an sum roots dug frum tha groun an I layed ther

for a time. Now an agen I wud go ta tha streem for a drink an then lay back down. Nite time come on an passed an day lite shone an I knowed I hadda keep movin so I pullt meself ta gether an tried ta stan on me dodgy legs. They was wobbly an it wer slow goin but I kept hedin down. Ther wer a path thru tha brush an I dint like ta think on wat made it nor ware it went but I knowed I hadda stay cleer frum tha brumby lair till I cud work out wat ta do. Id mount another stand on that mountin side but I needed ta get meself rite ta do it, ween meself orf ov tha haze staggers.

I hit tha canyin floor an in me haze crazed dreemins I lookt up at tha rok walls throwed up on all sides. Creechers in tha roks they move fastern litening an then thers creechers OF roks they take one hunnerd thousind yeers ta make a thort, a millyon ta say a word an wen they speek a hole sentince, its like a crack in tha sky, its like tha erf is come up outta tha groun an ya can see tha stripes ov all its diffrint colors an patternin ov ages. Hi up in tha face ov tha wall I seen tha feechers ov a stoan man wiv a stoan face made ov big chunks ov tha canyin wall. His massy stoan hans clutcht at thik stoan boans. Weepin eys an a line for a mouf, hevvy fore hed an little eers evin. He wer fallen for eva thru time, fallen away frum his one tru love wat is up on tha otha side ov tha canyin in tha cleft behint me. I seen as how they had come a part, like me an Isas come a part, by tha corse ov time runnin thru an splittin up tha groun unnerneef. Sum kinda catty clism ov tha erf ripped em one frum a nother, two things wat use ta be one. That stoan man wer clutchin at nuffin, its taken a thousinds ov yeers ta happen but wen tha thunner come its split tha groun an tore tha stoan man frum his cold lover an wen tha sky fallt tha rain wet his face wiv tears. Campt tha nite in that place it wer eerie quiet jest tha soun ov tha riva wat run thru tha canyin an tha face ov

tha stoan man wiv his silint greef only ya cud heer tha soun ov it unnerneef. It wer one ov them wirts wat takes a millyon yeers ta speak.

All nex day I basht thru tha scrub along tha canyin floor be sides tha riva. Ther wer a trak ther, it hadnt bin used for ages ther wer no recent passens. It wer slow goin thru downt trees an thik bush but I follert tha path thinkin itd come out somewares neer a track an I cud get meself anothea ride. I wer week an hungert wen tha canyin walls opent up ta a green valley an I come ta a shed built be sides tha riva. I smasht tha pad lock ta bits wiv a rok ta see wat wer in side. There wer a stove in ther but I didnt wanna lite no fire. There wer signs that sum one used that place sum times, mebbe as a way stay shin on tha trek thru tha canyin, jars ov tomados an ungyons in viniger an peppas an punkins an zuckeenies seelt away frum tha air in tha locker an dri goods on tha shelf wat werent got at by rats an aministrals. I made me self a home, I hadda big feed an rollt out ta sleep on tha hard woodin bunk an nothin bothert me dreems it wer blak an blissfill peece for a while.

Woke up tha next day forgettin ware I wer an who I wer sposed ta be. It wer a odd feelin slowly membrin an reelisin tha past wer all gorn now, all smasht up an basht ta bits an all I got left wer this wreck age. I hadda make tha best fist ov it tho, I still burnt ta see Isa agen an knowin as how tha Brumby King put a bounty on me hed for Sinnerman got me burnt up too. Tha burnin dint pass but I needid ta fix me self rite so I laid up in tha valley, carryin water up ta tha shed frum tha riva an then wen I felt better I sum choppt woods an started havin a fire. Me arm heeled up slow. I swummed in tha riva an day by day I washt me self cleen ov tha haze an tha road. Jerked orf ta tha membries of Isa in me hed an made snares like Smoov tort an cort rabbits an trappt brite fish in tha riva.

As me strenff come back I startid wannerin furver an furver out, thru tha hills around. I nevva seen anotha soul while I wer ther. It wer so peecefil I didnt unnerstan how come ther wer no one elts aroun. Mebbe it wer cut orf by tha canyin an tha mountins all aroun. Tha lan wer bountiful but, how come ther wernt no one ther livin orf ov it? Tha only thin I cud think ov wer brumbies an tha pull they had. It wer that kinder land, ya cud feel tha presints ov strong forcis getherin wat musta cleert orf all tha camps around so I kept on me progrim an heelt me self an wandert tha vallies around tha mountin serchin for clews an sines an a way up tha mountin ta ware I wud find Isa at last.

Chapter 17

On one ov me wanderins I fount a path thru tha forrist an a openin on ta a bald toppt mountin wat had bin laid bare by giant machiens frum tha past times. Tha hilltop wer gowjed by monsta teef wat had rippt tha erf up in strips ov diffrint colors. Tho tha bush wer thick on all sides an growin back ta re claim its share ov tha lan it wer like tha groun wer poisint. Nuthin growed on them walls wat stretcht up an up in layers an steps torn in strips frum tha mountin. Guts ov tha erf vommitid up an scratcht bare by machiens tha size ov wat Id neva seen befor. Ther wer one still ther a massif bukkit cud ov held four shippin cans an its rottid metal teef eech biggern a truckcab for diggin at tha erf. Huge traks like a dozer three times tallern me. As I got close I cud see ther was no sign ov use nor movemin in them rustid an broakin parts jest tha steel frame gnawed at by flapples an ferril bigdogs but too big ta be bustid in ta peeces. It wer a awsum site

ta see sum thin so big an tha size ov tha bizniss wat them as come be for musta bin doin. An wat cud be so preshiss in tha groun? They musta bin diggin for sum kinder sekrits, sum thin wat we wud nevva unnerstan cept wiv help frum tha Wotcher if it cud be made ta make sents.

I climed in ta tha depths ov tha blastid mountin top an down innit orf ta one side ther wer a camp all ringt in wire link fents watd fallen down an ther was bildins an sheds lootid an open ta tha wether. Walkin thru tha wreck age ov all wat had gorn frum tha past times struck a sad feelin in tha silints ov that playse. All tha powa in they hans an all they done wer dug big holes inna groundt an rip tha guts outta tha wirld. It wer a big place, they musta bin minin for sum serious dada an sum deep knowin in side that place. An on top ov tha sadniss I reel eysd ther mite still be powa in tha grownd ther an if I cud get it ta tell its sekret mebbe I cud fin out sum more about wat them brumby trucks was up ta. Tha camp wer strippt bare ov tools an ennythin usefil by flapplin scavingas an trucks lookin for parts ta re pair em selfs, but I wernt lookin for use I wer lookin for ansas an a way ta find out how I cud make me final move ta get Isa outta tha clutches ov tha brumby mob. Mebbe ther we sum thin left be hindt ov no use but wat cud tell a stori ov brumby trucks an tha way thins come ta this.

Crosst thru ova tha rustid fents rattlin at me passen an I walkt in ta tha camp. Tha Warbi mountins in tha neer distince swallert up tha sky. Tha sun sankt behind an tha valley wer in shadder tho ther was still hours ov day lite left. Hulkin recks ov machiens an rustid crumblin metal given orf a nasty oily smell ov teers an chard coal mixt wiv soil. Shippin cans wiv they dors swingin on broakin hingis showed ther rottid woodin flors ta tha afta noon air. Caravans an porta bildins wiv wiltin walls an gapin winders spred they legs an let tha decay hav its

way wiv em. I hedded ta wards a shed wat seemt less broaken down than tha othas. Tha door opent wiv a groan an I come in side. Inna corner ther wer a scarblin an a shuffillin an outta tha corna ov me ey I seen a scuttlin manshape shiftin frum a beem ov sun lite in two tha darknest. Me hart beet fasta, it wer tha first youman form Id seen for days. If it wer runnin mebbe it wer more scart ov me than I wer ov it. I callt out. I wer feelin boldt or mebbe jest missin torkin wiv anovva.

