

+ Highway Cowboys +

The roar of the arena awaited him. Sunny strained to hear the cheering crowd amidst the revving of engines. Occasional gunfire quickened his pulse as he waited in his vehicle. Young and with an innocent gleam to his features, the rookie looked like an unlikely demolition derby driver. But seven victories in matches all across the southern United States proved that looks can be deceiving.

Agitated mechanics and backstage spectators edged around his car. The air vibrated with excitement and expectation as he waited for the ramp light to glow green. Many drivers confessed that waiting solemnly in their seat was the tensest part.

Grinning away the thought, the cocky youth tapped out a half remembered tune on the steering wheel. Instead of worrying about his upcoming conquest, the rookie reminisced about another victory from the previous night. She had been a blond, eager fan that Sunny was more than happy to "show around the garage". His mind drifted through the gutter as he imagined more followers throwing themselves at his podium.

The buzzing electronic voice overhead rudely shook him from the indulgent day dreams.

"Sunny Miller on-ramp in five minutes. Final weapon check in two." He sighed at the return to reality. Restoring his grin the rookie waved over his loyal pit mechanic Ned.

"Well, I guess you can run another check on the guns," Sunny said, shrugging and not the least bit worried about technical difficulties. In fact he hadn't worried about much since his first two Division 5 victories.

Named for the limit of \$5,000 a vehicle, such matches ended quickly in fiery explosions and overjoyed locals. Under armored, under gunned, and under powered death traps were the cake and biscuits of such matches.

The battles had provided him with an easy entry into the arena circuit. Drawing inexperienced drivers from each small town, Div 5 matches were normally a big seller for the sheer amount of carnage involved. Sunny was happy to be past that stage in his budding career and already well on his way to Division 20.

Short and stocky and clad in overalls, Ned nodded at the request. "I wish I could have talked you out of this configuration. You know that relying on ramming is a-

The driver tuned the lecture out, having heard it before the past four matches. Pleasing the crowd and sponsors was part of Sunny's goal each night, and unique armaments and tactics helped achieve that. Besides, Ned was a good mechanic, but Sunny was a good driver. Ned didn't have a racer's reflexes or a gunner's aim, and all of his advice wasn't founded on experience.

Idly Sunny watched the man expertly run his fingers over the three weapons on the vehicle. A large bore machine gun dominated the lower half of the front hood. The rear of the vehicle sported two jutting rockets, painted in a checkered pattern of blue and white. Cleverly linked and bound to a sensitive bumper trigger, the projectiles would fire as soon as the back collided with a solid object.

Sunny tried to visualize the upcoming match. He wasn't certain of who he would face until they both drove out from opposite sides. Checking the gauges on his dashboard, he was at least certain of his car. Intimate knowledge of the limits and short comings of a vehicle could mean the difference between walking or being carried off the track.

Best known for a gaudy yellow paint job, custom of course, the Sunspot IV was a maneuverable sedan. Thick sheets of advanced plastics armored every side of the vehicle. The large engine and thick puncture resistant tires had sped Sunny around all different types of

tracks. Tonight he'd have the pleasure of battling in Yuma, Arizona.

Sunny planned to chip away at his opponent with distant machine gun fire. Hopefully he could avoid any severe retaliation thanks to a sharp turn now and then. He figured once the armor was penetrated on a side he'd swing the Sunspot around and speed backwards into the exposed victim. A high speed collision coupled with automatic rocket fire should put an end to the festivities. The roar of the crowd reminded him that daring, dangerous skids were cheered more than slow cunning.

Ned successfully finished his checks. Cleaning his hands on a stained rag he herded the wide eyed crowd away from the vehicle. The start of the match was a minute away, and it was time for Sunny to focus.

The ramp light switched to a solid blue, prompting Sunny to flick various switches to activate his weapons. Without hesitation he cranked the ignition and redlined the engine immediately, much to the surprise and joy of everyone in the pit. With a barely audible click the light switched to flashing yellow. Sunny breathed deeply, put the car in gear, and smiled his self assured smile.

The signal pulsed yellow, yellow, yellow, and finally green.

His car snapped off the line and he clattered up the metal ramp. Blinking at the burning desert sun he emerged into the Yuma arena.

As far back as the year 2028 it had been an international airport, but when the auto-dueling craze swept the nation the town was quick to re-purpose the tarmac. Old, heavily glassed viewports were converted into grandstands and staff offices became tacky gift shops. The airplane hangars were transformed into bustling garages. Asphalt was poured and leveled between each runway while thick barriers were installed to form a circular arena.

Driving from the south gate Sunny quickly scanned the area. To add excitement and strategy a variety of obstacles and mobile buildings were shifted before each match. A series of crossed metal beams ran down the left of the arena in a vaguely straight line. Five concrete blocks had been randomly spaced near the edges of the arena. The center was dominated by a large building bristling with TV cameras. Slightly south of that was a smaller, weaker wooden structure painted with a mural of horses. A set of crowd pleasing ramps were on either side of the building like a pair of bookends.

Spurring his vehicle to seventy miles an hour Sunny directed his senses to learning about his opponent in the shortest amount of time. His ears picked up the echoed, booming voice of a male announcer.

"Roaring in from the south gate is the yellow car...you know him, you love him, he's the man that brightens anyone's day...Suuuuunny Miller. Powering in from the north gate in the black and red car is his opponent, the one and only Kilgor Khan the Killer. Let the games begin!"

Ferocious applause drowned the announcer as he listed and thanked a series of sponsors.

Squinting against the shimmering heat haze, Sunny sized up Kilgor's vehicle. He had seen the man compete once before and already liked his odds. His opponent tended to prefer resiliency and brute force over finesse and speed.

Spying the hulking black vehicle paralleling the line of beams just confirmed his suspicions. Ponderous slabs of armor that would make a turtle jealous shielded every facet of the car. The driver quickly identified the chassis as a stripped and modified Hammer.

A big red fist was painted on the jagged front, and Sunny smirked when he saw the middle finger was raised. His mirth turned to concern as he looked closer and saw three bronze nozzles of flamethrowers lined vertically up the flippant finger.

Heavy metal music blasted from a loudspeaker on top of Kilgor's vehicle. Sunny decided to please the crowd and win their support early on. Carefully judging the distance he eased the machine gun trigger down. His vehicle bucked slightly as the belt fed weapon coughed to life, throwing shells as big as his finger down the range.

Evidently surprised by the early attack, Kilgor was caught off guard. As hoped, the loudspeaker took the brunt of the fire. Piercing squeals of protesting metal echoed between the cars as the noisy music was silenced in a glorious shower of sparks.

Sunny could hear the fervent bellows of the crowd as he weaved between the concrete blocks and circled to a north west position. He hoped to keep some distance between Kilgor's flamers and his Sunspot.

For a few seconds the strategy worked. Shells repeatedly fountained from his gun to hungrily chew through Kilgor's armor. With such a heavy vehicle Kilgor was forced to lower speeds to prevent rolling over during sharp turns. This allowed Sunny to keep one step ahead of the probing flamers. A few lashes of burning jelly did strike his vehicle, but the exchange was clearly in the rookie's favor.

Their chasing, roving route tended towards circling the arena. Clearly growing tired of the cat and mouse game, Kilgor acted suddenly and unexpectedly. As both combatants were closing on the central building, the black Hammer swerved towards the structure and jammed the accelerator to the floor. The vehicle spewed black exhaust as it veered towards the ramp in front of the building.

The maneuver happened in a split second before the trailing yellow car had a chance to react. Already edging left to circle the arena, Sunny was caught off guard and could only watch in shock as Kilgor's vehicle leapt up the steep ramp and flew over the wooden building, the spinning tires barely scraping the roof.

Tilting nose down from the weighted armor helped line up the red middle finger with Sunny's vehicle. He slammed on the brakes as the airborne Hammer sent gouts of flame across the Sunspot.

Beads of sweat formed across his forehead as the car was engulfed in the blaze. The acrid stink of burning plastic armor overpowered the cockpit as Sunny continued to slow. Tires protested and suspension howled at the deceleration, but it was all part of a plan he had formulated before even touching the brakes.

While providing prime pictures for tabloids and newspapers, throwing a three ton vehicle off a ramp isn't the best strategy. This was painfully clear to the roaring crowd and shouting announcer as the Hammer continued in a predictable arc, unable to change direction in midair.

On the ground Sunny twisted the wheel as hard as he could with one hand while the other worked the emergency brake. Using the last momentum the vehicle grudgingly did a full 180 degree turn, swinging the rockets in line with Kilgor's landing spot. As soon as the turn was completed Sunny sped in reverse.

Finally the black Hammer smashed to the ground, shattering the concrete and shaking the entire arena. Before Kilgor could reposition himself or catch his breath from the daring leap Sunny was on him like an angry badger.

Adrenaline pounded through his veins as the bumper collided at forty miles an hour. There was a momentary hush through the arena before the thunderous bang of both rear rockets triggering into the damaged Hammer. Sunny was thrown forward in his seat, the restraining belts cutting into his shoulders as his helmet cracked the front windshield.

Super heated plastic exploded in all directions as the heavy rockets impacted across the

helpless Hammer. Like a can opener the yellow car continued to plow through Kilgor's crumpled vehicle. Maintaining enough sense to angle his vehicle slightly, Sunny was able to slide under the top heavy vehicle and flip the burning wreckage over.

The sound of broken metal and secondary explosions dulled his hearing for a moment before the surge of cheers overpowered all other sound. His heart raced and his hands shook when his name flashed in scrolling marquee across the TV building.

"I gotta tell you I thought it was over when those flamers hit, but an incredible maneuver by the younger driver destroyed Kilgor and brought Sunny Miller his eighth victory!"

The hamlet of Primm was nothing more than a bump in the road between Las Vegas and California. Quiet desperation permeated the highway hugging casino and saloon. Flipping cards and rolling dice no longer kept the masses interested compared to vehicular destruction, and Primm had suffered accordingly. Unknown to the grubby drunkards at Whiskey Pete's pub, such destruction was closing in.

One particular patron could feel the looming cloud of danger. He constantly flicked nervous eyes across the room before feeling for the reassuring grip of a pistol. Having murdered five street girls tended to impose the attitude of a cornered rat. The Nevada Prostitution Guild, Inc. was not forgiving, and they would not forget the bloody hand of Trask.

The desert sun was high in the sky when he heard the engine. To a trained ear the roar of a combat car sounded terrifically different from the dull drone of commuter traffic.

Trask cocked such an ear towards Interstate 15 before rising from his chair to rush to the cracked bar window. Casually rolling towards Whiskey Pete's was a dusty armored car. Grit and sand beyond anything Trask had seen coated the entire vehicle. The original color may have been a dark green, but years on the road had browned the vehicle to a pallid shade of rust. Modern, sleek tips of dual lasers jutted from the top of the hood. Even though no other weapons were visible, the sight of such powerful equipment sent shivers through Trask.

Tinted glass shadowed the man inside. Weathered hands edged the car directly in front of the swinging doors, then cut the engine. Trask froze as the dull silence lengthened. His body screamed to flee or reach for his gun, but the murderer was locked with fear as the vehicle's door swung open.

A wide brimmed hat appeared first, shading an old face as worn and cracked as the car's mudflaps. Gritted teeth toyed with a toothpick as the driver emerged to his full height.

Adorning his torso was a rustic black tunic marked with bullet holes that had been stitched over. Cowboy boots worn beyond all creases scuffed slight clouds of dust.

Trask immediately noticed the ancient six-shooter comfortably resting on the man's hip. The gun was a police issued service revolver, likely top of the line twenty years ago.

The murderer coughed in surprise and fumbled for his own pistol. His time of reckoning had come, for a hired bounty hunter had finally caught up with him.

Pike surveyed the front of the saloon. Brazen neon flashed "cold beer" and the driver could see three spectators huddling in the broad front windows. His peripheral vision recorded these details, for his attention was locked on Trask.

Shifting his toothpick, the bounty hunter calmly walked towards the swinging doors. Ash colored spurs jingled as he mounted the creaking wooden stairs, his right hand resting easily on the holstered six-shooter.

Years in past police work had accustomed his voice to barking orders. Pausing outside the entryway, Pike shouted a booming command. "Trask, by order of the Nevada Prostitution Guild, throw down your weapons and come out with your hands up."

Feet shuffled inside, and for a moment Pike hoped the situation could defuse peacefully. Then he heard the telltale click of a gun being cocked.

The old man lunged through the door and dove behind the nearest bystander. Trask was waiting inside and fired a clatter of shots immediately, screaming "You'll never take me!" Wide shots shattered bottles and chipped into the wall, but the desperate fire continued. The wet thud of three impacts hit the patron Pike had taken cover behind, killing the unwilling shield. Exposed, Pike was quick to return fire. Snapping the six-shooter from his hip he fired two shots that splintered Trask's wrist and upper arm. Crying out in pain the murderer dropped his smoking pistol and twisted to flee. The swaying target weaved between slouched drunks, blocking Pike's shot.

The bounty hunter cursed and swung out the door towards his car. Storming into the cockpit he fired the engine to life and reversed in a wide spin, expertly pointing his nose towards the alley behind Whiskey Pete's.

Hobbling from the throbbing pain, Trask pushed open the pub's back door and painfully went to his truck. Raised, oversized tires combined with his wounded arm made the climb up quite a feat. Trask breathed a sigh of relief once inside the safer confines of the cockpit.

Then two pulses of light slashed into the side of the vehicle, piercing the armor and nearly killing Trask. Panicking the screaming man floored the truck, his screeching tires chewing through the wooden pub in a shower of splinters.

Jostling in the cab, Trask managed to keep the accelerator down enough to finish plowing through the saloon and out onto the Interstate. Mangled, crushed patrons followed in his wake, and for a moment Pike was caught off guard by the suicidal maneuver.

A veteran to many combats, the bounty hunter recovered quickly and edged around the outside of the destroyed pub. His quad back tires chewed up desert scrub as he sped onto the cracked pavement of the highway.

Pools of flaming oil greeted him, for Trask had been spraying the deadly substance seconds after clearing the pub. Reducing his speed and swerving to avoid the hazards, Pike chased south after the truck.

Unhindered by road dangers, Trask had gained a commanding lead. Revving his truck to ninety miles an hour he continued to drop flaming oil as the town of Densmore approached. Adrenaline fueled his charge and helped him ignore his wounded limb.

Two miles outside of the town his rear oil ran dry. The automated weapon had desperately tried to keep a consistent flow of flaming oil, but at such high speeds the strategy quickly emptied the tank.

Flicking a button on the dash, Trask switched to his rocket launchers. The heavy tubes could rapidly propel up to ten missiles before requiring a reload. He gained some confidence at the empty highway behind him, and further still when he thought of the launchers on the front and each side.

More confident still was Pike as his long car streaked past stunted desert plants. Paralleling the truck from a safe distance he could tell by Trask's slowing speed that the target thought he had escaped. Blurred hills flew by, providing intermittent cover between the two vehicles.

Driving off-road at such high speeds was hard on his green car, but it was a necessary sacrifice

to be able to bypass the burning oil and keep pace. Clenching his teeth he gently rubbed the dashboard, whispering "We'll get 'im soon Jodi, then we can rest." He eased the throttle back to eighty miles an hour to match the burly truck, and waited for an opportunity to strike back to the Interstate.

The town of Densmore provided such a chance. Boasting four streets and a small arena meant the place was a slightly larger bump on the highway. The arena was coming up fast to his right, between the desert and the Interstate.

"Perfect." Digging deep grooves in the soft turf, the bounty hunter turned Jodi towards the truck. A soft glow denoted the laser energy levels, but to Pike they looked like hungry eyes.

Slowing as he entered the town, Trask began to doubt the ease of his escape. Fingers twitched dangerously close to the triggers as he looked out all his windows, trying to catch a glimpse of his pursuer.

Screaming from behind the arena came the green car. The sun glimmered off the lasers and Trask caught all the glimpses he could want. Even through the tinted glass he could feel the bounty hunter's piercing gaze.

Pike approached from the left side, covering the open ground away from the arena as quickly as the terrain allowed. Splitting his mouth into a yellowed smile, Trask fired a double salvo from the left rocket launcher. A smokey tang filled the air as the missiles streaked towards his foe.

Reacting purely on instinct Pike swerved hard left, avoiding the first projectile. The rocket spiraled harmlessly into the concrete, exploding in a shower of rock. Luck was with Trask though for the second shot smashed into the oncoming vehicle. The ground shook as the hungry rocket exploded against armor, tearing apart a piece of Jodi's hood. Smoke leaked from the opening, but was quickly swept away as Pike continued to close.

As soon as he fired Trask sped up and tried to keep his left flank aimed at the bounty hunter. Pike continued his soft angled approach, which gave the murderer another chance to fire. Pike now knew what the truck was capable of, and had been dodging rockets since before Trask was a child. The incoming missile didn't have a chance. A deft nudge right sent the explosive sailing past.

Still he did not return fire. Patience was one of Pike's favorite tactics. Lulling the enemy into false confidence before striking with the fury of a rattlesnake had served him well for many years.

Boasting to himself at the earlier hit, Trask returned to his ninety mile an hour speed and fired again. His smile turned to a cry of confusion as the green car braked and dropped from view. Having closed to the ideal distance, Pike was done waiting and moved to attack. Nearly parallel on his approach, he drifted right and simply tapped the brakes to bring the lasers on a direct line to the rear of the truck.

Before Trask had a chance to swerve or counter brake, invisible beams of energy shattered his rear axle. Silently passing through the air like an archer's arrow, a second beam devastated the right tire.

Suddenly ninety miles an hour seemed eighty miles too fast for Trask. The split axle and popped tire sent the vehicle into a violent end over end flip. His truck groaned and protested as the roof slid along the concrete. Two hundred feet had passed before the wreckage slowed to a halt.

In full control came the green car, decelerating to bring it level with the flipped vehicle.

Whimpering and barely conscious, Trask wiped blood from his eyes and heard the menacing jingle of spurs.

"Trask, by order of the Nevada Prostitution Guild, throw down your weapons and come out with your hands up." In a rare show of emotion, Pike, savoring the victory, added a taunt, "If you can."

"Well I just think you're being a bitch about this."

"Then I clearly have not explained myself, nor my situation, adequately."

"Who even talks like that? Nor? Adequately? Jeez man contract a word every once in a while."

Fiery hair matched the fire in her eyes as the driver continued her tirade, "Hell maybe your wife wouldn't cheat on you so bad if you did."

The victim of the harsh words, a squirrely young man in gray overalls, pushed up his glasses and sighed.

Rolling her eyes and matching the sigh, she continued, "You're just going to take that shit? From a total stranger?"

The unlikely pair had been driving through southern Colorado for close to two hours. Highway 160 was their trail, and Cortez their eventual destination. The driver was a plump woman named Sassy Sass. In her own way, in the right light, she was quite beautiful. She exuded energy and every motion seemed vibrant with life.

Beside her was an already balding passenger, although he couldn't be older than eighteen.

Introverted and uncertain, he distantly looked at the rolling mountains out his window. For the small fee of six dollars a mile he was being safely transported in her armored taxi from the city of South Fork. The man, Pierre, would have paid far more to escape his wife.

"We are not -" Pierre caught himself and contracted the word, "aren't...aren't really strangers. I heard all about your childhood, and you know about my family situation."

"Family situation' is right," was the gruff reply. All types of clients came through her cab, but some rubbed her the wrong way the entire trip. "Still", she thought, "\$880 is \$880 bucks".

Uncomfortable silence settled on the car for a handful of miles. Lakes, forests, and cold mountains drifted past as the taxi cruised through the winding turns and slight descents. The sun lazily settled on the horizon and prepared to retire for the night.

Feeling herself being absorbed by the simple pleasure of driving, Sassy tried to snap out of her trance and keep the conversation rolling. "Let me ask you this, if you don't mind." Pierre absently nodded his accord, "What stops you from driving this stretch yourself? It looked like at least one of the cars in your driveway was capable."

"I'm just not like you Miss Sassy. I've been an algae farmer for so long that I can barely drive the commute into work."

This time Sassy contained her eye roll and settled for a venomous thought, "What a loser."

An abandoned post office at the junction to 140 solemnly watched them pass. Sassy preferred to work in the safer, populated routes, so seeing the slumped building depressed her.

The emotion lead to a moment of weakness, and she finally apologized to Pierre. "Hey, I'm sorry for earlier."

Stoically tightening his lips and nodding, the man returned to his scenery watching.

"Say, tell me a bit about farming the pools. I don't eat the stuff as much as I used to, but I bet that's an important job." Flattery came hard to Sassy, and the words sounded strained to her ears.

Pierre however brightened immediately at the invitation and became rambling about algae growth, transportation, and other mundane details.

Sassy wasn't quite old enough to remember the devastating grain blight. Instead she suffered the after effects for most of her difficult childhood. Starting in Nebraska in 2012, the outbreak destroyed the staple food stocks in the world. Growing up during the ensuing food riots and gang warfare had been hard on Sassy. Her parents were tough, intelligent survivors and protected the girl until the age of sixteen. Then a road gang brutally killed them while driving across Montana.

Sorrow mingled with the wishful thinking of youth pushed Sassy to become a courier soon after. She figured if armored taxi services had been as plentiful years ago, her parents might still be alive.

Her attention drifted in and out of the conversation. Algae farmers were indeed important and gained respect far exceeding their pay grade. Without a steady supply of food, countries had squabbled and warred for the last scraps from civilization's table. Harvesting thick, gooey algae from vast pools had helped solve that.

For her first few years of driving Sassy had lived on the stuff. Eventually her reputation at making reliable, consistent deliveries landed her a job running the illegal drug Wish. From then on side jobs in black market goods kept her well fed on week old fruits and vegetables. She considered that a step up from algae soup.

"...and after losing that much product my company stopped transporting to the smaller towns. Fortress towns only now!" Pierre exclaimed, beaming with pride as if he was the CEO and not a muckslinger.

Pandering to the man, Sassy faked excitement. "Wow how interesting. I never knew gangs could be so daring."

She was swaying through the curving road before the ruined town of Mancos when the radar pinged to life. Instantly Pierre began fussing, "Who could it be? Some other travellers?" Silently biting her nails she checked the map, noting a solid nineteen miles until Cortez.

An additional four blimps on the radar made her look up, then firmly answer "I wish."

Highwaymen come in all shapes and sizes. Cars, trucks, buses and semi-trucks are common choices. But the cheapest and easiest mob to assemble is a mounted pack of motorcycles. The Rampagers were a typical squad of wild, careless speed freaks. The leader boasted a gang size of twenty bikes, but drifting membership and fatalities put the number closer to eight. On this night a pack of five had assembled. Most slung rifles on their shoulders, and only two bikes were mounted with light machine guns.

A single motorcycle was no match for a prepared driver in a prepared car. But cycles preferred a dirty fight lopsided to their advantage.

Therefore it was no surprise to Sassy when a felled tree blocked the road around the next corner. Driving experience coupled with the early warning of five blips on the radar didn't leave her totally unprepared. Tires squealed like stuck pigs as she pumped the brakes, leaving streaks of burnt rubber.

Adrenaline fueled eyes noticed a crouched form on the left side of the road, and she desperately angled for the shape. Luck was with her for the tree had been knocked over and dragged from the opposite side, so she didn't have a root structure to contend with. Sassy saw the prone man scramble out of the way as her speeding car closed.

The ambusher fled to a nearby motorbike, which left an unguarded narrow passage to the thin upper trunk. Switching feet she jammed the accelerator, simultaneously clicking her left trigger twice. In response a pair of metallic plates clunked from behind her vehicle.

Nervously biting his nails and looking all around, Pierre yelped at the noise. "Are we hit?"

"No. Those were our mines." Fully focused on driving she didn't bother elaborating further.

The broad midsection of the tree made a formidable obstacle for anyone in the center of the road. Unfortunately for the gang, the effectiveness of their barricade didn't expand across the entire highway width. Sassy played upon his weakness by aiming straight for the thin upper half, hoping to ram straight through it.

Dropping mines was a simple precaution against any bold pursuers trying to follow her. Unlike some drivers, she didn't care about glory or victory, she just cared about getting herself and the passenger to their destination in one piece.

Regretting the earlier reflex to slam the brakes, Sassy urged the car to regain speed. Thick steel bars patterned the front of the taxi, providing some protection against collisions. Gritting her teeth she hoped it was enough to cleanly shatter the tree.

"Wait! Wait, you're not going to hi-" escaped Pierre's quavering mouth as the taxi smashed into the tree. There was a tremendous cracking noise that only split wood can create. Angry sparks burst from both headlights as the hood was compacted from the force. Sassy cried out as the front left tire impaled on a branch and violently deflated. Flashing lights and a buzzing alarm sounded in the cab, the on-board computer trying to alert her to the severe damage.

Her arms nearly buckled from the effort of straightening the vehicle, but eventually the car forced itself clear of the tree. Dark highway lay ahead, but Sassy was more focused on the ruckus behind her escape.

Motorcycle engines buzzed to life from both sides of the road, but apparently the gang had been caught off guard by her plan nearly as much as Pierre was. Leading by a solid four seconds gave her ample time to skid and spray a slick line of oil.

"Get on the turret!" she hollered, yanking a lever to reveal a targeting computer to the stuttering Pierre. Noise echoed from the roof of her vehicle as a drooping turret snapped to life. The swiveling weapon encased a Vulcan machine gun. The weapon was reliable and had a monstrously high rate of fire.

Now that the initial surprise had worn off, Sassy began to feel confident in her ability to fend off the five attackers. Her vehicle was configured purely for avoiding pursuit. To that end the back was covered in various tubes, ramps, and grills to discharge plenty of nastiness. In addition to the turret the taxi boasted a minelayer, smokescreen, oil jet, and spikedropper. Her confidence continued to rise as an explosion cracked through the night. One of the mines had done its job, and already the motorcycle gang was down a member. There was a lull in the panicked atmosphere as she sped away from the lights, hoping to escape in the shock of the mine. "Okay, I know we didn't go over this back in South Fork, but I need you to focus and get on that turret!"

"I...I don't know how to..."

"Look, just move this joystick to aim at any lights you see behind us. Hold the trigger for half a second to shoot, alright?" Pierre's sweating face was momentarily illuminated in the glow of the targeting console, and the fear there made Sassy consider putting the turret on automatic fire. In a snap she decided against the plan, knowing that even an inept human was better than an inept computer at hitting tiny targets in the dark. Calming her voice and speaking in a slower tone, as if to a child, she continued, "Pierre, I need you to focus, and I need you to try. You'll do okay, and we'll do okay. Now let's give it a shot." Wearing his best determined look,

the passenger gripped the joystick and peered at the screen.

Ku-Sang noticed the lead bike brake a moment before it skidded to the road. "Oil," he shouted into the mic as his own tires were covered in the slick trap. Having chased a mark once or twice in the past gave Ku-Sang the knowledge that the best approach to oil was to power straight through.

As leader of the Rampagers he could call off the assault. The initial mine explosion had almost made him quit, but he knew the taxi must be carrying something valuable to be so well armed. And so he ordered the gang onwards. Only three bikes remained after the crash at the oil. Ku-Sang knew the odds weren't in his favor, especially since the driver had cleared the barricade. His own ride mounted one of the machine guns. Lan-Hu, to his right, luckily carried the other. Completing the spearhead formation to his left was the newest member, a rifle armed woman named Ji-Wan. She wavered slightly through the oil but eventually held true.

"Lan and Ji hold formation. I'll draw the dropped attacks, and harass from a distance. You two get beside the target and open fire." Two confirmations to his order crackled over the mic, and the gang sped onwards.

Sassy saw the triangle of approaching Rampagers on the radar. Although motorcycles didn't have the top speed of a tuned car, they could accelerate much faster than other vehicles. Her four second lead dropped to nothing as the gang closed on her.

The dead tire on the left tried to drag her wobbling vehicle off the road, but Sassy held on and forced the taxi in a straight path.

Squinting through dark windows was futile for finding targets or appraising the situation. Instead she relied on the beeping radar for an idea of their approach. The fading sun provided just enough light to see the turns of the highway, but she knew a lengthy pursuit into the night would be impossible. Cursing her smashed headlights, she waited for the Rampagers to get closer before dropping more tricks.

The steady whine of turret mechanisms above her head meant Pierre was doing his job.

Irregular machine gun fire pierced the night whenever he thought a target was locked, but so far all three motorcycles remained.

The spearhead formation reversed and broke apart so that a bike was on either flank, while the leader slowed to hang back behind the vehicle. Then the return fire started in earnest.

Armor peeled off in smoking, curled tendrils as bullets tore into the car. Glass shattered from the right window as a machine gun raked across. Pierre swore, pushed his glasses up, and cranked the Vulcan around. Roaring as if his life depended on it, he slammed the trigger. A repeating flash light up Lan-Hu as the gun ate him up in a hail of shots. The belt fed machine gun had fired a dozen shots before the first even hit the Rampager. Helplessly the empty motorcycle wavered and slowed before careening off the road and exploding in the woods.

Meanwhile Sassy was intent on the rear rider as he pattered the back of the taxi with bullets. Trusting her side armor to hold against handheld rifle fire, she cut to the left every so often to attempt to catch Ji-Wan in a collision. With one rider tied up, Sassy dropped a spread of mines to make the other regret pursuing.

Ku-Sang split his focus between firing and watching the rear ports of the taxi for any sign of attack. When the first wheel sized mine slid out the back, he was ready. Weaving the motorcycle between the predictable spread of traps, he continued to fire. "Ji, press the attack, I know all this fool's tricks!"

The failed minefield caused Sassy to grip the wheel in frustration. Renewing her efforts at a collision she pressed Ji-Wan closer and closer to the steep edge of the road. Seeing that her time on the pavement was limited, the Rampager lowered her rifle and fired directly into the popped left tire, hoping to hit some key component.

Sassy saw the weapon arc downwards, but didn't have time to realize her plight until the first shell had struck the wheel's rim. Her taxi shuddered and a steady stream of sparks poured from the wheel well. The Rampager's shots had dislodged most of the remaining rubber, and now metal ground feebly against the road.

"Pierre get this bike!" she hollered, glancing at the passenger quickly. Shattered chunks of glass had peppered the right side of his face, and the man was slumped over. Fading adrenaline brought fading consciousness, and Pierre lost heart for the fight.

"So much for a 'low risk route'," Sassy mused. "Okay Mr. Big Bad Biker, you handle mines fine. How about this?" With a grin she started the smokescreen, then quickly worked the trigger for the spikedropper.

Trailing behind and still firing, Ku-Sang laughed at the feeble smoke, thinking the taxi must be getting desperate. He preferred the same approach for smoke as he did for oil, and that was to drive straight through it. This would have worked to maintain the pursuit, if only dropped caltrops didn't cover the road.

The thump of expelled air echoed from the cloud as the leader's bike dove headlong into the spread of spikes. Chunks of rubber hit his helmet and jammed in the frame, causing the bike to flip end over end. He was unconscious after the first rotation, and by the second Ku-Sang was another bloodstain on the road.

Cold silence filled the mic as Ji-Wan tried for a status report. The Rampager knew her limits, and started to brake and skid an escape from the killer taxi.

Sassy reached across and flicked the turret to automatic reverse fire, then swerved to expertly line up the weapon with the last bike. Shells pattered the highway in muted thuds, momentarily loudening as the Vulcan tore into the motorcycle.

A few days later Sassy lazily rose from her bed at the Goodrest Inn. Her back stung slightly from a minor case of whiplash that set in after the battle outside Manco. Apparently, as the doctors said, smashing through a tree isn't the best for your health.

Rubbing her eyes she crossed the small room to a window overlooking Harrison Street. Across the bustling road was the central market of Cortez. A twirling, flickering sign marked Mick's Garage and Service where her taxi was undergoing repairs.

After the battle with the Rampagers she had patched up the taxi enough to limp the remaining miles to Cortez. The full service shop would add fresh slabs of armor to the front end. The rim of the destroyed tire had been ground flat on one side and needed replacement. The repairs had been expensive, and nearly negated the money Pierre had paid.

"Ah, Pierre," she smiled. What a difference 150 miles made to the man. His sniveling, uncertain manner had faded to be replaced with calm strength. Killing a person, even scum like a gang member, tended to do that. Perhaps her view was skewed from the generous tip that brought her income from the trip to almost \$1,000.

Sighing away the heavy thoughts Sassy flopped down at her desk. A bulky computer rested there, covered in dents and scratches from the road. Absently she dialed in to the Taxi Mainframe, a service provided to any registered carrier.

After some internal groaning the machine displayed a list of available jobs, sorted by best paying first. A brief description, distance, danger, and other details were noted for each available task.

Half looking at the screen and half enjoying the morning sun, Sassy paged through the data. She caught her mind on the edge of drifting back to sleep. Scolding her tired body she focused fully on the computer.

Searching by city and state yielded a narrowed list of jobs. Feeling like one shootout was enough for the week, she filtered further by danger. After browsing a few options she settled on one of the most basic tasks: mail carrier.

Once called "snail mail", handwritten and hand delivered letters had diminished in popularity with the rise of computers in early 2000. There was a resurgence of usefulness after the networks were destroyed in 2012, making technology like the Taxi Mainframe a rare, expensive commodity.

Sassy hadn't been born yet but she remembered the harrowed stories her parents would tell of the bombs being dropped. Finger pointing for responsibility of the grain blight had led to open war, and soon after nuclear weapons were utilized. Luckily for mankind, mutually assured destruction didn't account for modern satellite defense systems.

A few of the bigger cities had been hit, and as a result Sassy tended to stay far, far away from the east coast. But in general America had weathered the storm of destruction fairly well.

Sassy often dreamed of those earlier times when families could pile into an unarmed station wagon and drive across the country for fun. The thought of no weapons or armor over that distance made her scoff and sigh longingly at the same time.

After the food riots that marked her childhood, such trusting nature was washed away in a sea of vehicular gangs. Towns added walls, cities added automated turret grids, and soon only those places defended like a fortress were left on the map.

To maintain some semblance of control, the ruined government eventually started broadcasting "death sports" in late 2022. Their hope was to turn attention and anger from the open highways to a more controlled environment. The creation and widespread adoption of autodueling changed everything. TV sponsors latched onto the idea, and Joe Everyman loved the idea of strapping a gun onto his car. Suddenly highway gangs encountered equally armed opponents ranging from commuters to taxis to dedicated vigilantes.

Instant communication marked the pre-blight years, but without it there emerged a niche market to carry old fashion mail great distances. The Pony Express, remantled and reworked to use cars instead of horses, filled this niche.

The letters on the screen had gone blurry with reminiscing. Sassy shook herself awake. She copied down the job information to a pad of paper marked with the hotel's letterhead, mumbling out loud as she did, "Kayenta, Arizona to Flagstaff, Arizona. Bla bla bla, 150 miles, pssh 'Light' danger my ass." She yawned and continued transcribing, "Weight 180 pounds...jeez did everyone in the town decide to write?"

She happily noted the start date as four days away. Sassy was familiar with Flagstaff, for the town was famous for it's closeness to the Grand Canyon. Kayenta on the other hand was new to her, so she drudged out her atlas. "I guess it would be too much for this stupid program to just draw me one."

"The Grand Canyon? Isn't that like 700 bajillion miles away?" Sunny groaned and imagined the tiring journey.

"Do you really need to be that dramatic?" Ned sighed, "Besides, it's 392 miles, actually, by the route I figured. Phoenix's always hit hard, real hard, by drug cartels. We can skip that mess by jumping off Interstate 10 to highway 60, then 89 through Prescott." Lost in calculations, Ned's view panned up to the ceiling, "We actually save about fifteen miles this way, and can get back on at Interstate 17 to Flagstaff. Then it's just a quick jaunt up 180 to that big hole in the ground."

"And what in the world could be so exciting that we need to drop everything and go there?" Ned, exasperated, tried to convince Sunny, "Let's face it, Yuma's all dried up. Kilgor was pretty much it in terms of Div 10, and even that was pushing it. You don't want to get a rep as just taking easy matches, ya know? The sponsors--"

"Easy?" Sunny cut in, blustering. He let the comment pass before pausing for a moment to deliver an argument he hoped would end the discussion. "What's stopping me from winning some Div 15 then?"

"Besides the fact that we don't have a car for it?"

Sunny rolled his eyes in response.

"Exactly."

His race suit squeaked together with each hurried step as Sunny paced the garage. He hated feeling forced into a situation, he hated not managing his own matches, and most of all he hated when Ned was right.

The mechanic was slippery as a serpent when it came to convincing people. Ned never intended to change a viewpoint, but maybe that was why his charming approach worked so well. He would pretend like he only wanted the best for Sunny, and present a few well thought out and well founded arguments. Then he wouldn't budge or flinch, which tended to enrage Sunny. Hurt at the slightest outburst, Ned would retreat to a dark corner of the garage to tinker with engine parts. Then Sunny would drift in guilt and, with his defenses down, start to consider Ned's points. Most nights ended with Sunny slumping his shoulders and shuffling over to Ned to agree to whatever plan the mechanic had.

Tonight was no different, and in no time flat Sunny was resigned to the Grand Canyon match. A competent driver and passable gunner, Sunny would have no trouble latching onto a convoy headed in that direction. Ned would also find easy passage with a simple demonstration of his skills at converting burnt out wrecks into working machines.

At the moment Sunny felt like he hated most everything, but he knew one deep, lasting hatred was not having his own vehicle. When he fought in the arena his sponsors would provide a car, or the money for some junker that Ned could fix up. Besides a custom paint job and wildly varying configurations, the base chassis Sunny drove was never the same between matches. Sometimes this wasn't a problem, like against Kilgor, but other times Sunny felt disconnected and distant from the car. Having to learn the feel of a new vehicle each match was wearing on Sunny.

He also hated having to organize his own transportation to whatever match Ned and the sponsors thought up. "A team bus? My own room? As if!" Angrily he kicked over a bucket of thick oil.

The next day his yellow duffel bag was packed and slung over his tired shoulders. Sunny looked like a whipped pup, but Ned was chipper and talkative beside him.

They waited along South Pacific Avenue, a wide street situated near an exit to Interstate 18. "They should be here in no time, eh buddy? I haven't gotten to ride with a road train in a while."

He tried to ignore the mechanic and his upbeat attitude, but eventually Sunny let go of his anger and focused on the bright side. "Yeah, it should be a safe trip. How many trailers did you say the semi had?"

"Four, apparently!"

Sunny cracked a smile at the mechanic's undying appreciation of engineering feats. A rumbling dust cloud near the Interstate drew his attention from any response.

"Looks like we'll know for sure soon enough."

Trailing an impressive cloak of sand, the long convoy rolled to stop in front of the pair. The focal point of the group was a semi-truck covered in enough weapons and armor to give it the appearance of a rolling fortress. Various rumors Ned had heard proved true as the rumbling cab towed four trailers.

Named road trains, battle barges, castles, and numerous other intimidating nicknames, semi-trucks were the true kings of the road. Bandit lords yearned to drive such beasts, while rich merchants could finally feel safe in a vehicle. Upkeep of gas, tires, crew, repairs and ammunition ensured semi-trucks remained in only the elitist of hands.

Configuration of such an incredible force varied between each baron and bandit. A popular choice was one trailer focused on supplies and living quarters while another brimmed only with weapons.

In the case of their escort, the first and last bristled with dozens of gun ports. The second trailer seemed to be loaded with equipment and dry goods, most likely a mix of machinery and canned food. Sunny caught glimpses of peering faces through thick portholes in the third trailer, so he guessed it to be the crew cabins.

Their eyes were torn from the details of the setup as the vehicle thundered closer and closer. Loose gravel rattled from the benches and brickwork around them as the cab approached. Vividly painted across the front was "The Dragon", and a matching mural of a coiled serpent wove between the chrome surfaces.

Nervously the pair took a step back, as if compelled by some primitive urge to avoid the colossal structure. A screeching air brake cracked across the lonely street, further intimidating Sunny.