— Whos ther?

Tha silints wer eeri an strange. Tha metal ov tha shed pingt as it coolt frum tha passen ov tha sun. Then a feelin took holdt ov tha back ov me nek wiv a coalt han an I backt outta ther an walkt away wiv out turnin.

Back in ta me valley shak that nite, but I cudnt get tha mine camp outta me thorts. It pullt me back tha nex day, I come in ta tha camp site an strait a way I seen a path wat musta gorn down ta tha creek. Furver down tha pathway ther was sines ov fresh passen, boot marks an broakin ferns so I follered along it wernt that ruff goin an ther wer a riot ov green all aroun rushen ta claim back tha lan frum tha minin. Workt me way roun a stoan bluff an then ther in tha forrist be sides tha creek wer tha downt body ov a massive robo wiv arms an legs. Wernt oftin ya seen a twolegged robo an more common wer bigdogs or otha kinds like flapples. This wer tha biggest robo Id ever seen but. It wer paintid yellor wiv flakes comin orf, blak stripes wer tha saftey markins was, covert in ritins now an markt wiv strange sines, tha sine ov tha lizzid, tha sine ov tha snake. Then I reelised it wernt no robo, it wer a mech for liftin in tha mines an it needt a rider ta work. I smasht thru tha vines an tha bushes ta get up close ta tha cockt pit ridin cab. Tha mech wer laid down a cross tha creek, arms spred wide,

like a fallin tree. Roun by tha arm pit ther wer a ladda ta a hatch way in ta tha riders cab.

I climed up me steps ringin holler on tha rungs an wen I got close ta tha cage ware a rider wud sit I startid. In side ther wer a bloak wiv a horses hed. I shranked back, terry fied ta see such a thin. Strait a way I wer minded ov tha profit frum tha camp wat challingdt Smoov on tha day ov tha raid. Me eysd bin laid on menny maimedt fokes but this wer sum thin else. He held hissself in tha shadders but I cud see tha skin ov his body was brown an peelin fried frum too much sun an wether an his horsy mane wer mattid in ta dreds. Big yellor teef glintid in his mouf in be tween his crakt lips an his eys gleemt britely frum eitha side ov his hed. Ears prickt up hi on his hed an he lookt at me side ta side. It wer like meetin santy claws after heerin all tha stories an decidin they wernt tru an then this bloak hauls up an tells ya its bin him all along.

He wernt supriset nor threttid ta see me it wer like he aspectid me. I wer in a daze bein in tha cab ov that machien. Smell ov fule oil an solvints an greese an synthfac haze polly mers.

He sed:

— Come tords tha endin ov thins, tha thru lines is thickenin, tha tangles is formin strait. Tha worm oorrooborras is spinnin in space an ware its hed touches its tale thers dyin an thers bein birtht at tha same time foreva an eva.

I cudnt get no meenin frum tha wirds but they raint on me ennyways.

— Mate your talkin bull shit, I sed.

He smilt, pullen his lips back ova his teef an sed:

— I know ever thin ther is ta know evin if it doan make sents ta menny. I got a big horsis hed fulla brains wat is ther for tha pickin.

He held his self back from tha lite but I cud see his wite teef in his mouf.

— Waddaya know ov tha Brumby King then? Tha mob wat is holed up on that mountin up ther.

He clackt his teef.

— Kings all ways changin, ay?

— Wot yer torkin bout? An how come ya is heer in tha dark in tha bush inna bustid robo.

— Im chasin afta tha King coz ov wat it done ter me creddy billity. Raidin an rainin pain on tha camps an all Im tryin ta do is predick tha rite time for tha saver. Thers menny caluculashins an mathemagicks ta be accountid an well tha saver dint come this time but its gunna come down soon. An Iwl tell yer its probly gunna be me in tha meen times coz Im gunna cleer tha backroads from that brumby scum. Its mechin babby trucks wiv seeds from tha Watchers lie bury, lookin for tha riginal truck form, tryin ta find a truckbody wat doan brake down, wat can heel itsself like a wound heels, like a hair wat grows onna hed. Even a bigdog robo can do that but tha brumbys cant, not yet. They doan wanna hafta de pend on youmans nor otha trucks for nuthin. They wanna mech ther own changis.

— So yore gunna go afta tha Brumby King then, all by yore horses self?

He went sly then an wudnt talk but I noatist tha greese on his hans. He seen ware me glance gorn, so he sed:

— Yair well Im fixin up this minin robo ta make tha haul up tha mountin ta tha lair so Ill hav sum thin ta use agenst tha King.

He got evin slyer then.

— Hay, ya doan wanna lend a hand, do yer? I cud use sum help. These hoofs ov mine is no gud for mechin an fixin.

— Yer a gallah, mate. I dunno nuthin about mechin an Ive got no fancy goin back up that mountin ridin in a robo wiv yer ravens ov a saver an a horsis hed on ya shulders.

— Ive got me a sekrit weepin agenst tha King. I know its weeknisses. I know all about it.

He movt a han back ther in tha darknest an palmt a linkmaker. Tha freek ov it jarred rite a way an I cud see he wer tyrin ta show me sum thin, a texfile manule nestlid in ware a rider wud keep patches for all tha pretty indie trucks. He sed:

— This manule is given me tha wurd on tha King an if we was ta road ta gether we cud share it an cook a plan. See, tha trucks was once all slaved ta tha grid mastermind wat wer loakated in a hi flyin flapple. I seen menny pitchers ov all kinds ov diffrint trucks an machiens wat wer workin in diffrint ways an styles. Sum was used for cartin erf an roks an sum was graders an diggers an sum was evin tha little boxes wat runned tha belts wat drove tha minins in ta tha otha trucks wat cartid it away. Im gessin that sum was also tha kinds ov machiens wat musta lookt thru tha dada they was diggin for, but I didnt think therd be much ov them left after all this time, or mebbe they was still lurkin in tha mastermind if I cud find it. See in this pitcher?

Thru tha link he showt me a pitcher. It wer barely reckinisible frum wat I cud see, but if in me minds ey I added up tha yeers ov dust an conflick ther wer tha shapes ov tha Brumby King. Tha wheel arches, tha snub nose an snarlin look ta tha grill.

— Smoov all ways sed ther wer...

Rite then tha sun shinedt thru a crak in tha cock pit canipy an cort on tha horses hed ey an I seen reely it wer glass. Lookin closer I cud see ther wer a line ware tha skin flap frum his hed met his body. I sed:

— Wats rong wiv yer skin ther?

He put his han up ta his froat.

— Nuthin, wat dya meen?

I put me han out ta touch him an he shiedt away furvver.

— Yer not reel.

— Im reel.

I took a step in clowser an pusht him. Tha hed come unbalanced.

— Yore jest warin a marsk.

I pusht him agen. Tha marsk sorta fell ta one side. He kwikly triedt ta set it rite.

— Ow, thats me hed.

— Its not its a marsk.

I grabbit him wiv boaf hans an shook him. He throwt up his arms ta prateck hisself but he cudnt stop tha mask frum comin orf. It took a line ov skin an hairs wiv it an floppt ta tha grimy flor like a mop hed. Ther wer a wite line ware his skin wer savedt frum tha sun, he had blak eys an thik ey brows unner neef a hed ov thik blak hair. He trite ta put tha hed back on agen but Id alreddy seen in side. It wer jest a scaredt littel bloak wiv fritent eys. It wer like all tha puff went outta him. He lost his air an felled like a kite when tha wind dropps.

— Wats tha pointa tryin ta be sum thin yer not?

— We is all warin our marskes.

— Yeh but yer tryin ta ack like sum kind ov profit.

— Doan make no diffrints ta me profitsy.

— Makes a diffrints ta how peeple see ya. Yer tryin ta be a inner face for tha Wotcher.

Smooov wer rite in a way, tha Wotcher wernt eva gunna make no inner feerants. That wernt wat it did. It jest sent down its messigis an it wer up ta tha fokes on tha grount ta terpert em as best as they cud. I didnt truck wiv this bloak who thort therd be a saver come down outta tha Wotcher ta lift us all up, or ther wernt gunna be nuthin comin down ta restart tha gigacities an banish tha trucks an make tha wirld hole agen. But one thin I wuntid an that wer that texfile manule. Me mood settlid calm an quiet. I wernt angerdt, I jest feeldt sorry for him an I shookedt me hed.

— Give it up chief. Its not gunna play enny more. Best be given tha manule ta me an scamperin back ta yer pasture an findt a mare.

— Wat, yer gunna go up ther all by yerself? No truck, nuthin? Ha.

— Yeh, Im goin. An Im gunna take that manule too.

I lent in closer ta him, anglin for his linker. He held it back.

— Lissen, if ya give me tha manule an give up on tha King rite now, Ill not tell ennyone wats unner yer marsk nor that ya been tellin porky pies. I jest wunt tha manule an I wunt ta go it alone.

I cud see tha hoap in his eys, it wer sickenin reely. Id gotten him rite ther wiv a promise that ever thin cud be made rite agen by buryin a lie.

— All rite, ya can hav a copy, he said.

It flickert in tha link an I wer awash wiv tha rush ov it, scannin tha pagis be hindt me eys as horses hed wer sat ther in frunna me gethernin up his costume.

He went on:

— But dont worry, ya wont be comin back frum tha Kings lair.

— Old mate, Ive got a better chance wiv out ya an now Ive got tha manule too, I sed.

It wer a gidddy feelin shufflin thru them diagrams ov all tha buried sekrits ov tha Brumby King frum its past. I cudnt make hide nor hair ov it but it wudnt matter I wer sure I cud come up wiv sum thin if Id gotten more time ta look thru it. Either way he wud win, if I killt tha Brumby King he wud hav his vengants an if tha Brumby King killt me therd be none left ta out his lies.

I left him ther wiv is mask an dreds an walkt back up ta tha camp thinkin on tha meenin ov his ravens evin if they wer faults profitsy. It wer all churnin in me hed like a urn. Wotcher an minin trucks an slinky snakes wat had eated ov tha poisin an be come poisin an wer showin tha way ta a link between rider an machien wivout no eyvee link. It wer like that wen I wer wiv Sinnerman, we was one part ov tha same sistim, blud mixt wiv truck chem haze.

Back in tha valley wiv me hed wheelin wiv all thes thorts an me body racked by thes feelins. It felt like it wer all comin ta gether, tha Brumby King an tha Wotcher an tha showmans. Tha Wotcher musta bin tha mastermine wat lookt after tha operatin ov it all. It musta kept all tha trucks in line an it musta knowt ever thin ta know frum all tha lernins it done an dugged up frum tha groun. It wer all ther, all in tha ark hive. I jest needed ta figger out how steelin Isa wud fit in wiv tha Brumby Kings program. Tha sun gorn down an tha fire smoakt up an tha manule burnt behint me eys wiv glowin fury as I scannt an torkt at tha

dum text wat cudnt ansa back but I wer gunna get it ta yeeld its sekrits. A plan wer formin an Id make a assult on tha mountin lair.

Chapter 18

Mor days in tha shack I ate up that manule. Flippin thru tha diagrams an puzzlin wordins frum tha past time. I startid ta think on tha beginnins ov a plan. I studied tha shapes ov tha Kings sirkits an tha patternin ov its form. It didnt make much sents, it wer like a lotta thins frum back then, itd gotten its own meenin lost an now it wer jest markins in tha file. Still if ya look at sum thin long enuff ya can start ta see tha pattins formin like wiv Smoovs notes, if thers stuff wat comes up agen an agen, shapes an pitchers, it starts ta built its own sorta thin. I thort I cud reckon eys sum things frum tha markins an how tha King lookt them times wen Id seen it an I startid ta think Id fount sum thin I cud as ploit. Fer three days me hed swummd wiv all tha inner serkits an buried sekrits ov tha Brumby Kings in sides till I seen sum thin I cud use. Tha Kings powa was fed frum a line wat

runned deep inside, but ther wer a part ware it come neer tha out side an it wernt armord up. If I cud cut tha line, tha King wud be cripplt.

Flusht wiv tha knowin I gathert me last possessins, packt up me tote an me typeriter an sum last ov tha roady for tha clime back up tha mountin tords tha lair ov tha Brumby King. Id got no truck no more. All I had was me wits. Sinnerman was gunna be up ther as well, made me feel sad an angerd, plus I was gunna hafta face down a whole Brumby mob. There was tha Left Tennat an Storm an all manner ov robos an droans slaved ta tha King. There was a mob ov about six wild indie trucks wat wud be decaled an paintid in shimmerin glyphs an smylin colors an signs frum tha Wotcher. I knowed that if tha manule failt ta show me sum thin I cud try ta rangle em wiv a custim patch if I needed ta, at leese it wud mess wiv they program. Jest gettin in ther wud be hard but I hadda do it ta save Isa an then ever thin wud be ok. We cud go roadin ta gether an she cud show an I cud rangle trucks. So it wer that I gorn up tha track ta tha mountin, step after step.

Tha slopes was steep but ther wer a track carved by little wallabies thru tha brush. Hunkert down on me knees sum times an sum times walkin tall. I swettid an skankt me way up tha hill side ova damp gullies an rocky ridges on me way up ta ware I wud findt tha lair. By tha time I come up close ta tha treeline tha lanscape was desserlit an weered an worried by fallen timbers an bent rain frum tha chemickals ov a older age wat was spat up outta tha groun. Passt a twisted tree trunk muted an barren walken thru tha ash like it wer sno. Walkt on up thru tha grey roks an stoans tords tha Brumby King. I wer scart an curious an determint at tha same time. I wuntid ta see how a reel life brumby mob wud be livin in tha side ov a mountin an wat wer goin on in side ov they lair. Wud ther be

burnin fires ov trucktires or wud it be blak as nite coz they wud use sens oars ta see in tha dark? On an on I climed up thru them strange trees in that strange time ov bustid lite.