Finally the tension passed as a tall man lowered himself from the driver's seat. He appeared perfectly suited to the vehicle with a chest as broad as the desert horizon and arms as thick as oak trees. Gruffly, the man tipped a weather beaten mesh cap. "Sunny and Ned?"

Sunny coughed, as if unable to find his voice. The shock of The Dragon wore off enough for him to meekly offer a greeting.

"You two don't see many highway rigs, I take it?" Dumbly the two shook their heads side to side. "Well anything you see after The Dragon will look like a bitch. I built it from the ground up over eight years, and I've never been bested on the road since."

"It's...it's an impressive vehicle." Ned exhaled and stepped forward, offering his grease smeared hand. "I'm Ned, this would be Sunny. We're grateful for the lift."

Like a battering ram the driver clasped Ned's hand. The touch of living flesh seemed to relax the mechanic, as if The Dragon might otherwise be some mythological beast from the netherworld. "Name's Zinc, like the metal," replied the driver.

Regaining his composure, Sunny nodded and joked, "I figured the road up would be boring. Now I'm thinking I won't want to leave at Flagstaff!" Zinc, unamused, grinned slightly to make the nervous autoduelist feel comfortable.

"Everyone's eager to go," he said, motioning to the third trailer and two cars idling behind The Dragon, "so get in the cab and I'll explain our setup on the road. You should be settled before we hit highway 95."

Sunny dozed in and out of sleep. The rumble of dozens of tires soothed him like the calming breaths of a sleeping giant. Beams of light played across the interior of the trailer, sometimes darkening as the vehicle passed a tree or hill.

They were a day and a half into the journey north, and already Sunny felt more rested and more secure than he had in months. Despite his size, Zinc wasn't foolhardy and wasn't in a rush. He figured eagerness leads to ambushes, so they covered a little over one hundred miles a day. The convoy averaged forty miles an hour, even though The Dragon could approach seventy on the flats. Narrow turns and damaged subhighways slowed them, as did the constant fear of attack. Being the biggest mass on wheels had advantages, but it also drew unwanted attention from bold bandits hoping to prove themselves.

Ned and Zinc had discussed the route, and agreed, mostly, on the general approach. Their avoidance of Phoenix and a majority of the Interstate put the trip to Flagstaff at 315 miles. The well maintained Interstate was smoother than some of their highway choices, but it also attracted many gangs and angry drivers.

Stretching out on his cold steel bunk, Sunny was sad they were already halfway there. His temporary home was marked Slab #43, with Ned's belongings resting in #42 beside him. Each Slab turned out to be a comfortable nook aboard the third trailer with just enough room to stretch out and store a change of clothes.

A central metal girder cut through stacks and stacks of these curtained bunks. The third trailer, nicknamed The House, was 28 feet long. Filling it were eight bunks to each side of the walkway, and those eight were stacked four high. In theory The House could hold 64 people, but comfort and personal space kept the number closer to half that.

Personnel could edge across a thin plank above each trailer hitch to get between The House and other trailers. Flexible armored plates created a covered crossing that shielding this walkway.

The second trailer, The Kitchen, was split between food storage, parts and tools, medical equipment, and cooking space. When possible The Dragon stopped to eat and clean under the open sky, but an interior option was needed in case of a siege or long running combat.

Sunny had been designated the role of gunner, but the able crew had no need of him so far. Part of his duties entailed familiarizing himself with the first trailer, The Tower, and the last trailer, The Trunk. Each was filled with weapons, targeting system, extra ammo, and other instruments of war. The Trunk focused on dropped weapons to slow pursuit, while The Tower had death dealing guns pointed at every angle.

Without a full time position, Sunny was left with large expanses of free time to wander the trailers, talk with other passengers, and peacefully enjoy the view. Ned was seen less and less as the trip went on, preferring to learn as much as he could from Zinc. Like Sunny, the man had spent most of his time in arenas and had little practical highway experience. But unlike Sunny, the mechanic was eager to remedy this by questioning the veterans with a gush of inquiries.

Covering his face against the light, Sunny drifted to sleep to evade the doubt and guilt of

laziness.

Pounding footfalls on the central walkway of The House shook him awake. His heart raced from the unexpected noise combined with the confusion of drowsiness. Unaccustomed to the corrugated walls and constant swaying of the vehicle, Sunny momentarily forgot where he was.

Tromping around the metal were children laughing and chasing each other. He sat back in the bunk, calming his temper.

"A little jumpy from the arena, eh?" The female voice was soothing and promised relaxation. Two rows down a blond, always a blond, smiled up at him.

Rolling onto his side Sunny grinned and pretended to grip a steering wheel. "Just can't let the thrill go, you know?"

"What got you into the sport?"

"Well my dad was a racer, the legit kind, back before autoduelling was big." He shrugged, "It was natural for me."

The blond paused, as if expecting more from Sunny. "Oh, yeah? I did a derby match once...it was fun but hurt too much."

"Maybe you weren't doing it right," he smirked, a twinkle in his eye.

Shrapnel shattered into The House, blasting the life from the woman. Sunny's mouth opened to scream in surprise, but no sound escaped his throat. Sirens whined throughout the trailer. The walkway lit up and red lights flashed from either end. Intercoms crackled above him, "Zinc to crew, arm battle stations. Mark seven, wait...eight vehicles to left flank and rear."

Sunny's mind was paralyzed, but his body snapped to work like a tuned automobile. He bolted to the rear of the trailer and threw open the access port. Warm desert air gushed in, and lines of sunlight warmed his arms. Roaring engines passed on the left and right, barely audible through the thick joint armor.

Still reeling from the blond's sudden death, he threw his upper body into a cupola. Two crew members did the same beside him. Reinforced bracers fit firmly against his shoulders, and a targeting screen powered to life in front of him. Swinging his body moved a corresponding pair of autocannons near the front of The Trunk.

Sleek black vehicles raced past on either side like angry wasps. Sunny didn't recognize the chassis, but the vehicles looked closer to a rocket than a car. Slim barrels protruded from a rear turret on each attacker. Sunny could barely see the muzzle flash as they threw dense slugs at incredible speeds towards The Dragon.

"Now counting nine vehicles. Looks like recoilless rifles. Our armor should hold, but careful of The Kitchen." Still near the mic, Zinc thought out loud. "The radar didn't pick them up...dammit, it still doesn't."

Sunny could hear Ned's mumbling voice reverberate in the background, "They must have figured out some way to shield against it."

Calmly he steeled his nerves and pounding heart, reminding himself that The Dragon was nigh unstoppable. Tuning out background noise and visual distractions, Sunny focused only on the targeting screen. He wanted revenge for the blond, and revenge for the attack. But most of all he wanted revenge for bringing chaos to his peaceful trip.

Roaring he pulled both triggers. The autocannons responded with a louder roar and poured shells into the nearest vehicle. Sunny, shocked, saw bullets deflect off the target. "What the hell, my guns aren't doing anything."

The nearest crew member cast him a confused look, then shouted, "Metal armor." The man returned to his firing, but backed off the cupola for a second to say, "Where you from, boy?" Embarrassed at his inexperience, Sunny mumbled, "Somewhere with rules." The thunder of autocannon fire mingled with screeching tires overpowered his response.

"Two down up front. Great shooting Tower!" Zinc's commanding voice visibly strengthened the crew, and they redoubled the defense.

Steam sizzled from the tips of Sunny's weapons as the watercooled guns tried to handle his rapid rate of fire. Unknown to the engrossed gunner, a mechanic had sidled up beside him to repair a charred panel. "Careful or you'll burn it out!" The man admonished him, shaking his head in frustration. Sunny flushed with anger at the comment. Again he was left feeling like a chump driving into his first amateur match, instead of a self declared conquerer of Div 10.

"Clearly the man is ignorant of my arena standing," Sunny thought, trying to prop his tattered ego up. He furiously unleashed on the nearest attacker instead of directing further rage at the mechanic. Swinging side to side, Sunny raked the vehicle with high caliber shells, trying to lower his aim away from the metal armor. The strategy paid off when the rear tires of his foe caught a shot. Instantly the rocket shaped car careened off the highway, flipping once it hit the desert.

"They can't handle for shit off the pavement!" he roared, hoping someone could relay the information to those that needed it.

Moments later the efficient crew of The Dragon proved themselves again. "Crew," Zinc said, "try to force them into the dirt. I'll swerve to keep them guessing, but aim low and get them to lose it."

Like an ant burrow, crew bustled to and fro within The Trunk. Buckets of ammo were deposited at each gunner's foot, fresh water was brought to cool the older autocannons, and any wounded were transported to the second trailer for immediate assistance. The scene replayed itself further up the semi-truck in The Tower. Rockets mingled with powerful anti-tank shells as The Dragon fought the attackers for every inch of pavement.

Two black shapes blurred by Sunny, then settled near The House. He aimed at the nearest, firing intermittently to prevent the barrel from melting. With a surprised yelp, he saw the other vehicle throw open a hatch and drift closer to the armored tires. An arm suited in black emerged from the opening and hoisted a grappling hook.

Before he could yell a rambling warning, the gunner to his left barked a curt order. "Boarding! Kitchen, left!" Immediately the daring car was pattered with shells from five autocannons. The exposed limb was torn apart in a cloud of blood. Sparks mingled with the red air as shots forced their way into the cockpit interior.

The Dragon lifted off the ground as the damaged car skewed right into the rolling wheels. Sunny gritted his teeth and was nearly thrown from the cupola, but pained fingers held fast. The attacker passed out the back of the semi-truck as a mangled heap.

"Three targets remain." Crackling of plastic armor filled the intercom with static. "Say again, they're going for the cab. Ned, get on the-" the connection shorted, and Sunny could feel The Dragon swerve left.

The gunner beside him shouted again, "Brace for whiplash!" Sunny understood the implications of the command clearly enough, but wasn't sure what could cause whiplash. He learned a moment later as the semi-truck straightened, and three trailers of momentum snapped The Trunk back in line.

The lights flickered as electrical connections strained. Sunny felt warm blood dripping down his arm and figured he must have caught some falling object with his shoulder. As the trailer

twisted his feet were lifted from the ground, and a wave of dizziness washed over him. Finally The Dragon settled down, sending shudders through The Trunk. The ringing in Sunny's head didn't subside, but he cringed through it.

Zinc groaned over the intercom, clearly injured, but continuing to admirably order his crew about. "One swerved off, Ned caught another with fire. Just one of these bastards left."

Quieter, and likely thinking he was off the air, Zinc coughed in pain, "Why the hell is he still coming?"

Sunny scanned for the last vehicle in his cupola, trying to strain the autocannons as far forward as he could. The screen didn't give him a glimpse of the cab though, so he couldn't see how the lead trailer fared. A few tense seconds later an explosion let him know The Tower had done it's job.

Breathing a ragged sigh of relief, Sunny dropped from the gunnery straps. Fresh blood dripped into his eyes. "Huh, must be higher than my shoulder," Sunny stated to no one in particular. Then adrenaline lost the fight to nausea, and he passed out.

A stained bandage wrapped around Sunny's forehead for the remaining distance to Prescott. A long gash ran across the right side of his head, nearly to his eyebrow. When the trailer had leveled out a loose panel had fallen like a guillotine and slashed across his skull.

Safe in The Kitchen a pair of doctors had worked furiously to stitch the wound and check for permanent damage. Sunny's streak of luck continued as the metal panel hadn't cracked his head or given him brain damage. "A skull too thick to dent," had been Ned's explanation.

Unfortunately for the driver, his reputation as a deadly, mysterious outsider had faded after rumor of his battle performance spread. "Heard he fired till the barrels were crooked as me thumb!" The voices had whispered. "Didn't even know what metal armor was, imagine it!" The gossiping crew would awkwardly drop silent when Sunny passed.

Ned seemed to maintain a better image and impression as his mechanical handiness saved numerous hours of repairs. In a short time the man had embedded himself in the day to day processing of The Dragon, much to Sunny's chagrin.

Trying to remain unfazed by the turn of events, Sunny stayed more to The Kitchen and his bunk. He had become friends with one of the doctors that had tended to his wound. Wise with years, the bent frame of the old man became a comforting sight to the outcast duelist.

"Milo!" Sunny called, pushing the bandage out of his eyes. He shambled up the stairs to the top level of The Kitchen. Unlike the simple layout of the bunks, the second trailer was cunningly split for numerous purposes. Four quadrants dominated the area, with thin catwalks and stairs between each.

Pushing aside a green medical curtain, Sunny caught up with the old doctor. "Hey, sir, how goes it?" Sunny had naturally slipped into a formal tone with Milo. Initially this habit had surprised the autoduelist, until he realized the doctor had an air of respect around him that inspired the best in everyone. His entire demeanor had immediately impressed Sunny who was used to gruff words in the garage.

"Sunny, my friend, come come, sit and let me look at that wound."

"Always worrying," Sunny grinned, but obediently sat on a sterilized bench. "Any word on when we're getting back on the road?"

The doctor didn't look up from unfurling a soft roll of gauze. "Zinc hopes by tomorrow morning." Sunny nodded and let Milo continue, "You know Prescott is not a bad town, you should try leaving The Dragon to enjoy the sights."

"Me? What about you? We could go rob a pharmacy," Sunny's laughter turned to a slight

whimper as Milo poked and prodded the stitches.

Stopping his work, the doctor smiled and said, "Pharmacy indeed!"

The Dragon had stopped in Prescott for minor repairs, just enough to get it back on the road to Flagstaff. Zinc also wanted some time to probe the locals for information on the black rocket cars. The town nearly rivaled Flagstaff for population, although being off the Interstate necessitated a higher wall.

The pair sat in comfortable silence for a moment as Milo quietly worked. Finally Sunny, tentative at first, expressed concern to the man. "The crew continues to mock me behind my back."

Sighing as if he shared the burden, Milo lowered his crooked hands. "Let them. Rise above it, become the bigger and better man until their scorn reflects like broken arrows."

"People..." Sunny started before pausing uncertainly, "people really don't talk like that anymore." The comment wasn't an insult, far from it. In a sense he desired an older, more peaceful time when people had a life beyond plain survival. "Where'd you learn those kind of sayings?"

A slight smile edged Milo's face, but sadness ringed his eyes. "Some from my father, although I've forgotten most of that by now. Books, as well."

"Maybe instead of seeing the sights, I could borrow some, sir? It's still a hundred miles to Flagstaff. Even if we get going tomorrow that's still two days before I needed to give them back." Sunny felt vulnerable, never really drawing attention to his uneducated upbringing.

"I'd like that very much, Sunny. And I'd also like you to visit Prescott for me." Milo raised a hand to stop the eager man from planning a shared outing. "In Willow Creek Park, not far from here, there are some wonderful gardens I saw long ago. Lush and vibrant too, which is not often seen this far south."

Knowing he couldn't disappoint the old doctor, Sunny nodded in agreement before merrily making his own demand, "I'll need some books first, of course."

Casting shade far across the desert, the massive semi-truck was parked along Northridge Drive. Nearby a minor traffic circle marked the junction with Smoke Tree Lane. Mechanics and servicemen bustled around the rig. Flashes from welders scored the penetrated left side, while others simply bashed away with hammers.

Stepping down the ramp from The House, Sunny stretched and basked in the afternoon sun.

"Maybe Milo was right and some fresh air will do me good," he thought. "Being cramped up with all those sidelong glances was getting exhausting." Ned and Zinc were heatedly discussing something over a roll of blueprints, but Sunny ignored them.

Originally thinking to flag down a bus or taxi he instead adjusted the backpack and decided to walk. Burdened with a small stack of books and a roll of bread, he ran across the busy road and cut through a suburb. Willow Creek Park was less than three miles north, and he planned on getting there long before the sun left.

Even the calming afternoon sun managed to scorch his forehead. Sunny was wiping sweat from his brow by the time he reached the green gardens. Situated off the highway and fed by a nearby reservoir, the park had maintained its luster since Milo had last seen it.

Eagerly Sunny skipped to the closet bench. Settling in against the worn wood, he indulged in the surroundings for a moment. Rows of large trees ran across the grounds, but their orderly layout had long been overrun by vines and flowers. A brook rambled through the park and strolling pairs of locals meandered through the thick grass on dirt paths.

Exhaling, Sunny released his tense shoulders. The aching pain that followed surprised the driver, and he tried to recall the last time he could truly relax. The start of The Dragon's drive would have been a candidate, if the attack hadn't happened. He tried to shut out the image of the dead blond that followed.

Sliding further back a blur of arena battles sped around his mind. Each was exciting, as were the rewards. But Sunny realized he had been caught up in the busy lifestyle of a professional competitor. Nestling further into the bench, he savored some time to let his guard down. The peaceful moment fluttered away on the warm air, and he unzipped the backpack to draw the first book of the afternoon.

The flat tire wasn't particularly heavy or burdensome. Pike still cursed it, then threw his head back and cursed the sky. As if mocking his protests, a thin cloud drifted away from the sun to soak the man with blazing heat. Dunes the size fortress walls loomed around him, as if rudely reminding an uninvited party guest to leave.

Slipping from his grip the wheel dropped near the rear door. Pike sighed and collapsed into the shade of his vehicle. Crudely taped to the inside panel was a thermometer which boldly stated 125 Fahrenheit.

Face down on the seat, he complained, "Think this is funny, don't you?" Silently watching his struggle Jodi showed no sign of answering. "Why can't you fix your own damn wheel?"

Drawing on deep reserves of willpower, the man pushed himself upright and slid out into the shimmering sand. He dragged his drained body to the back door and threw both hands on the tire. With a grunt of exertion he heaved the flat onto the rear bench inside the car.

"Not so tough now, are you?" He laughed, but forced himself to stop before the choking giggles became insane cackles.

He scolded himself, "Focus!" Closing his eyes Pike pushed out the searing desert, the sting in his ankle, and the pain burning through his veins. "Focus. Focus." His breathing slowed and Pike gradually opened his eyes. "Good. Now to get the spare."

After turning in the wounded Trask and collecting the \$7,500 bounty, Pike had intended to hop the California border. Unfortunately word of the capture spread quickly, and Trask's younger brother had run the man down on Interstate 15, near the Mojave desert.

Outnumbered and caught off guard, Pike had fought valiantly to escape. The irony of the reversed situation was not lost on the bounty hunter, but humor did little to slow the wrath of his enemies.

One of his dual back tires had caught a cluster of rockets, and Pike had nearly spun out fatally. After recovering his bearings the desperate man saw only one option for survival. He had plunged into the Mojave desert.

As foolish and eager as Trask's brother was, the fuming killer still couldn't force his supporters to enter the wasteland. Instead he impotently fired from the Interstate until Pike was a mere speck on the horizon. Perhaps knowing that a shot had pierced Pike's primary water tank would have cheered the man up.

And so the bounty hunter struggled on, hoping to replace the tire and cross the desert before he blacked out from thirst. A single emergency canteen of water from the glove compartment sustained him.

"Could be worse," he spat, using the recalled events to distract him from the dire situation.

"Right Jodi? I mean, hell, I could get bitten in the ankle by a snake or something." Halfway

through the sentence he began thrashing like a monster, frustration saturating his every pore. "Oh wait that happened!" The red veil of anger helped him ignore the throbbing venom that rotted his body from the inside out.

Spittle caught in his eye, distracting Pike and helping him realize he was going mad from heat exposure. Sullenly he returned to the car seat and uncapped the half empty canteen. Gently he tipped the precious liquid into his mouth, scarcely breathing for fear of spilling a drop.

He rationed a tiny gulp before closing the bottle. Pike kept his hands locked on the cap for a moment, pitting mind against body in an attempt to avoid devouring all the water. His willpower held, and Pike slumped back in the chair.

Resignation and exhaustion dominated his tone as he slipped lower in the seat. "I don't care who finds me. Bandits, robbers...anything is better than working in this infernal heat."

Yawning, he tipped his hat and drifted into a fitful sleep.

Images from Pike's past tortured his mind. Even enjoyable memories were twisted into dark nightmares. Much had happened in his 72 years on the road of life, and not every choice made him proud.