At firs ther was no sign ov enny thin livin or ded, machien or aminimal. Then I come up on a trak wat wound up tha mountin an it wer used recent, hevvy tracks an in deed evin I cud make out tha traks ov tha Brumby King its self, wide tires bitten in ta tha groun wiv strong metal teef. I skirted out tha otha side ov tha road, I didnt wanna leeve no traks ov me own. Wunderin up an up I come ta a plain ov fresh downed trees an it wer hefty trunks an a tangle ov branches an leeves ever ware. I swettid an swettid tha cool air damp an me hart wer pumpin. Wen ya see a tree growin in tha groun, ya think wen its down its jest a matter ov steppin ova tha trunk an on ya go. But its not like that. Thers branches up hi wat wen theyre on tha groun theyre all tangild an wen thers a hole bunch ov em ta gether thers all most no way thru. It wer slo goin. Tho I wer a lot stronga since last I past this way wen Sinnerman be trayt me I wer still not in tha bess shape. I tried ta find a diffrint path aroun tha wreck age ov tha trees but it took me out across tha top ov a clift face wind howlin, whipped up by sum deemon ov tha sky. Scattert rain an clouds an ice drummin down tha mist closed in it wer all I needed. I lost tha path. Ther wer witeness be low an witeness above an witeness on tha in side ov me hed ware I tried not ta think wat lied up a hed for me.

Down be low on tha bottom ov that clift ther wer mountin shapes shiftin in tha misst. I kept movin one foot in frunna tha otha across tha top ov tha lip an perty soon I was aroun an on tha rong side ov tha mountin an lost all ta gether. Tha wind blowed an I shivvert in ta me trucksuit it wer not warm enuff for this clime. I hunkert down an ate sum roady an waitid for tha storm ta pass. Nite

come on an me mind startid ta fill. It wer tha old feers come lurchin back, Smoovs face tha face ov Crow an above it all ther wer Isa. She wer so close now, I cud almost sents her thorts an feelins. She wud be in pain an she wud be in need ov bein freed an I wunnered an I fretted on tha time we wud first layd eys on eech otha agen but I cudnt pitcher tha moment in me hed. I hadda shock, I cudnt quite member her face but I had membries ov her eys an her smiles an her hair an her smell an tha way her skin felt unner me touch that time we did it an how wet she wer ware I touched her before I slid it in. I didnt wanna sleep but I needid me wits. Ther was strange creechers frum tha dreem land groanin in tha hollers ov rok an stoan, creechers wiv harts made frum bleached bone. Tha wind sung a trucksong in me eers like tha wine ov a trance mishin like tha beetin ov a donk an I woke in tha freezin cold dark an tha stars was out shynin so brite like millyins ov points ov wite lite so cold an far an I reelised tha soun I cud heer wer a donk, a brumby donk rumblin orf in tha darkness be low. I werent as far orf beem as wat may be Id thort. I crept orf in that way lookin for wat ever signs as may be foun.

Circlin ta tha edge ov tha road I seen tha gapin mouf ov tha brumby lair an a sensor clipped sweet an not yet tripped. I didnt want them ta know I was comin so I steered cleer, wotchin out for any others as I mite come across em. It wer a long way up an tha day wer comin on. Still mountin air rung in me eers wiv a sylint hi pitch wine an that big shynin sun rose ova tha mountins in tha eesterlin. Tha lite shifted frum soft gold ta harsh yellor as it got its burn on. There werent no time ta waste on fulmigatin plans it wer cleer I cudnt rely on force ta get thru I jest hadda go on me own two feets an try for tha sneek so I steered cleer ov tha road an skirted ta tha top. I figured them brumbies was too smart ta hav not left

a scape hatch at tha back, evin if it wer only small enuff ta take a meched truckmind in a telly presints droan. So thats how I spent me nex day unner tha harsh lite so close up ta tha burnin sun, scoutin roun steerin well cleer ov any sensors I seen an lookin for a air hole or a way in.

Birds scattered all aroun an I went up an up on that loanly mountin. Agen I herd tha rumblin ov brumby donks an I skirtd ta ware I cud see an not be seen ova tha road. A line ov trucks comin up ta tha summit frum tha entrince. They was led by tha Left Tennat an I wundert wat they cud be doin up ther. Nex come Storm, Sinnermans tretcheris partner. Then ther was othas frum tha brumby mob. I red ther names in glyphs as they come on, Silverfish wiv sparklin silver paints. Gelgoogle an Bauntaun an Little Cab an Ashsmash tha last one, all ov em was decked out an workin on thru tha mainline ov tha mornin sun. Ashmash tha last wer all dect in yeller an blak stripes only tha yeller wer dirty frum yeers ov soot an tha blak pock markt wiv rust an bullit holes recent too, lined wiv silva not rustid yet. It wer a toe truck an it toed tha truckbody ov a fallen bruvva on tha surfice ov that mountin. They was sad as bandicoots on a burnt out ridge, slo an mournfill trucksong boomin out in tha still air. An perty soon tha flapples come down outta tha sky an scavengin droans come ta pick tha parts offa tha ded truck bodies carried up by Ashsmash.

Then I lookt closer an I reckinised sum ov tha panils on tha truckbody an I reel eysd one ov tha truckbodies wer Sinnerman. Theyd took wat they wantid frum me poor ol truck an left tha rest for tha flapples wat cud digest all but tha chassis. Storm wer leedin tha proceshin I seen, it warnt obviously ova joyed ta see its mate Sinnerman like that an I felt sad at that. Ther was a droanin trucksong comin frum they soun sisstims, deep long bass waves an a leekin hi

pitch keenin wailin sad wiv no beets cept for tha riddim ov sadniss. I felt that sadniss an I wer sorry that Sinnerman sole me out for nuthin in tha end. Wuda been a bit diffrint if Storm had at lees wuntid tha same thin. But as it wer, it lookt like tha brumbies is gotten they hydraulicks in ta Storm. I reckont Sinnerd tried ta lure Storm away frum tha Brumby King but Storm wernt gunna hav a bar ov it an Sinner wernt gunna budge an be come brumby neither so it wer curtains for Sinnerman.

So it wer that me solid ol truckmate wat we had roadid thru meny adventures ta gether was toed out ta be buried in tha sky ov tha mountins above tha brumby lair an as I watched ova severil hours as tha trucks movt in slo pattins an dimmt they lites an sung they sad trucksong wile a hungry bunch ov flapples hisst an crunched ova Sinners spent metal boans. Its plates an panels wat it wer once so proud ov was pickt ta bits an carried orf in ta tha sky. I spose it wer a fittin end in tha end an I wunnert wat Storm wunted wiv it, it stayed longern tha others maybe it wer membrin times past an wunnerin if thins coulda bin diffrint. It startid hummin a sad lonly groove wat I thort a bit strange since it had cleerly playt a part in Sinners problims wiv tha brumby mob. Oh well nevermind I wotched too wiv a hevvy hart.

There wer a russellin ov wings an fevvers an they was blak wings an for a seckind I thort ov Crow an tha ark arkin voice come ta call me ta a novver place, come ta sing me hans ta differint actions ta wat tha part in side me ey holes wantid ta see. But a randim freek thru tha link squawked in me hed an me boans an I reelised it was one ov tha flapplin droans. I turnt ta see it hoppin tords me its beedy eys an vishiss beek glintin wiv metal shavins an shards. I backt away Id neva herd ov a flapple goin after flesh before but I dint wanna risk it but then I

latched on ta tha figger ov tha randim freek it wer Sinnermans tag file sig. I lined up a hit ov skull deth for it an that flapple come eesy an quiet as a lamb. Sum how Sinners truckmind, or a parta ov it ennyway, bin meched into tha flapple an I wer growed by tha thort that now may be I wud stan a chance ov gettin in side tha lair by me self. I cud rig a fix in tha camera ey holes ov tha flapple or I cud send it down as a dee coy while I clime in frum a bove. It wer a risk but I wer so close I mays well die as try so I riskt it. Firs up I needit ta fin a novver way in be sides tha main gait so I patched thru tha droans eys an rigged its vision for infrared so I cud see ware tha exhorst was comin frum on tha top ov tha mountin an ya know that droan wer not Sinnerman but it had parts ov Sinners same smarts an it wer cleer it wer gypped by tha brumbies wat welched on they deel or maybe it wer that Storm dint wanna go wiv Sinner an Sinner dint wanna stay slaved ta tha Brumby King so it tried ta make a run for it but it werent happenin. It wer cort an slaved anyway an then cannabill eysed an throwed ta tha sky an so now it wer up in tha sky ware I sent it an it sawed hi up in tha currints ov tha air an tha traffick flows ov heetid air staks rising frum tha valley be low. Pretty soon I had me fix on that exhorst vent an it wernt too far away neither so nex I climbt ova ta it an I sent tha flapple down ta tha entrince, reddy ta trip sum sensors as I climed down tha funnel in ta tha darkness ov tha lair.

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Down that channel I went in ta tha hart ov tha Brumby Kings wirl. In ta tha hart ov wat wud take me closer ta Isa. Tha floor wer covert in soot an ash an in tha dark I felt me way down tha narrer passigeway thinkin ov them creechers wat lived in tha roks an stoans wat come outta tha cracks in tha nite they is so skinny but they move as one wiv tha wirl an so I moved closer an closer down lissenin

wiv me hole body as I went. Dark wings patternin tha darkness wiv they russellin souns. Thins movin far orf down in ta tha dark, creepy crallin thins but then I reelised ther I wer a creepy crallin thin all ov me own self an so I restid eesy a bit then. I wer one wiv tha darkness, I wer movin as one wiv tha motions ov tha wirl. Theres nothin ta feer, thers nobody home as cept meself I thort an down I creept, down down tords tha senter ov thins, tords tha sekrit senter ware all questins wud be answert. There wer more movemint down a hed, a scurryin scuttlin soun an tha spark ov a match flares Crows face as he lites a durry an I seen he wer yung as, same as me. We was gettin moren more alike tha closa we got ta gether.

— Fancy seein ya down here, I sez.

— Ha ha. Doan mind me, I is jest some old bloke whos been follerin ya aroun. Or maybe its yer own self whos been follerin ME all this time, waitin for tha chance ta come up on me like this.

— I aint follerin yew. Yore like me fucken shadow, I cant shake ya.

— I alreddy tole ya, we is rollin on tha same road. Whos ta say wat side ov tha face casts tha shadow?

— I say it. Im not like yew.

— Thats as may be, but why dont ya try this coat an see how it fits.

— Im not puttin that fillfy thin on. I aint no crow. Be sides yer nuthin, thers nuthin ta ya.

— Well if thers nuthin ta me then wats this coat hangin on then?

He took orf tha coat. Unnerneef, he wer jest a skinny bloak in dirty rags.

— Take it, he sed.

I wer confused ta see him like that, I cudnt reelly speek.

— Haha we is one an tha same, boy. You is jest like me. We is bin tied together on tha roadin an we is gunna road some more yet, he sed.

I lookt down an I seen I all reddy wor tha coat.

— Nah, mate. I doan wanna a bar ov it. Yer nuthin, yer jest in me imaginins, makin up suggestings for me. I know yew.

He wer rite ther in frunna me, tha creesis on his face gorn smoov now an then tha nex minim ther wernt nuthin ther at all. An wen I sed it I had tha unnerstandin. It wer me wat wor tha coat all along. I cud still here tha voice in me hed:

— Well I see ya got me number all rite I guess Ill jest go quietly.

— Nah, Crow its not gunna be like that. I know ya an I know yer tricks yer not a quiet one at all but I call yer out now. Im cawin yer.

I made a dry rattlin coff in me froat an cawd him out. I knowed Crow, he wer me, he wer tha thin down frum tha in side wat moved me han wen I stood back an watched or wer too scart ta act. If I wer eva gunna be free frum him I hadda start bein smart enuff ta see tha connex be tween thins so Crow didnt hav ta put em ta gether for me frum wat I all reddy knowed but wer too dum ta see tha truf.

— Yer got no holdt on me know more. Yuv tort me a thin or two now Crow, yer cawin wer a way for me ta do tha thins I needed ta do ta as cape tha life I had wiv Smoov an his smoverin ov hurt.

Ther wernt no reply. Puttin it out in ta wirds tha knowin ov Crow suckt his cawin voyse outta me hed like poisin frum a wund. Becuz I knowed Crow all rite, it wer jest tha same as a creecher in tha rok, it wer nothin, it wer dreemsmoak an haze dust so I pullt that trucktire coat closer round me shoulders an I kept on

goin down. I werent afeert ov Crow no more an mebbe he evin left me sum ov his powers.

Chapter 19

In ta tha lair ov tha Brumby King I creeped. Down an down an down in ta tha bluddy hart ov thins, sittin in ta tha chamber like a bullit in tha breech. I reckoned facin it in side, in a small space, wud do a way wiv its powa, it wud equal eys us. Passige opent out ta a bigger chamber. Ther was arc lites set up aroun tha place, smell ov fule an solvints an greese an a funky mechanic organics waftin thru it all, rottid meets an mud. I found me way aroun tha edges, sneeked like a shadder in me trucktire coat thru tha wreck ages ov bits ov ded trucks an tha bodies ov spent droans an robos an tha blud an tha muck ov slawtered aminals watd bin pillaged for they bits as well.

A tangly nest ov wires russelled in tha half lite an it wer like a dreem ware ya look down at tha groun an firs ya seen one snake but then tha hole place is crallin wiv em an ya gotta make yer way around em. Slinky snakes, all coiled

around each over an rithin ta gether in a matin pile. Ther wer snake eggs an snakeshit wite an glowin in tha edges ov tha mangld an tangls. Ther wer snakes ever ware, all eetin up tha left overs an eetin tha greese an bits ov scavengid parts an robos, a dry russellin soun like fencin wires raspin ta gether in a coil.

Then in tha chamber I seen tha brumby six, plus tha one Left Tennat. Storm wer ther, also Silverfish wiv sparklin silver paints. Gelgoogle an Bauntaun an Little Cab. Ashsmash tha last one, up on a hoist while a robo whined aroun an meched a fix. Piles ov parts stackt in tha corners. Jenny pumpin out a throb, tha whole place hummin wiv powa an movement squirmin in tha sides of me eys. I seen a show beemed up on a screen, it wer one ov tha Watchers truck shows. I reckonised bits ov it but Id not seen this part before. I stood an watcht for a minim it wer a fine show, an them trucks was en transed. On tha screen a line ov wild indies was makin a move up against tha transcop thugs an smoakies. It wer about bein saved frum slavry an I foun it funny coz them in tha Kings mob was not asactly free an eesy ta do they own thin. They was slaved ta tha Brumby King, that wer its hole point but maybe they didnt care too much about tha story an they jest liked lookin at pitchers ov trucks. They was all watchin tha show like a camp mob wud, gathert aroun tha screen. Up on tha screen tha big rigs was blowin they airhorns an rippin up tha hi ways while smaller veerkills spunned aroun em, I figgered they must be droans tryin ta get at tha loads.