In his youth Pike was heavily involved in the emergence of autoduelling. Originally a racetrack driver, he was eventually lured to armed arena fights by the rich rewards. He travelled the country, gaining experience and knowledge in all types of road combat.

His skills and arena record caught the attention of the Larkhelm Una-Air Police Service. The Larks, as they were nicknamed, were a private firm that managed a substantial portion of Oregon. Their main specialization was protecting towns from early motorized gangs. Not liking the televised, commercialized shift in autoduelling, Pike had joined the force.

Pike's methodical methods, undying devotion to law and order, and ability to suppress emotion when getting a job done ensured he rocketed to the rank of Captain. However he didn't make friends during the climb. Most of Pike's nights were spent mumbling to himself while reviewing cases with a cold cup of coffee.

His entire world had spun like an engine cylinder when he met Deborah. With rank came responsibility, and Pike was stuck at a mandatory company function when she shone into his life.

They talked, deeply and openly, for many weeks after that, and were married before the year was out. They had a single continuing debate, and that was Deborah's desire for him to quit the Larks. Although torn by duty, Pike eventually succumbed to his wife's demands, as so many spouses do.

Eventually his drifting path took him to the church. Seeing parallels with the duty and trust of his old police job, Pike investigated further. Eventually he found his faith, and, rekindled with a sense of purpose, became a priest to Our Lady of Perpetual Mercy.

His marriage was at peace, and for once Pike felt like he could truly enjoy his life. No longer did he live on a razor's edge, waiting for a gang bullet to end him. The outside world took no notice of his contentment. Unable to escape the darkness of the roads, such a gang bullet soon changed his life.

Outside of Portland, Deborah was burned alive when her car exploded along Interstate 84. The culprit were a group of hoodlums and drifters. The Larks report said they didn't loot the vehicle, and had simply attacked for sadistic enjoyment.

In an incredible show of patience and faith, Pike had left the police to their job. Trusting in the Lady and the law, he had waited for news of the gang's demise. But no such announcement was made, and in a single moment of blind rage Pike cast aside his frock and penance in

exchange for a six-shooter and a car.

The Larks found the gang the next morning. Each had been bound and lined along a ditch on a distant, dusty road, then executed with a single shot through the head. Pike left the state after the murders, and became a mercenary bounty hunter.

It was late in the night when he awoke. Pike didn't bolt upright from the nightmares, for they were common. The haunting, screaming faces of the gang members always waited for him to sleep.

Sweat brought on by the fever covered his face and dampness soaked the headrest. Pike realized the burning pain in his veins was gone. "The poison...could I have overcome it so easily?" Pike shut down his mind and went to work, refusing to believe the Lady had a hand in his recovery.

When the sun dropped so had the temperature, and Pike found he could exert himself without becoming dizzy. Soon the tire was replaced and Jodi was ready to surmount the Mojave desert. Pike marked his bearings and started south east, towards the city of Needles.

The money for a successful bounty was good, and the \$7,500 from Trask would carry Pike for several months. Although he could immediately busy himself with tracking down another target, Pike always felt like he should resist killing. Instead his preference was to complete a job, and retire somewhere serene until his money ran out.

To lengthen this span he would camp or sleep in his vehicle, and eat only the most basic of foods. Pike had been living this meandering, aimless existence for close to eight years. He intended to spend the latest reward on provisions from Needles and then head to Lake Havasu. Nervous about jagged desert scrub piercing his tires, Pike kept a low speed. With luck he would reach the city by noon of the following day. Once settled in his seat Pike began talking to himself, under the guise of asking Jodi questions. Such was the life of a solitary bounty hunter.

"Hi. Jim Berowski." Sunny didn't slow down for the smiling man, assuming he was an insurance salesman. "Got a moment, Sunny?"

The driver turned slightly to get a better look at the speaker. Jim was trim and athletic and had his hands in the pockets of a tailored pinstripe suit. His face was calm and collected, but the man's eyes had a fierce fire visible under the surface. Forcing a smile, Sunny continued walking and asked, "My biggest fan?"

Grinning, Jim dropped his hands out of the pockets and matched Sunny's pace. "Not exactly. Have you heard of Surefire Fire Extinguishers?" He flashed a business card, but it was too dark to catch the text.

"SFE? Of course, everybody knows them. One of the first manufacturers of dedicated on-board fire extinguishers."

"I'm glad to see you know your history." Sunny might not expect the tricks and traps of a highway chase, but he certainly knew every aspect of the arena. "It will make this entire process easier."

"Look, Jim Berowski, I'm not really interested in whatever 'process' you're selling. And I've got a long way to walk." Caught up in his reading, Sunny hadn't noticed the sun setting until he couldn't squint to see the words. Now he hurried back to The Dragon, hoping to catch the trailing end of dinner.

"We could talk more in my car, and you'd get where you need to be faster than crudely walking." For a moment Jim's grin slipped into a mask of disgust, as if he loathed the idea of putting one foot in front of the other.

Laughing and picking up his pace, Sunny said over his shoulder, "Yeah, let's just jump in your car so you can mug me!"

Jim stopped and gazed after Sunny like a leering gargoyle statue. Just as Sunny was about to escape out of earshot, the man called out, "A Div 15 car and \$10,000 doesn't sound like a mugging, does it?"

A car passed on the street between them. Sunny had spun around by the time it was gone, and shouted back, "I'll meet you half way. Walk with me and I'll listen."

Unhurried, as if he expected the disinterest and was in no mood to appear anymore eager, Jim crossed the street. "Thanks, Sunny."

"Well, let's hear it?"

"You seem like a direct man, so I won't waste anymore of your time. My company has an interest in you throwing the match at the Grand Canyon."

"Throwing? Like throwing throwing? As in taking a fall and losing on purpose?"

"Yes." Jim's eyes didn't waver, even when Sunny did a double take.

"So if I..." he choked over the word, "lose at the Canyon, you'll give me a Div 15 car and ten grand?"

"Precisely. You see, we at SFE have analyzed your previous matches, and are concerned that you will utilize flamethrowers."

Now Sunny looked even more confused and worried. Had his attempt at unpredictability really become so...predictable? Could a bunch of lab rats figure out what weapons he would use before he even planned the load out? He tried to keep a straight face, "Oh, is that so?"

Jim read the doubt as easily as Sunny had read Milo's books. "I know you don't believe me, but the match will be held through ruined city blocks. We determined that flamethrowers would be an optimum weapon."

"And let me guess, my opponent will be running SFE products?"

"One of them will. The other will not." The revelation of multiple opponents sent Sunny even further off balance. He felt unprepared against the onslaught of Jim's insider information.

"Right. How do you know this, exactly?" As soon as the question left his mouth, Sunny felt ignorant for asking it. Of course a company as big as Surefire Fire Extinguishers would have the pull necessary to get early match details.

Again Jim noticed the hesitation at the end of the question, and let it pass unanswered. Sunny felt like he was debating a perceptive hawk.

For a moment they walked silently through suburbs. Deep in thought and trying to regain even footing, Sunny's mind churned. Beside him Jim seemed tranquil like the flat surface of a lake.

"Anyways, we want to demonstrate to the public what a difference SFE products make. You can destroy the car without an extinguisher system, to keep it interesting, but be sure to lose to the other."

Sunny tried to remember that Jim was the one making an offer. Regaining some gusto from that, he lightened his tone and asked "And that's it? You'd pay that much money to show people that, uh, fire extinguishers, you know, extinguish fires?"

"Well, some of our...less scrupulous board members also wish to profit personally by gambling against you. With eight straight victories, you certainly are the favorite at the Grand Canyon. Even with two opponents the odds will remain high for you to win." Jim's tone took on a more formal, serious air like that of a corporate manager. "Such a bet could net substantial rewards

for any involved parties."

Sunny caught the emphasis on 'any'. "Myself included, I assume?"

"As long as it's done through an intermediary, we don't mind at all if you bet against yourself."

They crested a slight hill to see The Dragon visible in the distance. Flickering campfires lit the armored sides, and Sunny could practically taste the smoked algae. "How can I contact you?"

Seeing that Sunny was considering the deal, Jim's manner grew short. "You won't. Instead you'll contact Jim Maldenerson once you reach Flagstaff. He'll make the final arrangements."

"Do they make you change your name to Jim when you start work?"

Jim slyly smiled, "It's easier for the public to remember."

"Well before you go," recovering his position of strength, Sunny implied that Jim would leave whenever the driver wished it, "tell me more about the money."

"Certainly. Once the match result is finalized in our favor, we'll phone in a transfer of the ten thousand dollars to any account you specify with Jim." He paused, then smirked slightly,

"That's the Jim in Flagstaff, of course."

"And the car? What can I expect with that?"

"A Hotshot, yellow in color, will be delivered to your team garage, again once the match is finished."

Sunny tried to act unimpressed, but in truth he could barely contain his excitement at the thought of owning his own top of the line vehicle. "A bit ironic for SFE, considering the armament?" he remarked, thinking of the four flamers on the stock Hotshot model.

"In the rare case an investigation comes up, I think a car opposed to our product would be a prudent choice."

"Slick, Jim. Well anyways," Sunny gave a prompt nod and turned his back on the man. The increasingly condescending vocabulary bothered Sunny, and he grew weary of being talked down to. Plus some food and company would help him think.

The following afternoon The Dragon roared to life and lumbered back onto highway 89.

Almost all of the repairs had completed on schedule. Waving thanks to Prescott mechanics, the semi-truck headed north to the final Interstate stretch to Flagstaff.

Sunny was deep in thought when Ned's face appeared level with the driver's bunk.

Precariously perched on the House ladder, Ned nervously made eye contact. "Hey there Sunny, it's me, Ned. Been a while, eh?"

Sitting upright, Sunny dismissed his considerations of Jim's offer and focused on the mechanic. The man looked content and rested in a way Sunny hadn't seen before. "Looks like The Dragon is treating you well."

"Yeah...yeah, it's been great." Clearly wishing to say something more, Ned paused and changed the topic. "Say, thanks for your help with those black cars. Zinc got some information on them."

"No one really stops by to tell me anything." Sunny said biting.

Trying to ignore the barb Ned detailed Zinc's findings, "Apparently the gang was headed by Ryan Halloway, an ex-navigator for The Dragon." Never comfortable with gossip, Ned adjusted himself on the ladder and leaned in closer, "Apparently this Ryan fellow was cut from the crew when he tried to blackmail a local town mayor. I guess he hoped to drop The Dragon's name and get some pull with the guy." Sunny listened intently, wondering if Ryan had suffered the same foul treatment he had. "So after Zinc cuts him out, Ryan gets a gang together and they track The Dragon for half a year. He knew pretty much the entire specs of the semi-truck, which would explain a lot of the tricks they used against us." Pausing to catch his breath, Ned

excitedly continued, "Radar blocking, exploiting the weak spot in cab and joint armor, that kind of thing."

"So it was personal? I guess this means The Dragon is becoming a little predictable in it's layout?" The driver held back a laugh when he considered Jim's similar exploitation of Sunny's own predictability.

"Exactly," Ned exclaimed, "to the point that Zinc is going to hold up in Flagstaff for a while and do some major overhauls and repairs to bolster our temporary patch jobs."

Sunny nodded, having seen similar outcomes in the arena. Often a skilled driver would become complacent and overconfident from a rash of victories. Sometimes an eager, daring underdog would topple age old champions. Internally torn, Sunny wondered if perhaps he was drifting into a similar period of stagnation. Maybe a change was needed to shake his style up. Ned interrupted his train of thought like a boulder on the tracks, and Sunny realized they had been sitting in silence for many moments. Fidgeting, the mechanic nervously asked, "So, about the Grand Canyon. Um, well, Zinc offered me a job here, a chance at a real life."

The announcement shook Sunny and widened his eyes with surprise. "A...a job? A life? What do you think we've been working at in the pits?"

"I know Sunny, it's just...well, I think I could do really good for myself here." Ned's expression was one of pleading desperation, as if he was a dog looking for a treat.

"Well you aren't under any contract with me. Do what you want," venomously he added, "pal."

Sunny's yellow bag dropped beside him, stirring a cloud of dust. Close to one hundred miles had passed, and still his anger at Ned simmered. The driver, fragile from crew gossip and torn by Jim's offer, saw the act as a betrayal. Ned had accepted tender aboard The Dragon, and even tried to apologize to Sunny for his choice. "Only he could stoop so low," Sunny bitterly said.

The semi-truck accelerated deeper into Flagstaff, away from the driver. The crew had been kind enough to leave him near a bus station, but the parting was cold and short.

"All the better. I can find ten mechanics just as good once I win," Sunny stumbled over the word as if Jim's offer had slipped his mind, "at the stupid Grand Canyon." Still debating on whether his dignity was worth a Div 15 Hotshot, Sunny grabbed his bag and started walking.

"Hey there cowboy, looking for a ride?"

Sunny bit his tongue to stop from snapping at the taxi driver. "Yeah, fine," he said, throwing himself into the backseat and slamming the door, "whatever."

"Where to partner?"

After futilely stamping around the bus station for an hour, Sunny had looked up his contact Jim Maldenerson. Now he scrounged a handwritten piece of paper from his jacket pocket.

"7651 Gemini Drive mean anything to you?"

"Yep, it's in the north east across town. Big houses that far out."

"Great," Sunny sighed, slumping back onto the leather bench. "Why do assholes always live outside the city?" At first he had tried to convince himself the address was just in case. But after sitting in a brightly lit bus depot he felt directionless, friendless, and ready to break some laws and make some money. He had stormed out of the building and briskly walked in the direction of Jim's house.

"Well aren't you Mr. Sunshine? Something the matter? You look a little riled up."

Sunny indulged in his anger, deflecting stress from the road onto the hapless taxi driver. "Hey, just go already."

The driver scoffed, flipped the meter, and merged back into traffic.

Silence reigned for three blocks, and then Sunny relented and spoke. His voice quavered with guilt, and started as barely a whisper from the back seat, "Hey, sorry for snapping earlier. I'm not going to that house for the best of reasons."

Unhurried in replying, the driver made a left turn before saying, "Oh yeah? You going to the in-laws or something?" Without missing a beat the driver laughed and continued, cutting Sunny's response off, "Don't fret, I get a lot of jerks with a lot of problems in that very seat."

Surprised by calm reaction he leaned forward to get a better look at the nameplate. "Well thanks, Sassy Sass." He let the name sink in for a moment before continuing, with a slight laugh and grin, "Is that your real name? Kind of sounds like you ma-"

"It's real, and catchy. Gotta have a catchy name to drive a cab you see. And you?"

Sunny continued smiling, realizing in his anger he had almost missed a chance to converse with the interesting lady. "Sunny, Sunny Miller."

This brought a roar of laughter from Sassy, who started speaking through coughing giggles, "Really? Sunny? And you were on my case for Sassy?"

Sunny blushed slightly, but continued to feel more comfortable around Sassy than he had around the entire crew of The Dragon. On a whim he visualized a rebuilt dueling team, "Say, can you do any mechanical work?"

"Like getting my hands all dirty with grease? Um, yeah, no," again came the laugh. "The only thing these puppies handle," she removed both hands from the steering wheel and wiggled her fingers, "is this here wheel. Speaking of which, what do you do for fun?"

"Actually nothing that different than you, Sassy. I'm an autoduelist. I'm going to meet a," Sunny searched for the word, "associate, to talk about my next match."

"Well if your associate lives along Gemini Drive I can only assume he's loaded. So you do pretty well in that racket?"

He smirked at the word choice, ironically thinking that Sassy didn't realize how truly "racket" described his next match. "It pays the bills. But even if they paid me in bread and water I'd still do it, I just feel at home in a car."

"Me too Sunny, me too."

For a moment the pair stared wistfully ahead, both warmed by their shared love of automobiles. Sunny realized he was so engrossed in talking that he leaned over the front bench. Awkwardly he shifted back slightly and took a second look at Sassy, "Have you been a cabbie long?"

Tilting her head slightly to see Sunny, she motioned for him to hop up to the front bench, "If we're going to exchange life stories, I'd rather not crane my neck." Happily and with an eagerness that surprised Sunny, he clambered into the passenger seat.

The drive went all too quickly for Sunny. He had met and courted many women before, but none that had the mischievous intelligence of Sassy. But before he realized it the city had faded behind them and the lights of Jim's community approached.

Having just listened to Sunny talk about Milo, Sassy changed the topic to the upcoming destination. "Just about there. Gemini Drive's the next turn, I think." Gently angling the car she continued, "But anyways, Milo sounds like a swell guy. Actually, when I can afford it I like to buy a book or two."

"Hopefully after my next match I should have enough to buy a whole library," he boasted. Sadness edged his voice when he thought of the dishonorable money.

Picking up the change in tone, Sassy probed for more information, "You don't sound like a man who's about to win it big."

"Do you..." Sunny paused then looked out the window, as if searching for comfort in the rolling landscape, "do you ever feel like you're at a crossroads? That the next decision you make could really change how your life ends up?"

"Practically everyday," she said, trying to lighten the mood and cheer him up. Although having just met Sunny, she placed him squarely into the "Not Annoying Passenger" category. After a moment Sassy continued more seriously, knowing she owed Sunny a proper answer, "I do struggle with that, but I try to look forward and not back at decisions I regret or mistakes I've made." Now it was Sassy's turn to stare out the window, "I guess that's the best anyone can do."

Uncertainly stirred in Sunny from the approach of Jim's house. Now he felt less alone and aimless than he did in the bus depot earlier. In a sense he already regretted his decision to come this far. Stirring from his thoughts, he looked over at Sassy. "You know one of Milo's books had a great quote I think you'd like." Clearing his throat and deepening his voice, he spoke as if reading, "It goes, 'Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.' A guy named Mark Twain said it, I don't know if you've heard of him or not."

"That's really great Sunny," was all Sassy could say, wonderment in her voice. She slowed the car to a stop, and Sunny could make out the number 7651 on the closest house. "Well..." she started, fidgeting now that her hands were free of the wheel.

"How's Los Angeles this time of year?"

Confused by the abrupt question, Sassy asked, "What? What do you mean?"

Acting as if he hadn't heard her, Sunny continued, "Maybe we should check it out. We can get back to Interstate 40 from here right?"

Mechanically she answered, "Well yes...yes it'd be just west along 40."

"Sassy, let's give it a shot." He was smiling broadly now, and Sunny's eyes twinkled.

Sassy shook her head, apparently not concerned with the distance. "Wait, what about your match?"

"Forget about it. The location was a dive anyways," he said. Internally Sunny cursed Jim, the SFE, the disreputable offer before gleefully thinking, "Time to throw off the bowlines and sail away."

The pair cleared the Kaibab Forest before doubts began to seep into the comfortable taxi atmosphere. They were fifty five miles west of Flagstaff and Sunny wavered for nearly all of it. Sassy on the other hand was beginning to question Sunny's monetary backing, and whether this unexpected joyride would be a paid expedition or not.

Once the excitement of rebellion wore off, Sunny began to think of the damage skipping a scheduled match would do to his reputation. He also considered the autodueling circuit standings and how his rank would slip. A dozen times he considered telling Sassy to turn the car around, but each time something deep inside forced him to remain silent.

And so the electricity of escaping Flagstaff flashed, simmered, then drifted from the car. Soon the two were idly swaying with each corner and bump of the road, both absorbed in considerations.

Sassy looked over at Sunny, as she had nearly every five miles. Finally her look led to conversation. "So..." for a moment the sudden voice broke the air, and the surprising levels of tension that filled it. "Um, you can pay and all, right?"

"Come on Sassy, this is an adventure, live it up," Sunny replied, forcing excitement into his voice. Seeing that the stern taxi driver wasn't convinced, he continued, "Yes, of course I can. Without auto repairs and entry fees I have quite a chunk saved up." In truth Ned had left all of their savings to Sunny, which, at the time, had only frustrated the hurt driver more. Now he was pleased at the boon and intended to use the bundle of cash to ferry him to a new life. "Well, good. I mean...it's just..." the words came hard to Sassy once she felt Sunny had been offended. "I...I just wanted to be sure."