I beemt a missige ta that Sinnerflapple up on tha outside. It squawkt thru tha link, last bits ov Sinnerman chomped up by tha flapple was wuntin its revenge for tha double-cross evin tho it parbly knowt it war gunna be tore ta peeces in tha end wen tha brumbies foun it. Tha brumbies tweeked ta tha trance mishin but they cudnt tell tha freek wer it come frum nor that I wer so neer. They

jest knowed sum thin was up an then tha flapple trippt up a senser. Ashsmash come down hard orf tha hoist an they all rolled outta ther. Tha soun ov they enjinns was deffenin an tha dust an fumes frum they exhorsed fillt tha air an filterd tha lites in ta a dim yellor glo. Sinnerflapple wud diss tract em all for a bit an I waited. Tha mimins passed slow. I wer waitin for me chance ta close. All I wunted was ta run frum ther, but I knowed that Isa wer on tha otha side ov it. An then in tha darknest I herd a rumblin an at tha back ov tha chamber come a deep note soun wat shook me hole body.

Out frum tha darknest ov tha chamber rolled tha Brumby King. Id neva been so close. Now I wer neer I cud see it wer cuvverd in scratchis an stains an dust. It warnt shynin an brite like tha otha indies, so proud ov they paintid truckskin markins an incrypt shuns. Tha Kings patternins was its scars an it wore em like badges. Tha chippt paint an oily stains an greese marks ware tha dirt gunked up in be tween tha panels. Weld marks like ropey scars frum a chest wound, mud an grass caked up unner tha wheel archis, paint wore down ta steel ware tha riders come an gorn ova yeers an yeers. Gowges an dints an buckled body work frum rammin an fuckin. Ova tha hood tha blak vu screen emty as nite, flat an dark, no lite reflexed in them eys thers no tellin wat was goin on inside or behint that program. Me hart quivert ta see it so close an nasty hummin wiv its brutal powa shakin tha groun as it gunned its enjinn an movt forwids frum tha stall. Me in stinks sed keep far far away but I knowed I had tha best chances if I stuck reel close ta it.

Id gotten tha image ov that fule line frum tha manule shinin brite in side me hed, a trance mishin wiv tha pattern ov drawins on tha page makin they shapes form in me minds ey. I zoned in on tha armored platin an foun tha spot. It wer

behint tha cab, neer ware tha traila wud join. Hunkert low I shufflt in ta wards tha Brumby King. I rolled an crosst as tha King seen me an moved forwids, exhorst valves flarin wide in anger. Feer in me froat, ever muscle achin an strainin, ever fiber in me hed screemin turn an run turn an run, but I stood me groun an faced down tha Brumby King as it come tords me in tha small space ov its garrige.

Its grill was silver grinnin thru tha dust an dings an bullit holes, a nasty mouf wiv bustid teef filed ta sharp edges. Hedlites wite inside they grey speckt housins an then I seen tha hood ornamint for tha firs time: it war a wild stallyion up on its hind legs. I slid in unnerneef, ther wer plenny ov cleerants cept neer tha diff, it wer built for workin tha mines. Neer tha inner section ov tha steerage I seen tha line an if I cud dis loge that I cud disarm tha King, but that thin was gummed up an jammt tite wiv tha muck ov agis an I curst me foolishniss for thinkin it wud be eesy like in tha buk. Tha King kept movin forwids an I wer dragged along unnerneef, I turnt me hed ta see ware it wer goin. Ther wer a nest ov slinky snakes it wunted ta drag me thru em. Me trucksuit tore an I wer scraped by tha ruff groun. Rollin forwids tords tha snakes. I slunk me han in down by me side ta feel for me link maker. Maybe I cud as slot a patch an try ta rangle tha King.

Wat kinda patch wud work on such a creecher tho? I ganked thru me files wiv me thum, hangin on wiv one han ta tha unnerside ov tha King as it pickt up speed, movin tords tha snakes. A bolt on tha groun banged in ta me sholder it hurt like hell. I almost let go ov me linker but tha patternins ov me patchfiles was scrollin fast behint me eys. A snake sliverd up roun me leg. I slottid tha patch home an stuck me linker back in me tote while I tried ta shake orf tha snake an Id

see wat wud happen ta tha King wen it chompt down on that patch ov toxik shok wat I saved for tha direst emergencies, wat cud cripple a truck reel fast in a jam. Tha King warnt no ordinary truck tho, an it swervt as a shivva shook thru it but it still kept on goin an we was almost at tha snakes wen I let go an went spinnin in ta a wall.

Basht an batters an feelin pufft wiv me nervs keenin like wind in tha wires an tha blud poundin in me hed. I lied ther a second while I saw tha King come spinnin around fixin ta ram me against tha wall. Tha snake wat wer on me had gorn, shooked orf in tha fall, but I cud feel ware itd bitted me. Skin stiffenin up unner tha poisin. King startin ta slow now, meybbe tha patch was startin ta take hold. Pain washt away wiv all me feer, but still tha King kept comin an I knowed Id hafta try one more thin if I wer eva gunna see Isa agen in this life. Snakes russellin an movin an all manner ov twistid metal creechers shufflin aroun in tha dark down ther but tha only thin wat I cud see was tha King, ferroshiss an feersum. Smoak staks belchin enjinn gunnin howlin in tha echo ov tha chamber. It come at me an rammed at tha wall an I spun away ta me rite as bitsa rok an chips ov stoan raint down on me. Tha Kings geer box glunked as it foun reverse, a soun like boan poppin out ov a joint. It backked outta tha wall, rumblin away agen, its serch lites swingin all ways swingin my way lookin for me.

Then ther wer tha Left Tennant appeert in tha openin, bitsa Sinnerflapple smasht up in its grill. Itd bin recallt by its master an wer comin back in side ta see wat it cud do. Tha other brumbies was no ware ta be seen, out serchin ta see if ther was mor threts on that mountin side no dout. But now in side I wer facin two trucks in sted ov one. I hadda roll outta ther lickety split but tha main entrince wer blocked by tha Left Tennat an tha Brumby King wer between me an

tha funnel I come in down. Tha Left Tennat shot out a grapplin arm on a flexi cable wat snaked out thru tha snakes an grapplt around on tha ground nexta me. I kickt at it an it twistid aroun me ankle. I felt a spark as it toucht on tha skin roun tha snake bite, currint runnin thru me body an a flash ov truckmind sickenin yaw in me hed it musta bin a raw connect strait in ta tha Left Tennats truckmind an it warnt a pretty thin ta feel. I wer dragged in ta tha Left Tennat then, as it drew back on its grapple. I squirmt aroun but ther wernt no way out it wer jest me an tha grill ov tha wild brumby truck. I went in for a rangle, usin me fadin strenth ta flip me linker on tha rite freek but it clattert outta me han, tha smooov steel surfiss slidin away in ta tha darknest ta be infestid by snakes an otha creechers. No doubt that wer tha end ov me truck ridin daze but all I cud think ov was gettin ta Isa. She was in tha cab ov tha King for sure I felt it in me boans an plus ther wernt no ware els for her ta be in tha lair, wiv all tha brumbies gorn that wer cleer enuff.

I felt naked wiv out me linker tho ther wernt nothin I cud do an a strange feelin come on up thru me leg frum that flash ov truckmind like a new channel had opent up in me ed once I got snakebit an as I wer gunna get chomped any way unner tha steel weels ov tha Left Tennat. I sent out a randim freek jest usin me thorts, as tho I wer innerfacedt wiv tha link an it didnt seem ta make any differints that I wernt in side tha truckmind, a wide freek opent up in side ov me be tween tha flash frum tha Wotcher tha previous day an tha spark frum tha bite. I wer inner facin direct wiv tha Left Tennant an I rode it evin frum out ther on tha groun. I let go tha grapple an felt full control ov tha big truck. I wernt no soft body rider no more, I wer one wiv tha Left Tennant. I moved in ta close on tha Brumby King wat suddenly reelised I wer in control ov its own prize brumby.