"Don't worry about it." Quickly he took advantage of the renewed discussion and changed the subject, "So what's Interstate 40 like?"

Pushing herself up in the seat, Sassy regained some energy in her speech. "Hell you don't know? The way you threw around the directions I thought you knew the area."

"Yeah, well, I don't get out of the arena much, let's just say that."

"Hah, I figured you for a seasoned highwayman," she grinned, then soured her face at the next thought, "Wait, you can handle a gun right?"

Sunny rolled his eyes, and Sassy brightened, "Right, of course you can. Well this beauty of an automobile has four drops and a VMG in the turret."

"Ah the Vulcan machine gun, where would we be without you?" Sunny joked rhetorically, "Besides crudely shooting less than a zillion rounds a minute."

"Try two thousand," she said, pleased to spout technical statistics.

"Do you figure we'll see much action on the way?" he innocently asked, feeling comfortable enough to display some level of highway ignorance to Sassy.

"Maybe a little," she said, winking. Sunny blushed at the double meaning, but turned his head towards the window to hide his red cheeks. "Here to Kingman, about a hundred miles ahead, is pretty quiet. Most of the gang activity is still centered around Phoenix." She took a breath and scanned over her shoulder, "But after that we cross into California, and we're in the thick of it until Barstow, outside of Los Angeles. That's another two hundred miles or so. Then the short arm of the law cuddles us, and we're safe enough until Los Angeles."

Calculating the distances in his head, Sunny asked, "How far out of LA is Barstow?"

"Hmm," Sassy thought, then nodded her chin to the passenger seat, "reach under there and feel for a lockbox. Pull that sucker out, it's got all the maps."

"Under lock and key hey?"

"Knowing where you're going is half the battle, and it's not like we have National Geographic driving around plotting highways. Maps are a hot commodity in most states."

"Who are Nationa-"

She shushed his question with an outstretched finger, then perked an ear to the roaring air blowing past the window. "Did you hear something?"

Sunny sat frozen with the lockbox in his lap, trying to listen for any suspicious noise. "Yes, just then. It sounded like an engine," uncertainly he guessed, "some kind of big block."

"Dammit, nothing on radar. Stow those maps and keep a lookout, I'm going to try to pull off the road."

"Shouldn't we keep driving instead of letting someone catch us stopped?"

"Better to avoid a fight if we can. Once I'm off the highway we can shut down and that'll hide us from all but the best radar systems." Sunny doubted the confidence in her voice. "Now, look," she ordered, motioning his eyes to the back window.

Carefully he peered behind them and to both sides, trying to catch a glimpse of the source of the approaching noise.

He twitched and spun around in surprise when the radio crackled to life. "Impact 66 we have you sighted. Slow down and drop your cargo, this is a robbery!"

"Shit," Sassy exclaimed, rapidly working various switches on the dashboard. The turret whined to life and Sunny looked at the view screen before grabbing the aiming joystick.

"I still don't see anything." Sassy didn't respond, so Sunny tried again, "What's our plan?"

"First we'll-" her squeak as they crested the next hill cut off her sentence. The brakes howled and Sunny lurched forward in the restraining straps, the pain reminding him of desperate arena fights.

An armored van waited at the bottom of the hill, angled sideways to block the road. The entire rear quarter was replaced by a single massive weapon sprouting cables and ammunition tubes. Sunny had yet to face such a gun in combat, but he knew the make by reputation alone. "Blast cannon," he mumbled as Sassy started to angle the car to flee.

"You know I could have had ya," echoed the voice on the radio. Sassy's mouth dropped in surprise. Beside her the duelist was too shocked to budge. A tall man walked out from behind the van, waving a prosthetic arm.

"Son of a bitch," she yelled into the mic, all panic gone from her voice. "War Dog why didn't you just radio me right away?"

Beginning to recover, Sunny pushed himself back into the seat. "Wait you know this guy?"

"Sassy, Sassy, Sassy. If I told you I wouldn't get to see you turn and run like a little rabbit," came the mocking response.

"Clearly the superior strategy against that...thing," she replied, motioning to the gun even though War Dog was too far to see her hands.

"You mean Bessy, or Betsy?"

The taxi churned to life and she angled slightly to bring the vehicle back in line with War Dog.

"I never know which is which, but I do know I wouldn't want to tangle with either."

Momentarily clicking off the radio she asked Sunny, "Do you know what that gun is?"

"Yeah, a blast cannon. Looks like a newer model too, maybe from late 2035." Sassy nodded, impressed that he knew something she did not. Feigning ignorance of her approving glance, he rambled on, "Definitely expensive, and definitely military."

"Bessy is my van," War Dog said over the radio, then sarcastically added, "clearly. Betsy is her little sister that I just picked up from an army auction."

Pulling to the side of the road, Sassy got out of the taxi and smiled, "Who'd you kill to get money for that?"

"You know, a few here and there. The Redwoods are busy this time of year with inept tourists."

Sunny was taken aback by the comment, and his eyes uncontrollably narrowed at the man.

"Bandit?"

"Down boy," Sassy said in a joking tone, grinning towards War Dog. Turning back, her face belated calm and control to Sunny. He took the hint and restrained further comments.

"This your fare Sassy?" The man said, measuring up Sunny. Feeling the probing gaze, Sunny straightened to his full height and matched the stare. War Dog was taller and clad mostly in leather accented with jutting metal spikes. The man had a thick black beard and wore wide sunglasses, even on the overcast day. Sunny figured they were to cover the horrible scars, cracked cheekbones, and general disarray of War Dog's face. "When are you going to stop babysitting and come roll with me?"

Trying to deflect the escalating testosterone, she strode towards Bessy. "Probably when you get

a real vehicle instead of this house on wheels."

"Sure she tops out at seventy, but she's got more armor than three of your little cabs," War Dog said, patting the hood of the van.

Having exhausted the natural progression of the conversation, the three drivers stood uncomfortably on the open road. "Well, taking this boy further west?"

"His heart's set on the coast," Sassy replied, looking down the Interstate over War Dogs shoulder. "Where'd you set out from?"

"Mexico, baby. I was camped on a patch waterfront in San Felipe, letting some local heat die down. Then some villagers come at Bessy with pitchforks like a damn witch hunt. I guess one of the barbarians got a radio and heard of my...good deeds further up the Gulf."

"So what'd the 'barbarians' do?" Sassy urged, playing along with War Dogs long, winding approach to story telling.

"Well, crying mostly once I started shooting." He roared with laughter, and Sassy joined him. Sunny detected her reluctance, and offered his own halfhearted chuckles.

As the boasting and bellows died down, War Dog leaned against the van and continued, "Anyways if you're taking 40 all the way west, be careful around Mojave. There's been some bad shit lately with punks in hot rods." War Dog's lips parted in a crooked smile, "I wouldn't want your pretty face to get messed up, after all."

Sassy nodded, "Thanks, I'll keep it in mind." Slowly she edged away from Bessy and back towards the taxi. "Good to see you again War Dog, sounds like you're doing great. I, we," she looked at Sunny, who was matching her backwards route, "had better hit the road. Long way to go and all that."

"Well if you're ever in town," War Dog said, pushing himself up from the leaning stance, "call me."

"Of course, of course." She didn't bother to clarify which town, and certainly didn't plan on seeing the man if at all possible. Waving out the window she eagerly started the car and pulled around the wide van.

War Dog, still grinning through his smashed lips and mottled face, called after them, "Call me!"

"Well, he seemed like a," Sunny searched for the perfect word, "wholesome guy."

"Stupid, ignorant, moron," she spit as soon as the taxi was out of earshot. "Just forget about him Sunny. I'm glad there wasn't trouble or anything, but I almost would have preferred a straight up fight to meeting War Dog again."

"Such a scary name too," he replied sarcastically, enjoying the chance to relentlessly hassle Sassy. "Do you think it's so helpless tourists and Mexican people, er, 'barbarians', fear him?" Not appreciating his biting comments, Sassy narrowed her eyes and stewed in anger.

Seeing that she wasn't going to offer an explanation, Sunny pushed, "Do I have to pry the thrilling details out of you, or what?"

"Look, a lot of different people work as couriers. I met War Dog when I was running the east coast. He seemed to think we hit it off," she scowled, "at least enough to basically follow me across the country. Creep just shows up every so often, as if to remind me he can find me."

"Uh, oh, wow," Sunny said, surprised by the disturbing details. "I thought you were an ex-bandit or something fun, not a victim to a crater faced stalker."

"Yeah, well..." she paused, wavering on saying anything more. Sassy was surprised at how quickly Sunny had charmed her, even if he hadn't meant to. Years of hurt and confusion from unruly, rough men meant her natural reaction was to back off and try to create some distance.

"But," she thought, "maybe he's just a solid guy. He's young and sheltered enough to not have a

heart of stone from killing." Her mind wandered through the possibilities. "Sure he doesn't know a highway road from a dry oil stain..." Sassy realized she had left the duelist hanging with her unfinished sentence. Loosening her shoulders, as if physically letting down her defenses, Sassy decided to open up to the driver a bit more, "There's a lot about me you don't know."

A sheltered citizen of a fortress town, having only driven on protected roads in his unarmored car, might not understand the bond that can form on the open highway. Besieged by bandits and surrounded by danger and uncertainty, comrades of the road quickly form lasting friendships.

Sassy and Sunny were no different, especially after spending most of the day talking. He confessed to growing up in the garages and arena pits while she spoke of food riots and her tender early start in driving.

Sassy found she shared many core views with the duelist, under her cold, snappy exterior. While they exchanged feelings and emotions Sassy couldn't help but think of the last time she had opened up to a man. Such memories only strengthened her resolve and thickened her protective shield of frigid disregard.

They stopped late in the afternoon in Kingman, near the California border, preferring to drive the dangerous section that followed with fresh nerves and fresh reflexes. They ate a small cafe in a walled mall, then retired to the cramped quarters of a motel room.

Silently they unpacked bags from the trunk and secretively carried maps into the motel room. The pair continually exchanged glances and smiles, and amidst all her doubts Sassy couldn't help but feel that if anyone could restore her trust, it was Sunny.

Still, years of harassment, lewd jokes, and endless unwanted attention didn't melt in a night. Sassy encouraged the duelist to sleep on the floor while she curled up on the narrow, flimsy bed. After saying their goodnights and shuffling into a comfortable position, both drivers stayed awake long into the night, reflecting.

The soft drone of traffic woke Sassy the next morning. Due to Kingman's proximity to a copper mine, the city was rich and popular. Sassy knew the highways west would be hazardous, and the numerous vehicles driving by the motel window would dwindle to a dangerous few.

Rolling over in the bed, she glanced down at Sunny's bed mat. He was not there, and momentarily she was confused and slightly nervous. Then she noticed sunlight pouring over the lounge table where he sat. The man hadn't noticed her awaken, and was busy pouring over detailed maps.

She watched him for a moment, enjoying the cramped lines of concentration lacing his face. Eventually he glanced up, as if sensing the stare. "Had enough beauty sleep?" There was no cruelty in his jest, only warmth.

She replied by sighing and rolling back over. Her eyes were open though as she watched the traffic drift by.

"So did you learn anything useful?" Sassy asked later that morning. The pair sat in her taxi, Impact 66, eating their morning meal. She choked back algae salad, while Sunny ate tightly packed rolls of the green growth.

"I just wanted to get a better look at California. I've only been there once, and it was further north."

"California is California, the way I see it. I think you'll like LA though, it's a pretty bustling

place." Sassy mentioned, breaking the unspoken rule of avoiding discussion on what would happen when they reached the city.

"Yeah...LA," he replied, staring in a daze at his rolled algae. "I guess we better saddle up and hit the road. Maybe we can get through before the bandits wake up."

The bandit Bloody Bill Sandriro awoke with a start, automatically reaching for his pistol. He sat upright, sweat beading across his rough face. An artificial bearskin rug hung over the cot, and he could hear his rowdy gang chattering outside. Two women sprawled in the bed beside him curled up against the gust of fresh air.

Bloody Bill was named for his red dune buggy. Whispered tourists said the vehicle was coated with the blood of his foes. In truth it was two jugs of paint, but Bill wasn't one to correct beneficial gossip.

His gang, the Blood Reapers, prowled the Mojave desert and surrounding roads. They led a nomadic existence, settling for a week or two in light tents. The trackless sand dunes meant they primarily drove off-road vehicles with reliable weaponry that fired even when clogged with sand.

The Blood Reapers had hit a bus laden with medical supplies eight days ago. Foolish and inexperienced, the drivers had cut through the Mojave desert along Kelbaker Road. Apparently his legend hadn't spread enough to stop people from trying to use his territory as a shortcut. Listening to the boisterous cheers outside, Bill knew the time to depart was at hand. The gang grew restless from the relaxation, and if he didn't loose them on new victims soon they'd start to in-fight and turn on each other.

Resting the pistol near the bed, he rose and crossed to a well worn map. Lines of red marked their most recent activities. The crisscrossing trails drew a smile from Bill, for the gang had done well recently.

Looking closer he saw Interstate 40 had only a few lines, faded and aged. Perhaps the time had come to revisit old ambush spots along the highway.

Sassy and Sunny drove in comfortable silence, enjoying each others company. The road towards Needles was quiet and safe so far. A convoy going the opposite way had hailed them, so they slowed and let it roll past. Two slower vehicles further down the highway had done the same for Sassy. Slowing to let friendly cars go by was common courtesy on most highways, and the practice made everyone involved feel more relaxed.

They crossed the California border and recharged at a station outside Needles, but skirted the walled city itself. Close to forty miles later, just north of Essex, trouble found them. Trouble was painted red.

Sassy noticed the beeping radar first, and quickly checked for target information. Cursing, she began the routine of combat preparation. Switches flicked and levers were pulled as she relayed radar information to Sunny, "Looks like four vehicles. Engine readings are a little wonky for three of them though..."

Leaning across to glimpse the dashboard, apparently unhurried by the approaching signals, Sunny guessed, "I'm not too familiar with the radar, but I've seen lower signatures like that when the vehicle is something light. Say like a jeep or buggy." Sassy absorbed the information, but didn't slow in her planning. "They could be friendly, like that last two?"

She had considered the possibility. The taxi driver truly wished they could have safely reached Los Angeles, just to relish peace for a while. But whatever the four signals were, they were coming in hard from the Mojave desert. Nothing good came from the desert.

Calmly activating the turret, Sunny didn't seem as worried. He figured a little combat would bring the pair closer, and Sunny didn't mind that outcome at all. Plus his humiliation aboard The Dragon had inspired the man, and he had been thinking and planning since. "You know I've been thinking more about highway combat."

"I don't know if we have time for a heart to heart, hun," Sassy said, checking the relative distance on the radar.

"No no, hear me out. I know we don't have walls and barrels like in the arena. But that can help us here. We'll look all lonely on this wide open road, and these guys will think they have us outnumbered and outmatched."

"Duh, they do," she snapped, not understanding his reasoning.

"Are you hearing me out yet?" he replied in frustration. "Anyways, I know that a hungry enemy will follow a weaker car anywhere. Especially when that enemy is blinded by favorable odds." Sassy had started speeding up to meet the foes at combat speed. "Yeah, so? So?" she eagerly asked.

"Well maybe it's time to ambush the ambushers."

"A bait and switch hey? You have been thinking about the road," her cool energy dissipated into happiness at having Sunny as a co-pilot. For once she was glad to not be driving alone, or worse yet transporting a cowardly moron.

Sunny was smiling at the thought of battle. "They might have more guns and cars, but I say we drop some goodies and even things up."

"The fool is fleeing," Bloody Bill spit into his mic, enraged at the blatant cowardice. He wouldn't let the prey get away so easily though. "Rankor and Fry, pursue! We'll follow at five hundred feet. Arm weapons and get ready." Crushing the wheel in his grip, he growled, "Ready for a slaughter!"

Roars of approval echoed back through the radio, and Bill cheered. "Today will be a good day," he thought. Revving the exposed buggy engine, he screamed after the two lead vehicles.

Sassy floored the taxi close to 140 miles an hour, nearly the limit of the wavering vehicle.

"Good, just keep going. We need to escape their radar range to make this work." She was trusting fully in Sunny, who scrutinized the California map. "Okay, hard right in a mile. Before you turn drop a row of mines, with a gap big enough for us to fit through."

She was so focused on driving at a high speed that Sassy barely heard the idea. The mile was quickly devoured under her tires, and she angled out and slowed before the turn.

Pumping a button four times covered the pavement with a row of active mines. Then she cornered and did the same further south on Goffs Road. The side road connected with the highway to Essex, but the pair didn't intend to go that far.

Having laid another series of mines, Sassy doubled back to the Interstate and headed west towards the gang. Half a mile down the road she swung around yet again before bringing the car to a stop.

The taxi faced east, towards the first set of dropped mines. Sunny's plan was to wait for the gang, then pretend to flee back to Needles. Their path would cross the devastating mines, and the unsuspecting foes would drive right over them. If any vehicles remained they would cut down Goffs Road and hit the second strip of mines, pulling the same trick for against any survivors. He figured they could mop up the rest using the turret and other weapons.

Sassy liked the plan, even if her mine ammunition was depleted setting up the ruse. The taxi still had smoke, oil, and spikes to drop in a pinch. And Sassy felt confident at how comfortable

Sunny seemed guiding the turret in wide, probing sweeps.

They waited partially off the road, as if to hide. "Hopefully," Sassy thought, "our position will really make the attackers think we're scared and an easy mark." The driver crossed her fingers at the thought, and waited.

Rankor and Fry were newer members of the Blood Reapers, and therefore positioned in the lead. Out front was dangerous and vulnerable, but the two drivers sped, undaunted, towards the latest signal of the target. They both drove crude dune buggies. The vehicles were little more than steel piping surrounding an engine, seats, and a machine gun and flamer. Though exposed to return fire, the buggies were ideal for the deep sand edging the highway.

Sitting beside his brother, Slim spotted the taxi first. "Hey Chub," he cried in his brother's ear, "I see dem! Dead ahead." Driving with one hand and working the radio with the other, Chub relayed the information to Bill. Having been with the gang for longer meant the brothers had first pick of salvage. They drove an imposing four-wheel-drive truck. A pair of rockets were loaded in the front, and Slim hunched over a linked Vulcan machine gun turret in the back. The pair of weapons were crudely bolted together and mounted on a steel beam. Hooting and hollering the thin gunner eagerly swiveled the guns to bear.

"Good. Rankor and Fry, split off either side of the road and get that son of a bitch. Slim and Chub, stay back by me." He slowed the dune buggy slightly. "Once they get tangled up we'll swoop in and seal the deal." Driving in his namesake buggy, Bill had no doubt of their impending victory. His buggy carried an impressive array of four forward machine guns, plus a flamethrower. An oil jet dribbling out the back of the open chassis.

Sunny knew he may have overestimated the effectiveness of his plan as soon as the horde appeared in the distance. Four blinking dots on a radar looked much less imposing than the roaring cloud of vehicles bearing down on them.

Her face chiseled from rock, Sassy calmed the man's worry. "Fire as soon as they're in range. On the first hit I'll flee towards our trap."

Steeling his nerves, Sunny pushed all thought of failure from his mind. He had done similar before in the arena. Now came his true reckoning of fire on the lawless highway.

Two of the buggies separated from the group and cut off the road on both sides. Calmly Sunny adjusted the joystick until the turret was aimed squarely at the left buggy. Holding his breath he fired for half a second, re-targeted, then gave another half second fusillade. The car shuddered slightly as ammunition fed into the turret, out the chamber, and down the road like furious falcons.

Rankor saw the muzzle flash but barely had time to react before the first cloud of bullets smashed into his buggy. He weaved deeper into the desert sand, hoping to drop lower than the road and use the asphalt as cover. Steel cracked and sparks flew as dozens of the rounds hit home.

The strategy saved his life though as the road intercepted the second hail of Vulcan shots. A few snuck past the black barrier and caught the buggy's left side, melting the thin sheets of plastic armor. Running parallel he saw Fry duck further off the road, matching the safer approach.