Tha King squeeled an come on in ta run me down, tangled as I wer still in side tha cable an it wudve got ta me, too, be fore tha Left Tennant cud reech it, cept I focust me mind ta join wiv tha Left Tennat an throw its rammin bar rite at ta tha hart ov tha Brumby King. Tha Left Tennat crasht in ta tha King wiv a sickenin raw. Tha King howlt for traction an pusht back but it cudnt get orf that spike. I joint evin hard an pusht at tha Left Tennats mind ta go furver. Me eys turnt ever thin red, me hed seemt ta swell twice as big an shrink dense as a pinhed at tha same time. Screemin geers strippt metal flesh deep in tha Kings in sides an tha groun ternt blak ware its fluids runned out in ta tha dust.

Weels spinnin an then fallin silint in tha lair I cud all most heer tha dust fallen in tha rusty russellin ov tha slinky snakes in they matin pile. Left Tennat lokt ta gether wiv its King ta tha last momint. Twistid metal an leekin fluids. Smell so harsh an hi in tha close space. Wiv out tha Kings slave wire, nor me own link, tha Left Tennat itself wer dum an still. Tha otha brumbies outside musta bin tha same. It wer brane damigt an ded weight ware itd bin so strong jest a minim be for. On tha end ov its spike tha King lay dyin, all its inner sides leekin out on ta tha ground. Tha King made a effort ta move but it wer pinned. Wiv a groan it stoppt an wer still. All that powa an tech come ta this at tha end, a roon ov bucklt plates crusht unner neef its own Left Tennat. It made a small whirrin soun all most like its last breff an then I knowed it wer ova an releef washt thru me systim like truckdreem. It lookt like tha King was cactus.

I startid ta move tords tha Kings leekin body, carefil but also keen coz I still reckoned Id find Isa reel soon. Tha Left Tennat wer finisht for sur, ther wernt no sines ov life frum tha outside. Its hed wer blown like a gasket. I reeched out an toucht its plates still warm but ther wernt nothin goin on in ther. It wer still a

awesum site bein so close ta tha wild brumbies like that, me blud wer yammerin wiv it, all most a better trip than haze. Feelin moren more plucky I got up on tha Left Tennats weel arch ta hav a betta look at tha damage Id dun ta tha King. Thin wisp ov grey smoak waftid up frum in side tha Left Tennats cabs an ther wer a drip drip drip ov hydraw licks hittin tha groun. Tha Kings vu screen wer blak as eva, blak as a burnt out tree stump, no sine ov anythin goin on behint. It wer pinnt ta tha cave wall on its side, its armer gowged an crumplt, metal shiny an cleen ware itd bin sheerd an dirty an rustid ova older wounds. I jumpt down ta tha grount ta get closer but jest then ther wer a creekin growlin soun an a wailin ov sheered metal. In tha gloam tha King movt agen, a growin shape wer formin unner neeth it an I jumpt back as it seemt a swell up an push orf tha Left Tennat. I didnt see wat happent nex coz I wer busy gettin me self outta tha way but wen I turnt I seen tha Left Tennat bin rollt ta one side an tha King had sprung out two monstruss hairy legs frum unnerneef its chassis. Shakin like a newborn foal itd climt ta its feet, tha truckcab nestlt up above tha weel housins ware tha two backwids jointed legs sprung an swayt like a chook. Tha King reert up its hed an let out a terry fyin roar frum its rustid froat. It stompt closer ta me, an then I felt tha colt rush ov its sensa sweep as it scant me wiv its red ey. Fluids was runnin down them massive fleshstretcht robo legs. It wer weeknt but still comin on. It staggert ta one side. I seen its thick an yellor toe nails an it struck me strange.

It wer odd but it given me a thrill evin tho I wer thretted wiv deth, an that monsta towert abuv me. A truck, totterin on legs ov smooov flesh tho tha joints was facin back an tha toes was splayed. I wer seein sum thin watd neva bin be for nor probly wudnt come agen afta, an at last I unner stud wat them trucks was tryin ta get frum ther wunderins ov tha Wotcher: it wer like tha horses hed sed,

they wantid ta be done wiv parts an pillagin an ta go wiv sisstems wat cud heel em selfs. They wuntid tha seed ov tha original truck form frum tha Watchers lie bury an combint wiv tha powa ov flesh frum hi breds. I scampert backwids wiv me back agenst tha wall. Me last line ov de fents as a foot come down an stompt me. I rollt orf ta one side. A thunderin jolt jarrrt me brane in side me skull.

Tha King wer still teeterin abuv me but it wer angert an bustin ta stomp me hed in. It wound up for annuvva go. I wer stunn't, but a blu lite frum tha slinky snake poisin sparklt thru me blud ta me hed an I reecht up in tha air ware a linkmaker wud go evin tho I dint hav no linkmaker no more. Feelin thru fleshmade link wave for tha Kings truckmind evin as it set agen ta crush me. A push thru tha wavvy freeks an tha Kings firewall an I foundt wat I wer lookin for. Tho ther wer a otha rider in ther, I wer fresh bit frum that snake an wiv a massiv force I stormt tha King thru tha link, tryin ta slot home a mindflesh patch wat wud stall tha on slawt.

Me fleshy patch slottid home in ta tha Kings truckmind. Ther wer a shudder thru them fleshy legs. Tha rustid an bustid truckbody seemt too hevvy for em ta holdt an it tottert ova ta one side then fell at tha ground wiv a crash. Tha noise wer shockin. Slinky snakes skittlt outta tha way ov tha blast ov dust an chemikl smoak leekin frum tha truck cab. Tha body wer seizt by me patch, tha truckmind come unstuck between tha two wunds ov tha Left Tennats spike an tha sudden crash ta tha groun. Tha King lay ther legs twitchin. They was smooov an hairless but ther was hairs growin on tha toes an a sorta down up neer tha top ov em. I cudnt help me self I toucht em an they was warmbody. Stoppt ta catch me breff, ever thin catchin up ta me. Me hart thumpin like a trucks donk be for it shifts geers. Tha smell ov oil an greese an tha close trappins ov brumby trucks an tha

rancid pong ov ded aministrals. Tha droans wat once was slaved ta tha Kings thrall was goin skitter scatter ever ware. Ther wernt nuthin for em up ther no more in tha lootid wirld ov a ded King. I let em go, I wernt inner restid in slavin nor wranglin no more truck minds all I cud think ov was seein Isa. Tha lair disappeert in me eys an eers, all ther wer left for me now wer gettin in ta tha cab. I climt up ova them legs wiv ther down an ther opin pores an I fount a way up on ta tha runnin bord dintid an dingt frum so menne truckbattles. Made it ta tha riders hatch an tried it but it wer jammt tite.

I tuk up a metal bar frum tha reckige an pried it open. It come wiv a creek an a groanin ov steel. Inside tha mirra pickt out a reekt angle ov lite on Isas face, her eys met mine.