Tires squealed as the Impact 66 roared away. Sassy, on cue from the successful hit, had gunned the engine almost simultaneously. The two buggies busily dodged and tried to weave to safer positions, giving Sassy the perfect opportunity to avoid their fire until her car was up

to speed.

Rankor and Fry saw the escaping target, and opened fire despite their angle. The cackle of machine guns filled the air, but both bandits scowled and cursed as the haphazard shots went wide.

"Idiots," Bill said under his breath. Into the mic he ordered them, "Hold your fire until you can actually hit something!" Anger edged his words, and he suddenly doubted how far the lead buggies would get in the Blood Reaper hierarchy. "Do you want to run dry before you even get in range?"

"Sorry, boss," came the mumbled reply from Rankor, undoubtedly the stronger of the two new members.

The pack rumbled down Interstate 40, unable to come to grips with the speeding taxi. Sassy had invested quite a bit of money to ensure her vehicle could outrun almost any foe. Even so the buggies always kept within firing distance, settling for swatting at the target like a cat strikes a mouse.

Sunny was merciless in his return fire, but the Vulcan machine gun couldn't fire forever. The buggies still kept low and off the pavement which made Sassy's rear weapons ineffective. On their own Bill and the truck would have been susceptible, but now the lead buggies acted as an early warning system for hazards.

Dedicating herself to driving felt pointless to Sassy, for the highway was mostly straight until the intersection with Goffs Road. Finally she dropped a triple batch of spikes out of sheer frustration. As expected the buggies missed them entirely, and Bill and the trailing truck, once warned, could drift out of the way.

"Let's hope the buggies don't see our mines, or this'll go badly real quick," Sassy yelled over the roar of machine gun fire.

Sunny paused his firing to offer advice, "Maybe let up a bit so they get closer and have less time to react."

Nodding she gripped the wheel and swerved slightly, faking a loss of traction. She braked and slowed, acting as a nervous driver would. Sensing weakness in their victim, the two buggies sped up and closed.

Sassy noticed a pair of landmark rocks and knew the mines were close. Rear armor flaked away and the back window shattered as the distance to the buggies lessened. "Keep them busy, almost there!"

Continuing to focus on Rankor, Sunny spun the Vulcan machine gun and finally hit the exposed engine. Flames exploded from the valves, and smoke poured from the vehicle. Rankor slowed, coughing through his bandanna.

"Chub! Rankor is hit, but they've slowed. Get in there and blast their ass," spittle flew as Bill hollered into the mic, eager for the kill.

Too eager.

There was a blinding flash and blast of heated air as the truck accelerated directly over a mine. Bill grimaced as chunks of Slim splattered his buggy. The force of the explosion jack-knifed the burnt out wreck into a second mine. Already shattered and melted, the chassis disintegrated into a cloud of ash. Flecks of metal mixed with pieces of his gang wafted over Bill.

Keeping his wits the leader swerved to match the truck's original path, taking him over the already detonated mine. He breathed a sigh of relief when no killing explosions resulted from the move.

Quickly he issued orders to the remaining buggies, hoping to salvage the situation. "Fry stay up alongside them and shoot the bastard in the head. Rankor keep harassing from off-road, I'll join you."

Bloody Bill and Fry accelerated at the same time. A cloud of dust sputtered from Fry's buggy as he crossed onto the pavement. Driving hard he nearly pulled up beside the taxi. Further back, Bill moved closer to Rankor, and added his rack of machine guns to the punishing barrage against the taxi's rear.

"Wait, boss, I ain't got no side guns!" Fry nervously asked over the radio, apparently witless under pressure. Bill could see and hear the Vulcan shells pattering the buggy.

"Use your damn pistol if you have to, just get that driver distracted!"

"They're almost through the rear armor, Sunny," she exclaimed, weaving and dodging to try to avoid Fry.

Concentrating hard the duelist barely heard her. "Speed up. That buggy with the smoking engine can't keep this up forever. Then we'll-" Sassy's window shattered and sprayed the pair with glass. Grinning down the barrel of a shotgun was Fry. He hefted the weapon and reloaded for a second attack.

She screamed in pain as razor sharp pieces cut into her face. Shock and pain caused Sassy to lose control, and the taxi fishtailed towards the desert. Lurching against the swaying vehicle, Sunny spun the turret and held the trigger, praying for a miracle. He could hear the patter of casings on the roof as the Vulcan fired at full speed.

Still recovering from the shotgun, Sassy spun the wheel in dizziness and confusion. Between gasps of pain she couldn't tell which way was left and which was right. Impact 66 continued on the deadly path into the dunes.

The sweeping arc of Vulcan death chewed up pavement and spit up sand. Dragging the joystick, Sunny lined the turret up with Fry. Instantly the buggy exploded under the withering hail of fire. Pieces of the roll cage snapped in all directions, tires exploded, and the ruined buggy became a chunk of firewood for the flames.

Before he could cheer or choose another target, the careening taxi jumped off the pavement and slammed into the side of a dune.

Bill and Rankor mashed the brakes, hoping to quickly swoop in and destroy the crashed taxi. The leader was furious to see another gang member die against, what he considered, a glorified mail carrier.

"Hurry Rankor!" Finally halted, the remaining Blood Reapers were quick to reverse towards their victim.

"Boss my-" was all Bill heard on the radio before Rankor's buggy caught flame. The damaged, overworked engine reacted poorly to switching gears. Trying to reverse was like triggering a bomb, for the entire vehicle was engulfed in blazing fire.

Screaming and clawing at his face, Rankor stumbled from the wreck. His clothes were aflame and rolling on the pavement did little to quell the blaze. Spilled gasoline had stuck to his skin like napalm, and the man was burning up. Considering himself merciful, Bill reoriented the red buggy and fired a quick burst into Rankor, putting him out of his misery.

Swinging the vehicle around to bear on the taxi, Bill flailed in his seat, "That's four honest men you've cost me! You hear me assholes?"

Pain from her wounds combined with the impact to knock Sassy unconscious. Hunched over

the wheel, blood dripped from her face and shoulder. Her foot kept on the accelerator, and the taxi feebly squealed in the dirt. The front was crushed inwards against a dune. Lines of sand filtered through the cracked armor and into the exposed radiator, and white smoke was starting to drift from the engine.

Sunny was aware of his surroundings, but only barely. The targeting screen was cracked, and a matching cut bled above his left eye. He swatted at the joystick, barely able to lift his head. Squeezing the trigger produced a clacking sound from the turret as the weapon tried to eat ammo that wasn't there. "Empty. Great."

"Look at you now!" Bill enjoyed the sound of his own voice echoing against the dunes, and he continued the boasting. "Blew up a few vehicles for what? A bunch of sand?" His hand twitched over the flamethrower trigger, just wishing one of the passengers would limp into the open. "Come on then? Nothing left..." The gang leader's voice became as cold as ice and he threatened, "...but payback!"

Bill held the triggers so hard his finger hurt. Four machine guns poured bullets into the disabled taxi. Tattered armor dropped to the sand, and the underlying trunk caved inwards and sparked. Long jets of fire erupted from the flamethrower as he raked the breadth of the vehicle.

Sunny threw open his door, desperate like a cornered animal to escape the heat. He grabbed Sassy's wrist and tried to haul her across the bench.

"Not real fair, picking on 'em like that." Intense with anger came a voice over the radio.

The bullets and fire stopped for a moment as Bill released the trigger in surprise. "Who in the hell is this?" he yelled into the mic.

"Just a...concerned citizen."

"I'm gonna kill these punks, then I'm gonna find you and I'm gonna burn you so hard your kids'll be hotdogs." Roaring Bill jammed the triggers again and the barrage resumed.

Laughing manically in his exposed buggy, Bill threw his eyes skyward in the ecstasy of murder. There was a slight thump from further up the road, and suddenly his head drifted towards the clouds. Laser beams severed the bandit's neck and tore apart his torso. The mangled corpse slumped forward; death having ceased the attack on the taxi.

Focused solely on saving himself and Sassy, the duelist continued to pull her body towards the door. Amidst the smoke of the burning vehicle he saw Sassy drawing shallow breaths.

Dropping one hand to the sandy ground for balance, Sunny pushed himself out of the vehicle. Heaving with his other arm, he pulled the unconscious woman off the bench and down to the ground.

Any moment he expected Bill's guns to tear through him. "Beats burning alive," he thought.

Wearily, beyond exhaustion, the duelist started crawling away from Impact 66.

A dusty boot stomped down in front of his face.

"You got a lot of guts, kid."

Sunny vaguely looked upwards, one eye bruised shut from the crash. A wide brimmed hat blocked out the sun, and he could see a toothpick at the edge of his savior's mouth. Then Sunny collapsed to the sand, whispering for mercy.

Pike shifted his toothpick and looked down at the pair. More than happy to kill a ruthless

bandit, the man felt his job was done. Callously, as if to convince himself of his right to leave, Pike spun on his heel towards Jodi. "Their wounds will probably heal," he thought, "well, if other bandits don't come and finish the job first."

Jaded and having little room in his heart for pity, Pike took a step towards his car. But deep inside, under the chiseled face worn from long years on the road, he knew he couldn't leave the helpless couple.

"No, dammit," he said, rubbing his forehead at his indecisiveness, "where was the good samaritan to save my wife?"

He took another step towards Jodi, futile rage hardening his heart. Pike gave one final glance over his shoulder as he walked, then stopped. Sighing slowly and turning, he gazed longingly at Sunny's desperate, life saving grip on Sassy's wrist.

Finally he relented and dropped to a knee by the two. Gingerly scooping up Sassy's prone form, he turned back towards the car. His aging back already hurt from the burden, but Pike persevered. He knew a person couldn't just forget years of officer and priest training, no matter how much he resisted admitting that fact to himself.

"Don't look at me Jodi, you're going to have to carry them next."

Human flesh heals quicker than metal, and Sunny soon became coherent enough to worry about his surroundings. "What are you-" A cough from his dry throat interrupted the question, "Where are you taking me...us?" he said, remembering to look back at Sassy. She was crumpled in the rear seat amidst a hastily cleared stash of equipment. Sunny was leaning back in the passenger seat of Pike's car. Silent and focused with driving, Pike was an intimidating captor.

Still reeling and dazed from cracking his head on the targeting system, Sunny nervously continued, "Are...are you with that gang?"

"No, you don't have to worry. Here," Pike reached into a slot beside him, "here, take some of this."

Sunny quaffed the offered water, instantly feeling better. "Ugh," he groaned, not quite healthy enough to sit up abruptly. "Thanks. I'm Sunny, and that is Sassy."

"Pike."

The younger driver was confused at the gruff attitude after the lifesaving intervention. He wondered if perhaps the man had spared them for some selfish, nefarious purpose.

Determined to match the unfriendly voice, Sunny pushed again, "Where are we going?"

"South east. We passed through Barstow an hour ago. I learned that the 18 through Victorville was dangerous, so we're swinging around on the 138."

"And where does the 138 take us?"

"What state are you from?" For a moment confusion crossed Pike's face. Sunny didn't mind and thought any emotion was better than single word answers. "The 138 goes into Los Angeles."

Sunny shook his head, still a little groggy, "Right, right, I knew that." Silently he berated himself since a brief search through his memories of the maps helped him visualize the route. He decided matching Pike's cold attitude would be impossible, so the duelist tried a friendlier approach. "And I'm from all over. Me and Sassy were actually travelling right to Los Angeles, so this works well." He protectively glanced at Sassy again, "I mean, it would have worked better if her taxi wasn't totaled."

"I'm last out of Needles," Pike said, responding well to the relaxed attitude Sunny was working towards. "My apologies that we couldn't hang around the accident. I was worried more bandits would be by, and didn't want to risk a fight with two wounded civilians," Pike shook his head

slightly to clear the accidental slip into formal police speech, "I mean people."

"Once Sassy recovers I'm sure she'll want to get back there and tow her cab in for repairs."

Pike tilted his head in doubt, "What the Barstow people didn't strip, I'm sure scavengers did."

"Regardless..." Sunny trailed off and tried to lean back to get a better view of Sassy. "Wait, I mean, I assume she's going to recover..." Dizziness swept over him, but he fumbled through the spinning to turn Sassy's face towards him. "Thanks for the bandages," he sincerely said.

"Don't thank me, thank the people of Barstow. They have quite a good medical center there."

Sunny nodded vacantly and continued his inspection. Spots of blood, some dark and some fresh, patterned the entire left side of her head. "The docs were able to get out all of the glass, but she'll probably scar."

"How bad did it look?"

"Bad enough. Probably a good thing she's a cabbie and not a street girl."

Sunny solemnly nodded and turned back to watch the road. The rumble of cracked pavement broke the silence, and Sunny caught himself falling asleep. Still not trusting the detached driver, Sunny tried to talk to stay awake. "Were you able to bring any of that salvage to Barstow? We knocked off quite a few buggies."

"Actually yes, again thanks to the people there," Pike replied. "While you were getting fixed up I talked to a chop shop, an honest one, and told them about the fight. They drove out and hauled back most of the cars." Talking about salvage rights and accounting details made Pike forget his stoic facade. "Looked like they beat the unscrupulous junk vultures to the punch before the crash was stripped clean."

Rounding a corner, Pike leaned to the side and started digging in his jacket pocket. "Here's the bulk of it," he said, passing Sunny a credit chip. "Maybe it'll help you two get back on your feet. I don't know what your situation is like...and honestly there isn't much more I can do to help, but it's something."

Sunny checked the card's readout, which marked the secure banking chip as containing \$4,500. Before his mind wandered into calculations of possible purchases, he patted Pike on the shoulder. The motion was reflex from friendly camaraderie in the pits, but the older man recoiled from the touch. Sunny pretended not to notice, "Thanks a lot, this is really good of you."

The pair returned to silence. Pike tried to quell the growing comfort of having someone to talk to, besides Jodi, and the unexpected feeling of not being alone. Sunny was still busy determining what kind of life awaited him and Sassy in Los Angeles.

Her eyes peeked open to a fading sun and a wash of pain. Sassy cringed and tried to mentally center herself. She could hear Sunny's voice, distantly, as well as another man. Her body recognized the sway of an old fashion muscle car before her mind could process the information.

"Wha..." escaped her lips, and she closed her eyes again. The left side of her face felt like someone was running salted sandpaper across it. Both her legs hurt from being smashed against the bottom of the dashboard. Sassy took comfort in the calmness of Sunny's voice, knowing that he would be violently stressed if they had fallen into the gang's clutches.

A question ran through her mind, amidst the swirling confusion. "Maybe I'm dead though?"

"Sassy? Sassy can you hear me?"

His voice reinvigorated her, and Sassy dared to open her eyes again. Sunny was peering from the front seat. A line of stitches ran across his forehead, but otherwise he seemed in good spirits.

"Su...Sunny. I feel like I just drank tequila from a gutter."

"Damn near to it," he exclaimed. Sunny knew they had grown close, but was still surprised by how overjoyed he felt at seeing her alive. "This is Pike, and he saved our lives."

Humbly the man lifted two fingers from the wheel in greeting, "Howdy, Sassy."

"I'd love to chat boys, but I think I'll pass out instead." Sassy drowsily slumped forward. A sense of security mixed with exhaustion put her into a deep, sound sleep.

Years of autoduelling had been hard on Los Angeles. The port city was rife with gangs and violence since the first groundwork was laid. After the inception of autoduelling modern gangsters realized guns on cars were immensely more satisfying, and effective, than carrying a pistol.

Rolling blackouts and the food riots of 2016 decimated the civilian population. Crowded hovels of under prepared families were washed away in the chaos. Rich, upscale movie stars hid in their mansion fortresses until the gates were torn open. Survivors had to deal with bands of hoodlums driving lowered cars and toting an arsenal of destruction.

The police force, swamped by bureaucracy and thousands of outstanding cases, could do little to stop the onslaught. For many years the city became "Los Anarchy". Lawless streets filled with brutal violence marred the crumbling city for many years.

In the winter of 2038 some semblance of law was restored. Government tanks and mercenary duelists rolled block by block through the burning city. Opposition was destroyed without mercy or question as the iron boot of order returned to Los Angeles.

Three years after The Reckoning, as locals call it, the city has nearly recovered. Smashed skyscrapers and looted suburbs were demolished and rebuilt. The atmosphere of the city has reversed and now gang members cower, waiting for justice to find them. "Banditry Via Automobile" is the official charge against any foolish enough to fight on the streets, and such a crime is sentenced by death.

A new, elite police force was installed after the tanks left, and they are doing everything possible to prevent a resurgence of violence. Funding wasn't an issue once the movie mills of Hollywood began churning again. Poor and destitute, many citizens would trade their last bowl of algae soup for a single chance to escape with the media.

Sunny had heard a fraction of this through gossip, so all he saw was a city tightly controlled by rules and regulations. The gleaming skyscrapers and fresh pavement delighted him, and the duelist felt like he was entering a new world. Most cars that passed weren't loaded down with armor and weapons, and every vehicle seemed to have been cleaned recently. Unabashedly he stared out the window, nearly forgetting his years scraping by in dusty, forlorn arenas. "Wow, would you look at that," he would often exclaim at some exciting sight.

Sassy was more reserved in her approval of Los Angeles. She had crossed through the city a year ago, but her courier duties at the time took her deeper into the criminal underworld.

Often the glamorous life promised by every crisp green lawn and well manicured model was a mere illusion. Dark elements worked below the surface, and cruising the soft underbelly stripped the sheen from each skyscraper.

Pike was indifferent, for a city was a city to the worn out bounty hunter. All he saw was expensive living and a desperate scramble for any scrap of success. The man hoped his duties would end in Los Angeles. Once he dropped the couple somewhere safe Pike intended to turn

north and find a quiet place along the coast. Morro Bay had crossed his mind as a possibility. Even after getting supplies in Needles his cash reserves could comfortably carry him in a quaint port town for a while.

"I'm glad to see you're both feeling better now." Pike opened once the initial excitement and trepidation at Los Angeles had worn off. "I'd like to drop you both somewhere, as I have my own...matters to attend to."

Sunny was quick to respond, "Of course, of course. You've done a lot for us both." The younger driver did feel some admiration for the stoic man, but realized his displays of praise weren't translating well to Pike. He held his hand from patting Pike on the back again.

Ignoring the two men, Sassy squeezed her forehead and tried to think of a safehouse. She needed a contact or intermediary to get a new vehicle from. Losing a car wasn't new to her, but the process for getting back on the road was more trying each time. Ideally she could hook into the Taxi Mainframe and see what kind of work was available.

In a large city like Los Angeles some packages were still deliverable on foot. Sassy hated such low quality runs, but they would help her scrape enough together for a car.

She interrupted, "Just head for the Santa Monica airport. I know somewhere we can stay a few blocks from there." Deep in thought, Sassy didn't pause to consider how the roles had switched. She was but a passenger now.

"I don't think we'll meet again, Sunny." Pike said, but regretted the statement when he saw how hurt the young driver looked. The older man knew Sunny was intrigued by Pike's lifestyle, but also felt a bit like a zoo exhibit under constant scrutiny.

"You never know." Sunny paused, "Besides, I'd like to try to repay you somehow."

"I didn't help you as a payday." The old man snapped, offended. "And-"

"Why did you help us then?" Sunny asked, defiantly, like a scolded child.

Sighing, Pike looked away and gritted his teeth. Then he remembered how he felt on the highway, when these two strangers had come into his life. "I'm...I'm tired. I'm old and tired. And I get tired of being old and tired. You just caught me in a down mood, okay?"

"Yes you are old, tired, and most definitely alone," Sunny stated, then softened, "But everyone needs a friend. Look, once Sassy finds work I don't think she'll want me kicking around, so then we'll both be on our own." The realization was new to Sunny, but the idea scared him. Before meeting Sassy there had been his mechanic Ned, and before that other faces that stretched back to his childhood. Sunny understood he had no experience or desire to wander the desert alone. "Let's meet up for a beer, hit the highway, maybe catch a scumbag bounty together?"

"You're a good kid. But you're a kid, and I don't want anymore blood on my hands."

"Yet you were-"

"Sunny, come look at this," Sassy yelled from the house, her head poking through the ripped screen door.