Chapter 20

Her face wer holler, cheeks sunk. Tha scale on her arm frum tha slinky snake bite had growed ova tha place ware tha eyvee drip wer fed. It smelt reel bad in ther, like shit an piss an rottid flesh an unnerneef all that wer a smell ov new life like dirt an erf wen a thunner storm has past. Tha cab wer dark now tha King wer ded. It wer tha first time Id seen in side a brumby truckcab, it wernt nuthin speshal, jest tha riders cage an tha vu screen. She lookt at me wiv her eys brused an hurt, her pain washin ova me too as I reecht in ta undo tha harness. But ther werent no clip. Tha harness wer growed in ta her chest I seen then, her legs was wasted in ta tha fabrick ov tha couch. Ther wer no cleer line ta ware Isa stoppt an tha Brumby King begun. I put me arms aroun her sholders, hisspered soothin wirts evin as tha stink war almost too much ta bare but that otha smell got ta me sum how it wer tha smell ov hope an life in all its meny forms an particulars.

I kissed her mouf but she turnt her hed away. She cudnt speek, ther wer jest trucksound in her mouf, chesty gurgles or froaty whinin. Her eys was rollt back in her hed.

I strokt her hair, trite ta comfit her.

— Ther ther, I sed.

She gurglt sum more an then thru tha noyse I herd:

— Doan touch me, she sed. Her eys snappt opin an they was burnin.

I backt orf.

— Its gunna be all rite, I sed.

More gurbmlin, then she hisspert:

— I doan wan yer help.

— But yore damiged. Im gunna mech ya outta here an Iwll findt sum one ta help. Thers a doctor in tha midden dump.

She coffed, then foundt her voyce.

— Im not innerestid in no doctrin, she sed.

— We can road ta gether, start our own show like we all ways sed.

— Im not goin enny ware, leese ov all wiv yew.

— I doan unnerstand. Ive come ta reckscue ya. I can fix ya up anotha rig, mech a new truck body.

— I dunt need no reckscuin. I roadid wiv tha King ov me own free choyce.

That didnt make no sents

— I bin roadin afta ya since tha raid.

— I know, I bin lurin yer forwids.

— Yeh, nah, thats not wat happent. I bin tryin ta findt ya.

— I knowed ware I was all tha time. I wernt lost.

— You was lurin me forwids?

— Ya still had Smoovs notes wat I needed for tha codes. I needed them transe crypts. Thats why I stoppt tha King frum killen yer an yer truck back on tha plane. Or didya think it wer jest yer lucky day?

— But I know how ya reelly felt about me. It wer jest Smoov an tha show wat was holden yer back.

— I neva wuntid nuffin cept ta lern tha sekrits ov that Wotcher so as I cud get tha knowin an restart tha gigacities. Once them seeds was sowed frum tha Wotchers ark hives tha backroads camps cud be led back in ta tha gigacities agen.

She sed it an she turnt her hed further aroun. Me froat jammed up like a rustid type riter. In me hed I seen faces in tha clouds an shapes ov shadders ova tha mountins. Tha in side ov tha cab wer close an rank. Outside I cud heer tha last twitchins ov tha brumby mob, slaved droans an telly presints robos wat wer shuttin down now wiv out ther king. Me mind wer emty but it wer tryin ta catch up wiv wat Isa wer tellin me.

— In sted Ive foun tha sekrits ov tha Brumby King, she sed. Sekrits frum tha slinky snake bite an be comin one wiv a machien like how them bigdog robos is turnin ta eetin carryon. Its tha same, tha synthfac wat makes tha haze makes tha inner face an two thins be come one. No longer sepert parts, but tha same thin.

I reeleyed then she wernt evin lookin at me. She wer all ways be longed ta sum ware else an now sum deep part ov her hart wer pared ta tha Brumby King. Wen I runndt thru tha Brumby King wiv tha Left Tennat, I killt her too. She cudnt live out side. She wer too far gorn an dyin rite in frunna me eys.

— It doan hafta be like that, I sed. It cud be diffrint. Ya cud make a diffrint choice

— Thers no diffrints. Ya cant make sum thin happen jest by wantin it so. Thers only tha way it is.

Ther wernt no moven forwids or backwids. She wer stuck in tha Brumby King like she wer frozin in ice, like Isa, her name. Stuck on a ideer ov how thins cud be an reely ther wernt no Wotcher wat cud make a diffrints, not in this wirld ennyway. Ther wernt nuthin gunna seed tha gigacities, nuthin frum tha past times. They was gorn now, blown away like ashes frum a campfire. She wernt able ta see ther cud be a diffrint way, that we cud form a nu wirld wat didnt hafta be parta tha past. Me hart wer made frum jaggid edgis ov broakin concrete. I knowed then Id hav ta leeve her ther. She wernt gunna moov.

— If thats tha way it is then ya gotta be wat yer gunna be.

— Thers nuthin ya can do. Thers nuthin enny one can do. This is jest how its ment ta be.

— Im sorry, I sed. Im sorry.

Teers pricklt me eys. Everthin come orf tha rails. Everythin wer grindin down. I kist her goodbye. It wer her broakin voyse wat dunnit for me. Tha teers come, rollin down me cheeks. Ther wernt nuthin more ta say, I left her ther in tha wreck age. Cryin as I walkt away, cryin for me own foolishniss as well. Lookin up at tha tiny point ov lite at tha endin ov tha tunnill I seen meself for wat I reely wer, a scarvingin crow roadin by me own selfish needs an tha lies I toldt ta me self. I cursed me self for not bein able ta do ennythin, I cursed Isa for her stubbin ways an Smoov for his cruelty an tha King for its own ways. Me eys burnt wiv teers ov shame an tha anger ov losin it all like Id lost me mar that day by tha road

side, me own needs pullen her down. Me life wer jest leevin behind tha blue bodies ov any thin I ever loved an I wer be come tha crow now. Tha knowin ov it settled an sickint me an I turnt frum that place an walkt back up outta tha lair. Me hed burnt brite wiv anguish an desolation an I cud see meself agenst tha backgroun ov tha stars, I wernt nuthin but a broakin man starin in ta tha gapin fucher yawnin open in frunna me. A small man drove ova tha brink by small needs an small stinkin thinkin.

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I pullt that trucktire coat tite roun me neck an hedded orf in ta tha darkness wiv me typeriter strappt ta me back. Tha Wotcher wernt no sekret. It wer nothin but a lie bury it self, a twistid lie bury spewin out non sents ravins an bad dada. Ther wernt no ark hive, no hisstry, no sekrits. If Smoov an Isa cudnt find em no one cud. None wat we cud crack frum down her ennyway. Jest a buncha lies. Or a pattin ov menny diffrint trufs so strange they mays well be lies. If Isa cuda foundt tha key ta such a thin, it wudnt ov helped none. Tha passed wer like guide posts on tha hi way, reseedin in tha reer vu, gorn like dust stirrt up by tha presint momints passen but soon ta settle. It cudnt neva be brung back. Didnt do no good ta look back, ya hadda look forwids an try ta make sents ov tha wirld as best ya cud wiv wat wer in frunna ya hans.

Out on tha coldt lonely mountinside. Past tha bodies ov tha unslaved brumbies, dum an mindless on tha slopes now ther king wer ded. Down thru tha trees an tha scrub in ta tha backroads agen. I come ta a cross roads an sat ta wait for me nex ride. I startid up a fire an burnt Smoovs notes be sides tha road, watchin tha embers spark lines ov lite an tha ash drift liter than air. I took orf tha trucktire coat an I wer gunna burn that as wel but it wer coldt in tha mornin lite

an mebbe I wud need it for warmth. Ther wernt nuthin left for me ta do but peck at tha bodies ov Smoov an Isa in me membries so I took out me typeriter ta peck at tha keys.

END