Both men stopped their bickering and turned to the taxi driver. She had already darted back inside the hovel. They were in the 3200 block of Purdue Avenue, east of the Santa Monica airport. Traffic on Interstate 405 roared overhead and clusters of tents flapped in the wind. Sunny, still clinging to an idyllic view of Los Angeles, resisted entering the slum area under the highway. But one of the few people Sassy knew in the city lived there. Now they clustered around a shanty of tin propped up against a concrete support beam.

Pike nervously looked at Jodi and the eager, prying eyes peering from the shadowed slums. He tightened the six-shooter around his waist, double checked the locks, and then followed Sunny

into the home.

The stench of decay hung in the shanty. Strange light arched along the floor, reflecting from the tin siding. A thin man was slumped in the corner amidst a pile of straw. Blankets, torn and flea bitten, hung loosely around his shoulders.

"How did you meet this guy?" Pike whispered, the cramped quarters forcing him to squeeze in beside the couple.

"Mozamoom is a low ranking runner for the Ilduneen family," Sassy explained, as if mentioning unfamiliar names would clear up the matter.

Pike leaned past her to look at the dented plank that served as a table. "Must be very low ranking," he muttered.

"Wait, who are the Ilduneen family?"

"Crime kingpins." Sunny's eyes widened at the declaration. Sassy worked at ignoring his sheltered view. "I ran drugs for them up to San Fran once or twice. But they're hooked into the Taxi Mainframe, and right now that's all I care about."

A thick bundle of cables snaked through a split in the tin wall and into a rusted computer console. "So what did you want me to see?"

"Right," Sassy said, spinning and tapping a few keys, "Look at this." She motioned for the men to lean closer.

"I'm not sure...what am I looking at here?" Pike said, baffled by the organized job postings of the Taxi Mainframe.

Grasping the intricacies better, Sunny shouldered his way closer. "Is that for real? I mean is everything on there legit?"

"Yes," her eyes were wide and a broad smile crossed her face. "Can you believe it?"

Frustrated and excluded by his lacking knowledge, Pike growled, "Dammit would someone tell me what is going on!"

Sassy hit a pair of keys, then pointed the bounty hunter to a single line on the screen. \$213,000 was displayed in green glowing text.

A hush fell on the room. Mozamoom strained his neck upwards to see the group standing in a circle, alternating glances at each other.

"Is that a typo?" Sunny asked.

"No."

"And it's assigned to you?"

Sassy's smile couldn't grow any larger, but she still strained her face trying, "Yes, it showed up only on my login."

The hush returned.

Sunny was speechless, but Pike interjected, "How? Why?"

"It could be because I'm in Los Angeles, but I doubt I'm the only courier willing to work for...for..." she paused and pointed in the general direction of the screen, "that much." Sunny and Pike nodded and let her continue, "Sometimes a personal request comes in. This company, Atrebla Beef, seems to want me."

The prone man shuffled to his feet behind them. "Wat dis 'beef'?"

Sunny looked equally baffled until Pike explained, "Beef is from cows. Cows used to be all over this country, but the grain blight and looting changed that. This was back when we could eat more than just algae gunk."

Each person took a moment to stare off in the distance, trying to visualize what an animal, besides squirrel and pigeon, would taste like.

"I don't know why this company would call themselves that though. They can't be producing

anything. I mean they-"

"Well let's read."

Mozamoom dropped to the ground at the declaration. Sassy fought the keyboard until a detailed paragraph of instructions appeared on the screen.

"Hmm, Atrebla Beef wants a size 4A package," already the other two looked lost, "um, that's a small box or poster sized tube. They want it driven from Los Angeles to Seattle and delivered to a lab there." Sassy continued scanning the text with her finger, "Okay, looks like some logistical information here. Addresses and stuff. There's a warning to expect 'strong, dedicated, unrelenting attacks' by thieves along the way. Great."

"Unrelenting hey?" Sunny shrugged and grinned a cocky grin. "What exactly is in the package?"

"It doesn't say, but I'm sure the lab folks could tell us."

"Some kind of weapon maybe? Something biological or chemical?" Pike pondered, more to himself.

"And for a quick drive-" Sunny started.

Pike cut in, "three days, at least."

"A quick three day drive carrying some chemical bomb or something and we get paid two hundred grand?"

"That's the jist of it, yeah," the taxi driver said, equally baffled. "Of course, who said anything about 'we'? The job is personalized to me," she stared at the two before emphasizing, "alone." An awkward silence crossed between the two men before Sassy's sly grin reassured them both of an open passenger seat.

"Oh yes, who would need two of the best duelists in the state?" Sunny said, throwing a casual arm around Pike. The older man shuddered and pulled away, and Sunny sheepishly matched the retreat. "Well, we are rather good."

"Says the guy who just learned the ropes of the highway a day ago." Her broad smile returned, softening the jibe.

"It was much longer than a day ago, and I'm a quick learner. But the fact remains, this is our chance..." he paused and looked at the other two, trying to gauge their reactions, "...team?"

"Before we get too far along, let's look at the facts," Pike gruffly ordered. Sassy leaned out of his view and playfully rolled her eyes at Sunny as the older man continued, "That much money is tempting, no doubt. The Lady knows I could settle down and retire on a chunk of it. But the price tag doesn't line up with the duty."

Sunny listened intently, already having similar doubts as soon as the initial surprise had worn off. "Yeah, Atrebla could outfit a dozen cars for that."

"More! An entire convoy of top of the line vehicles. You dueled Sunny, you know what twenty Division 10 cars could do on the highway. What do they need us for?"

Sassy was tapping her chin, still refusing to succumb to paranoia, "Twenty company vehicles would draw unwanted attention." The two men exchanged unconvinced glances, "Maybe their headquarters is being spied on, and anything leaving the place is raided. A taxi wandering in isn't out of the ordinary though."

Tilting his head, Sunny considered the possibility, "They could be trying to slip under the radar, literally."

Pike continued the brainstorm, opposing his initial ideas, "Maybe we're not the only ones. Maybe the company is stinking rich and they're hiring everyone in the city for a big push north."

"Meebee it be a traitor," Mozamoom coughed from the ground. Sassy jumped, having forgotten the man was there. "Meebee da lab boys is tryin' to sneak da goods out fra unda da bosses

nose," he snapped his fingers in front of his own face, "like dat."

"Hmm, an inside job?" The thought worried the group. None of them wanted to get caught in the middle of corporate espionage. "If that's the case we're going to have company schlubs after us."

"We'll need cars," Sunny mumbled to himself. Louder, "I wonder if they do an advance on that cash."

Rolling her eyes at the unlikely scenario, Sassy said, "Doubt it. We could just skip town with even a fraction of that cash."

Sunny pushed between the two, "But just think of it," he held his arms out in front of them, expansive and swaying like a painter, "Pike up front. Our bold barrier breaker with his double lasers. Sassy in the back, dropping hell to any chasers. Me in the middle, filling the gaps and running offense on anyone who gets close."

Pike nodded slightly, "Jodi," he paused and looked away, "Uh, my car, is ideally suited to barricade removal."

"I've run from enough people before," Sassy said, laughing.

A twinkle rimmed Sunny's eyes and he kept his arms up in the air. The two looked at his expanded hands and basked in the imagined convoy.

"I think it's worth a shot," he said, dropping a single outstretched arm in front of him.

Sassy pondered for a while, looking to them both at length. "Me too," she dropped her hand on top of Sunny's.

"Can't let you youngsters have all the fun," Pike said as his own hand was added to the stack.

Sunny let out a cheer, stifled it in embarrassment, and broke the grip.

The group rolled to a stop in front of the Atrebla Beef lab building. Flush with excitement, Sunny and Sassy piled out of the car. Pike checked his surroundings, still not entirely convinced of the legitimacy of the job. Finally he killed Jodi's engine and stood beside the pair. "Doesn't look like much," he said, leering at the squat stone building. A mix of plywood and black garbage bags covered each window. Atrebla Beef and Associates was written above the door in faded orange paint, and was their only indication the address was correct.

"They probably spent the budget hiring us," Sunny joked, trying to lighten Pike's mood.

"Wait, before we go in..." Pike said, motioning the two towards the trunk. He opened the hatch to reveal an array of sidearms. "Are you two any good out of a car?"

Sunny ran his fingers over the pistols, rifles, and shotguns. "What did you have in mind?"

At the same time Sassy lifted her pant leg, flashing a holstered submachine gun. "Never leave home without it."

"Sunny, grab one, just in case." Pike checked his own six-shooter and waited for Sunny as the younger driver carefully weighed each gun with his hand. "Just choose already," he said after Sunny's fifth trial. Grunting and mimicking Pike, Sunny opted for a large caliber pistol.

Gingerly they tapped on the front door. Reinforcing beams of steel were bolted to the portal, and a rusted metal slit peeped from the center.

"Let me do the talking," Sassy ordered, adjusting her hair. Metal scraped and creaked as the slit opened. A well groomed man wearing a lab coat and glasses was barely visible through the gap.

"Yes? Can I help you?"

"I'm Sassy and these are my associates. We're here about the Seattle transportation job." Shushing them the lab rat said, "Quiet, don't mention that city so loud." His dark eyes judged Sunny and Pike. Seemingly satisfied, the door man started heaving a wheel attached to the door. Slowly the entryway slid open.

"I'm Curtis, one of the technicians here."

"Who coulda guessed," Sunny snidely mumbled.

Once the door was fully open Curtis motioned them inside, then quickly slammed and locked the portal. The interior of the building was significantly richer than the outside. Dull blue lights illuminated the large two storey room. Circling staircases joined a lower lab level while computer terminals dotted an upper set of walkways. Numerous men and women in matching lab scrubs scurried around the area.

"It's good that you've responded to our request, Miss Sassy."

"We can skip the formalities, Curt. Looks like you've got quite a setup here, and you're offering quite a sum for what seems, to us," Sassy looked to her companions for reassurance, "a rather simple job."

A passing scientist handed a clipboard to Curtis, who signed it and returned the paperwork.

"Please, come with me. You'll understand when you see the cargo."

They saw the cargo. They didn't understand.

"It looks like a tube to me. Does it look like a tube to anyone else?"

Pike and Sassy nodded, as confused as Sunny.

"So...this has some kind of weapon in it?" Pike asked, apparently fixated on the idea of the cargo being a deadly biological weapon.

"No no nothing of that nature. What you see here is, well," Curtis beamed like an auto-duelist about to win his first Division 15, "this is a multicellular diploid eukaryote of *Bos Taurus*!"

The three mumbled and scratched their heads. "So it's a what now?" Pike finally asked, voicing their combined question.

Another technician approached and patted Curtis on the back. His glasses were thicker, his skin was paler, and he had the uncanny appearance of an older version of Curtis. Smiling and continuing his patting, the man said, "Sorry. Curtis here can get a bit technical and overly excited with our recent work." He extended his hand, "My name is Doctor Moss, and I'm the head technician of our facility."

After exchanging greetings, he continued, "And what Curtis is saying is that this container houses our most important discovery. Inside is a frozen embryo of a cow. The Hereford cattle breed to be specific."

"Like...cow..." Sunny tried to piece through the bold statement, "as in...beef?" The young duelist was confused at the implications, especially since he had just learned about cows from Pike.

"Not yet, no, but that's where you and your friends come in, Sassy." Now it was Doctor Moss' turn to beam, "We don't have the technology to clone and replicate an adult cow from the embryo. Our sister facility in Seattle, however, does."

Pike chimed in, "Bringing cattle back? That's what you're saying, right?"

"Eventually yes. We hope to supplement, or surpass, algae with a secondary food source of fresh beef."

Sunny, still uncertain with the scientific terminology and implications on society, threw his hands up. "Sure doesn't look that tasty."

"And you're willing to pay over two hundred thousand dollars to get this to Seattle?" Sassy

asked the Doctor. Experience meant she tried to know the full story to any job she took.

"In a nutshell, yes that's correct. The reasons and motivations are complex, but I'm sure you don't want to-"

"Could you tell us a few of them?" The group nodded, each wanting more information. "If we're going to be driving over 1,200 miles with this...thing...I'd like to know what we're up against."

"Curtis, please continue your work. Let's reconvene in my office."

Doctor Moss' office was sparsely furnished save a warm, rich rug and imposing oak desk. A smattering of papers, charts, and computer disks adorned the desk in place of photos of family or friends.

"Are you familiar with San Nicolas Island?" he asked, dropping a portfolio of pictures on the desk. The photos were black and white snapshots of ocean, rocky cliffs, metal facilities, and more.

"No, not really," Sassy answered, reverting to her role as group speaker.

"It's about eighty miles off the coast of California. Before the blight the government used the island as a military base and weapon testing ground."

"Sounds like my kind of place," Sunny muttered while browsing the pictures.

"After the food riots we regained the ability to reach the island. However the security codes and protocols to the facilities there were lost. At the time I was working for the government, as I was tasked with cracking the base. Getting inside." Doctor Moss stood and paced behind his desk, tapping his chin with a pencil. "Five and a half years ago I succeeded, and we gained access to the old buildings. One of the discoveries was a...how shall I put it, a 'Doomsday Vault'."

The three listened, enamored by the government intrigue so far removed from their lives.

"Apparently when the blight started a collection of high ranking military officials decided to store seeds, embryos, technological data, and so on inside a sealed vault at the center of the base. I don't know if they predicted an apocalyptic scenario, but regardless we found a trove of old world goodies."

"While my team of scientists were cataloging the find, the government heard of our success, and decided to intervene."

Sunny flipped to a picture of Doctor Moss and three gruff uniformed men at the thickly bolted door to the vault.

"By the time I found out about this, they had shipped away all of the seed material and most of the active embryos." He clenched his fist at the memory and sat back down.

"The higher up who took over the show wasn't a bad man, he was just doing what the government ordered. But he told me they intended to sell the materials to the highest American bidder."

Doctor Moss angrily mumbled, "Stupid, senseless-" before catching himself and continuing,

"When I learned that one of the primary buyers was Green World, I had to step in."

"Green World..." the name was familiar to Sassy, "as in the algae company?"

"Yes, as in the biggest algae company, by miles. Back then they only owned eighty five percent of the market. Now it's closer to ninety five. Green World basically has a monopoly on what, and how, people eat." The doctor shook his head, "I'm sure some of the buyers had good, noble intentions. But not Green World. All they wanted to do was keep wheat, lamb, and everything else off the market...keep algae as big as it is. To do that they spent a fortune buying every scrap of material they could find."

Pike nodded silently, preferring to patiently listen and weigh his responses instead of blurting anything out.

"At the time I was so caught up in the find. I acted, but not enough. If only I could go back...if only..." again Doctor Moss shook his head sadly, "The best I could do was convince my boss to convince his boss to convince the government to fund a research project around the cow embryo."

"Behind closed doors I know that Green World protested, but their case was flawed because, at the time, we couldn't clone the embryo," his voice rose with some measure of pride, "So I got my wish, and we got funding. Atrebla Beef was founded."

"Now you'll notice we're Atrebla Beef and Associates. Guess who those Associates are?"

"Um..." Sunny pondered, trying to absorb the tale Doctor Moss spun, "Green World?"

Gritting his teeth, Doctor Moss spat, "Green World." Angry silence hung around the desk, and the doctor calmed himself before starting again, "We pander to them and the government overseers. We tell them 'Yep boss, making great progress'. Every year I think they'll want to know more, or see some hard evidence, but every year our project gets more money without so much as a peep. I guess we're lucky the government is such a mess that we can get lost in a maze of paperwork and automated payments."

"Anyways, actually doing anything with the embryo in Los Angeles would be dangerous and stupid. Even if Green World pretends to turn a blind eye, I know they're watching." For a moment a paranoid glance crossed Moss' face. "So I started my own little pet project, and that's what the lab in Seattle grew from."

"So how does it all come together? How do we fit in?" Sassy asked, still focused on the job.

"Two days ago the Seattle lab had a breakthrough and were able to successfully clone a rat from an embryo. I'm sure this is terrific news for all the hungry homeless living in the gutters, but I want to aim higher. I want to get the cow embryo to them so they can start large scale cloning of cattle."

"I think that once beef is available on the market, public protest would stop any Green World retaliation." He shrugged, as if such a massive change was no problem, "We just need to safely get to that point of critical mass."

"And that's why you're willing to pay so much to get it there," Sassy confirmed, then glanced at Pike to see if his doubts had lessened.

"I'm not saying the trip will be easy. I'm hoping to sneak you guys out of the city without Green World noticing, but eventually they'll catch wind of the embryo being gone from my lab. You might make it out of California before they put two and two together and catch up."

"Then there'll be hell to pay," Sunny said grimly.

Doctor Moss nodded, "Besides the usual highway dangers you'll have Green World goons on your tail. I don't think the government will get involved, but they might try to reclaim their property."

Pike spoke, finally, but his voice quavered with unaccustomed nervousness, "That's heat we might not be able to handle."

Sunny and Sassy looked at each other, their confidence waning.

The older man continued, "A twelve hundred mile long cattle drive is quite a feat. Can we expect any help?"

"No, not really. I'll be caught up trying to stave off the government inquiries. I'm hoping the initial opposition underestimates you guys, which buys more time." The doctor scanned a sheet of paper on his desk. "If we send a giant convoy, not only would it be obvious from the start, but they'd throw everything they have at you."

"Like tanks," Pike said, shaking his head.

"I'm no driver, but I don't think you'd have much of a chance," Doctor Moss added.

Their rattled morale sunk at the information.

Then Pike laughed, surprising them all with the loudness of his bellows. His feeling of doubt resolved, he slowly stopped laughing and said, "Well, at least we know the job matches the pay."

Rejuvenated by his mentor's resolve, Sunny chimed in, "Think of how famous we'll be!"

"I asked for you, Sassy, because I've heard you're reliable. Your companions seem just as competent, and I sincerely feel that if anyone could do this, it's you three."

The group nodded their appreciation, and their spirits glowed like they had in the tin hut.

Sassy stood and shook Doctor Moss' hand, "We'll do it."

"I had hoped you would."

"We need cars, maps," she looked at Sunny and Pike as they rose from their seats, "and a plan."

"Let's haul ass on Interstate 5 past San Francisco," Sassy started.

A set of maps were sprawled out on a steel desk in front of them. They hovered around the setup, batting away flies that wandered towards the desk laps. Most of the technicians had gone home for the night, and Doctor Moss was busy in his office with the financial details. Having travelled California more than the other two, Pike added, "We should be safe for that section since it's still relatively patrolled. Redding's a gang town though, so I think we should cut to the coast by then."

"Sure, maybe the 101 past San Fran? We hit the Redwoods, and can get back to Interstate 5 via 199, just at the border," Sassy said, considering the options. "So much road to cover," she mumbled to herself.

"Just a question," Sunny interjected, having taken a backseat in the planning due to his lack of geographic knowledge, "But why are we so intent on Interstate 5? I thought we wanted to stay off the radar, wouldn't that mean sub-sub-subhighways and little dinky slum towns?"

"Eventually," Sassy and Pike said in unison. They looked at each other, surprised at the similar thought process.

Sassy continued while Pike remained silent, "Cutting over on the 199 is tentative. If we're being harassed by then we'll stay on the coastal 101, or on the roads in between."

"I know some people in Portland," Pike mentioned, "so we should be safe there."

"That's good, because after that it's a clear shot to Seattle. By that stretch any cover we had will be blown, and we'll just push the home stretch and hope for the best."

"Hope for the best? Hmm, what about," Sunny said while flipping and adjusting the maps,

"Why don't we skip the obvious routes. Hitmen or mercenaries or whoever they send after us will be smart. They'll know to watch the 5 and the 101, and those are our only two routes north."

Even with her stronger feelings for Sunny, the taxi driver had trouble listening to him talk without wanting to point out flaws with his reasoning. "Maybe I should cut him some slack..." she thought.

"Unless we try something totally different. Totally unexpected. We stay on the 5, like they would expect us to. But instead of going north of San Fran we cut across some tiny highway. Say, um," he browsed the map with his finger, "say the 108, through the Yosemite forest."

"But then we're into Nevada," Pike stated, confused and not seeing the point to Sunny's ramblings.

"Exactly! Wait, stop and think how confused you are now. Think how baffled and bamboozled

you are. Our enemies will be like that as well, and by the time they figure anything out we'll be into Oregon, but on the east side."

Sassy was nodding slightly, her eyes scanning the vast layout of the maps, "This blank area around highway 95 looks nice. There's a few highways we can sneak around on, or just cut right through the desert."

"Plus check out eastern Oregon," Sunny flattened the map and swept his hand across the state. "See how there are more than two northbound highways? We can skip across them depending on the situation or how close Green World is." Sunny shrugged and snaked his finger along the rest of the route, "Then we take Interstate 90 west to Seattle, coming in from a totally unexpected direction."

"We'll miss restocking in Portland though. And this route is longer," Pike performed some mental calculations, "a lot longer. I'd rather get it over with and hit them before they know what happened."

"Both of you have good points," Sassy said, still focused intently on the maps. "And I like thinking outside the box by considering an eastern slanted route. Either way," she flipped back to California, "we don't have to consider cutting across Yosemite until about three hundred miles in."

"That's the other thing we need to talk about," Pike said, replacing the toothpick between his teeth, "What are we hoping to do per day? Five hundred?"

"Five...five hundred miles?" Sunny asked, surprised, "Isn't that a bit much?" He had thought the Red Dragon's one hundred mile a day policy seemed more achievable.

"We could get there outside of three days, easy."

"Not so easy," Sassy tentatively argued, "Even on the best Interstate we're looking at a cruising speed of what, fifty? Sixty? And that's not including shittier roads like the 101."

Supporting her, Sunny added, "And we want to be in fighting shape."

"What's the longest you two have driven?" Pike asked, changing the subject.

"Like total distance?"

His eyes were grim, "More like time without sleep."

"Twenty six hours. I was running a hot item and they needed it by morning..." Sassy trailed off, seeing that Pike was fine without the explanation.

"I did a twenty four hour endurance race, but it was just along a track. No shooting."

Previously this accomplishment had impressed those he told, but now Sunny realized he had been a big fish in a small pond.

Pike hid his face under the brim of his hat, "I've done sixty five hours. I'm not proud of it, and I was hallucinating something fierce, but I've done it." Unlike Sassy he didn't bother adding any details, preferring to keep the reason a secret. Pike had only driven that long and that hard to escape the law, after he murdered the gang that killed his wife.

"Wow," was all Sassy could say. Her and Sunny's dropped jaws expressed the rest.

"Okay, so we know we can pull some hours if we need to." Pike looked up, "Let's aim for a state a day, which puts us in Seattle in three days."

"Tough, but a reasonable guideline," Sassy agreed.

Sunny smiled at the man and added, "Sounds good, Pike." The younger driver tended to overestimate his abilities, but felt confident in his friends on this job.

"Now, let's get some wheels."

Sassy tapped lightly on the glass in Doctor Moss' door.

"Yes, come in," he said, stirring from a slouched position in his chair. The overworked man, so

wound up from the past days, had been fighting sleep.

Immediately he brightened and smiled, "So did you get a route figured out?"

"Mostly," replied Sassy.

"Good, good. And the maps seem fine?"

Stepping forward, Sunny cut Sassy off and answered, "The maps are great. We need to talk about cars."

"Right, right." Doctor Moss shuffled papers on his desk, looking for a freshly printed sheet.

"Sassy's taxi was destroyed on the way here."

"We took a few with us," she said, seating herself in front of the desk.

Doctor Moss continued unperturbed, "Sunny, you don't own a personal vehicle."

"Not at the moment, no." The autoduelist seemed embarrassed by the plain statement of fact.

"Pike, you have a '35 Aerostar sedan, standard Larks loadout, correct?"

The old man seated himself, but appeared surprised and impressed, "Yes, it's an ex-police vehicle."

Indulging in small talk, Doctor Moss added, "Good year, or so my mechanics tell me."

"Speaking of which..." Sunny prompted.

"We don't have any inhouse mechanics, of course, but we can get you a deal at Roody's Revvers. They aren't too far from here. They'll give you a discount, but new vehicles aren't in addition to the reward. I can give you an advance on the \$213,000, as much as you want."

The group agreed the offer was fair, and nodded their consent.

"I'll double check the receipts with Roody, but that's just a formality."

Sunny raised an eyebrow, slightly offended, "Do you mean you think we'll rip-"

"Let it go..." Sassy sternly said. The younger driver opened his mouth to continue talking, so she kicked his chair, "...dear."

Doctor Moss smiled and pushed up his glasses, "The remaining amount will be placed in a locked account. When you deliver the frozen embryo, unharmed, to the Seattle lab, they'll give the code to unlock the reward. Then you can do what you see fit with the money."

Sunny was the first to stand up, "Let's get a few addresses, then hit Roody's before morning."

Giving orders to the other two seemed to restore some confidence that had been stripped by Sassy's chair kick.

"I'd like to head out before noon."

"But not too obviously early," Pike added, trying to find every advantage against their foes.

"Right. I figure I drive my taxi, my new taxi, in here. I grab the cow tube, then meet you two on the road."

Sunny paged through the car catalogue like a kid at a toy store. "Look at this chassis," he motioned Sassy over, "Imagine that with an anti-tank gun."

She rolled her eyes and flipped pages in a similar pamphlet.

"Sunny, you need to think long term. We need sustainable firepower. We might not have a chance to stop and leisurely refuel and restock every ten miles," Pike continued lecturing, but Sunny turned to Sassy and scoffed.

"No, he's right, Sunny," she said, leaning in closely so Pike couldn't hear them.

"Pike are you going to refit Jodi at all?"

"Definitely, and I don't need some damn Uncle Albert's catalogue to help me. I'm going to downgrade the double lasers to four lighter, more compact versions. Then a ramplate for barricade removal-

"Barricade busting!"

"Either way, a ramplate. I might redistribute my armor a bit, since we don't know if we'll run over mines or what angle we'll be attacked from. New tires too, instead of my old beaters. I'm going to get a spare laser battery to charge my guns."

Sunny knew that laser based weaponry drew energy directly from the power plant. This was a fine solution for short term arena duels or one off highway battles. But Pike practiced what he preached, and he was thinking long term. The man didn't want to be stranded on the highway because he burned all his fuel to shoot lasers.

"Oh, and armored wheel guards on the front two. Last thing I need is to skid out and have you crash into me, Sunny."

"I doubt you'll be going fast enough for it to hurt, old man," Sunny joked, returning to his catalogue.

"Pike it sure sounds like you know your gear," Roody added, flipping up his welding mask. The late hour meant his garage was empty of other clients, but Roody and two junior mechanics were busy implementing Pike's wishes.

"You learn a thing or two in 72 years!"

"Well, let me know what you think of this," Sassy started, pandering to Pike's desire to dispense advice. "Impact 244 chassis. Basically my dream car from the ground up," she laughed. The vehicle was an improvement over her old Impact 66, but still retained the familiar feel of a taxi. "I'm going to go with three machine guns, rear and to the sides."

"Nothing up front?" Sunny asked, used to his face to face arena duels.

"Well, babe, you'll be in front of me."

Sheepishly he returned to reading.

"I'm used to my quad dropper approach, but I'm going to change them up a bit. Smokescreen and junk dropper are a given. I was considering spikes, but a junk dropper can be reloaded from scrap, so it should be easier to handle ourselves."

"Good, now you're thinking," Pike exclaimed, pleased by Sassy's choices so far.

"I thought you'd like that. Anyways then a flaming oil jet. Most of the major highways are straight, so some punk hitting normal oil won't do much to them. If I can make them run over flaming oil though, we might just pop a tire or two."

"Nice," Roody said, muffled behind his welding mask.

"And finally," she spun the catalogue around and pointed to a weapon illustrated on the page, "an ice dropper."

Pike raised an eyebrow, unfamiliar with the weapon, "A what now?"

"It's newer tech, but think of it as oil that you skid out on no matter what," she explained.

"Even if you go straight across it?"

"Exactly. That should let me slow pursuit, or maybe make someone skid out."

Sunny rubbed her back, "I like what I'm hearing."

"And did our hotshot choose something?" Pike said, smirking and walking over to Sunny's side.

"Well, let me show you." The duelist was surprised to find he was nervous, and secretly hoping for Pike's approval.

"First of all, a Side Draft chassis." He opened the Uncle Albert's catalogue to reveal a sleek sports car. The aerodynamic vehicle had a broad front window and a slight spoiler along the back.

"Yellow, of course," he said, nodding to Roody. "And this beauty can zip, let me tell you."

Pike doubted if the speed didn't have tradeoffs, "Looks like it's made of paper mache though."

Sunny expected the criticism, and refuted them by saying, "That's the beauty though. The chassis weighs practically nothing, but it's still a luxury car and I can load it to the pipes with

armor and guns."

"Hmm so you're going to take a lightweight frame, and use those space savings on armor?" Pike squinted and considered the possibilities.

"Hell he'll probably end up the most protected of all of you," Roody chimed in, standing and grinning.

"For guns I'm thinking linked recoilless rifles in a turret. Targeting computer and all, which should let me hit them without hitting you guys," Sunny said, feeling his excitement build. Sassy smiled at the concern, "Definitely important when you're in the center."

"I figure anyone trying to hit us will go for a flank. So I'm planning on a cluster of light or medium rockets. Say three to a side," he nervously looked at Pike's face for any response. Pike interrupted, "They're single shot."

Sunny countered the interrupt with a biting tone, "I know that. But a single shot might be all we need. If I can damage or blow up a car with one cluster, then I figure it'll stop other bandits from trying the same gimmick."

"A gimmick for a gimmick," Pike said, letting an unnecessary edge creep into his voice. "At least they're fast to reload at a truck stop," he mumbled, turning slightly from Sunny.

"And a simple machine gun up front, to help against whoever you're hitting, Pike." Sunny finally boiled over at Pike's continued criticism. He had hoped the old man would accept at least one of his ideas. "That is if you weren't such a dick."

"Hey look kid," Pike retorted, "I don't want to die out there because you imagined some hot shit ride on paper that crumbles on the highway."

"Boys, boys, cool it," Sassy said, raising an arm between the two. "If we're falling apart in the safety of a shop, how do you think we'll do under fire after twelve hours of driving?"

"I don't know, ask Mr. Zen Master," Sunny yelled, motioning to the stone faced Pike, "He's the big man who drove a zillion hours in a row." Letting his emotions take control, Sunny stormed across the shop.

"You were a little hard on him...did you have to play devil's advocate for every single idea?" Sassy whispered to Pike, her tone forced into friendliness.

"You think the bandits will be any easier on him?" Pike replied, his voice barely loud enough for Sunny to hear.

"No, but that's why we aren't teaming up with bandits. We're teaming up with you," she looked directly in his eyes, "I know you're a good man, and I know you expect a lot from Sunny."

"He just has so much potential," Pike said, his voice softening as he followed Sassy's lead of conversation. "I don't want him to get cocky and burn out on the road."

"Maybe you should tell Sunny your concerns. Right now it just comes off as harsh anger."

Pike gritted his teeth, spit out his toothpick, and struggled through the words, "Sunny, look, I think your design is pretty solid. Double RRs are a great all round weapon." Sassy spun her hand, egging the older man on, "I...I think you'll really help the team." Pike exhaled heavily, forcing the final words out.

"Was that so hard?" Sassy whispered, playfully elbowing Pike. He accepted the jibe without comment or reaction.

"Well," Sunny spun and took a step towards the pair, "thanks. I think if we end up out front, we'll really work great together, Pike."

Sassy, pleased with her adjudication, stated, "Now, team, let's try to relax, choose some paint colors, and get to work."

The three friends rolled out of Roody's Revvers after a long night of toil, a few pulled strings and a series of last minute phone calls.

Sunny finally had his own car, haphazardly painted a blinding shade of yellow. The sleek Side Draft had a low slung machine gun out front. Three light rockets were near the rear wheels on each side. And his pride and joy of two recoilless rifles were squeezed on top in a flaming red turret. Roody had struggled to fit the bulky weapons into a single turret, but by slowing the rotating mechanisms he was able to fit them both. An advanced targeting system supported his fire. The addition of a spoiler and airdam to the light chassis ensured Sunny could handle his car at high speeds.

Unfortunately for the duelist, his earlier predictions of masses of armor proved an exaggeration. He still had a few more pieces than Pike, but Sassy blew them both away with her shielded vehicle.

Sassy had to suffer a few concessions to fit all her dropped weapons on the Impact 244 sedan. The smokescreen and junk dropper were aimed backwards, but the flaming oil jet and ice dropper were angled from each side. Triple machine guns covered all but the front, which was unarmed. The vehicle was sturdy and built like a tank, boasting the highest armor of the group. Her main color was a dusky yellow accented with checkerboard lines of black and white. Pike's mid-sized 2035 Aerostar muscle car, still a dusty green, was showered with a host of long overdue fixes. Roody provided him with new puncture resistant tires, including protective wheel guards on the front pair. The power plant was upgraded to a massive super sized version that roared whenever Pike brushed the gas pedal. His idea of four light lasers to the front worked perfectly, as did the ramplate and thick, layered slabs of armor around the engine block.

Angle parking their fresh cars outside of Roody's, the three friends disembarked to bask in the purchases.

Roody joined them outside, his voice and loud steps echoing inside the garage. "That'll be sixty thousand, five hundred and ninety three dollars," he opened.

Pike coughed but regained control before he stumbled, "Well, fella, do you take credit chips?" "Roody, looks like you got them all set up." They spun to see Doctor Moss approaching.

Sassy's face brightened at the visit, "Hey there Doctor. Check out the new rides." They edged out of the way so the Doctor could appraise each car.

"Quite an assembly," he whistled between sighs of appreciation. Even a non-driver like Doctor Moss knew how to appreciate a good machine when he saw one...or three. Turning to Roody he asked, "How much did you say it was?"

"Sixty thousa-"

"And this was with the discount we talked about?"

"Oh," Roody said slowly, "right, that."

"Yes, that," Doctor Moss replied smugly.

The mechanic scurried inside to mark the prices down, and the total advance on the reward ended up being close to fifteen percent less. The group were pleased to learn they still had a little over \$161,000 awaiting them. If they survived.

The epic journey began with no cheering or howled farewells. The cow embryo was securely locked in an armored, refrigerated safe stashed in Sassy's car. She picked up the tube two

hours before noon, and met Pike and Sassy on Interstate 5 soon after.

They left Los Angeles before the lunch hour rush. Busy office workers smothered in paperwork didn't stop to give the convoy a second glance. Casually driving at fifty miles an hour, the group passed the junction with highway 99 soon after.

Morale was high, and joking barbs flew across the radio airwaves. But in the silence of dead air each driver grappled with personal demons and feelings about the job.

"I'm never done something like this," Sunny admitted, still too high with excitement to care about being embarrassed.

Sassy piped in, already giggling, "That's what you said in the hotel."

Laughter crackled from Pike's car.

"Old man your static is really starting to kill me," Sunny complained, adjusting a few knobs.

"I'd worry less about my radio and more about Sassy's admissions," he chuckled back.

Mocking the older man, Sunny snarkily replied, "Har har har." Without skipping a beat, Sunny pressed his original statement, "But I'm serious. I mean, we could be making history right now."

"Kid, every day is history. The problem is no one notices most of the time."

"Let me just ask you something Pike," Sunny said, hoping his eye roll translated across the radio, "Do you ever stop lecturing?"

"Sure, when you start listening." Pike wasn't used to joking while driving, but was thoroughly enjoying himself. Normally any radio communication was from targets begging for their life.

"Actually I think it's from when I was a preacher-" he wanted to say more, but Sunny and Sassy both cut in.

With some variance they both shouted, "What! You were a preacher?"

"Oh, I thought I had mentioned that," Pike replied plainly.

"I don't think the fusillade of unasked advice stopped long enough for you to."

Pike smirked at the remark, and fired back with his own, "Wow Sunny, did you learn 'fusillade' from a pocket dictionary?"

"Probably from a news bite of his dueling loss," Sassy added, imagining Sunny pouring over every scrap of reviews.

Nearly cutting her off, Sunny loudly said, "More like 'Sassy's crummy taxi blew up under the fusillade'."

"Let's hope not, or we'd lose a future of delicious food." Laughter from all three followed.

Interstate 5 benefited from the tax dollars of Los Angeles citizens. Police and emergency services were slow to recover after the food riots, but taxation continued nearly unabated through the chaos. The surface of the twin highway was crisp pavement untouched by weather. A pair of wide lanes headed each way, and both sides had broad shoulders. Sections of the median were reinforced with concrete, but the rest was made up of dry grass.

Rush hour hadn't encroached far enough north to slow them, and most of the traffic was light.

The pleasant banter continued between the group, until Sassy took a more serious tone.

"Look at this yahoo," she stated, tapping her radar.

"I see him," Pike confirmed.

Whistling at the fast moving radar blip, Sunny added, "He must be doing a buck twenty."

Sassy answer, "At least."

The radio was silent for a moment, then Pike spoke. Both Sunny and Sassy detected a new undiscovered edge to his words. With a grin Sunny realized the older man's words were meant to be playful. "We should try out these new cars and my new upgrades. Just to be safe."

"Of course, just to be safe." As the last word left his mouth Sunny floored the accelerator. His new car responded like a race horse after a long winter. Uncaged and unrestrained, the high performance engine roared him to 100 miles an hour in the blink of an eye. He glanced at his side mirrors, and had to do a double take when Pike casually rolled up even with the Side Draft.

"Looks like your piece of paper can move, kid."

"I'm surprised your ancient car can keep up without blowing a cap," Sunny replied, throwing a thumbs up to Pike.

"Boys and their toys," Sassy crackled over the radio, the calm hum of her engine in the background. "I'll let you two burn it out, since I don't think Atrebla Beef would appreciate me crashing their product after only two hundred miles."

"Fair enough," the duelist replied. Still on their secure personal channel, he said to Pike, "Let's see how the speedy stranger manages."

"I'm more interested in seeing your tinfoil car fold into scrap."

Smirking, Sunny flipped his radio to a local public channel and transmitted, "To speeding northbound car on Interstate 5, let's race?"

Pike chimed in, quoting an ancient car movie from his childhood, "You got any balls in that mother?"

The men were surprised when a female voice replied, "Gladly. First one to Santa Nella?"

Over the radio Sunny could hear the sound of flipping paper as Sassy organized her maps, then said, "Based on the last marker that's about eighteen miles ahead. Good luck guys."

Still on the public channel, Sunny answered, "Deal. Name's Sunny, by the way, in case you want to know who beat you."

Light laughter met his boast, followed by, "Hatchet. Molly Hatchet. I should catch you at the next mile marker."

Sunny and Pike slowed slightly to let Molly reach them. Her lime green car resembled Pike's chassis. The hood was long and wide and housed a powerful engine. Like many muscle cars the trunk was tiny, and lent a hawkish appearance to the entire vehicle.

"I see we have similar tastes, Captain Dusty," Molly said, clearly aiming the comment and nickname at Pike.

"Except my shade of green doesn't blind anyone."

Molly's car answered for her in the form of a surge of momentum. The vehicle sped past the two men and began weaving between stunned commuters.

"She's got some moves," Sunny mumbled without bothering to switch on the radio. He responded with similar acceleration. In the past he had driven cars in excess of 150 miles an hour, but his new sports car rivaled any of those experiences. Instead of wavering uncomfortably at the speeds Sunny felt he still had some measure of control. Wind roared around the sleek body as the Side Draft cut through the air like a crossbow bolt.

Even as he shifted up, Sunny was passed by Pike. The older man's car snaked left and right as the looser suspension and worse aerodynamics affected the Aerostar. Sunny had to admit, even with Pike dangerously on the edge of skidding out, the Aerostar had a more powerful engine.

Molly's car seemed similarly supercharged. The lime green vehicle wove between slower traffic. At one point she cut into the shoulder to pass a honking semi-truck. The havoc of nervous and confused drivers left in her wake made a formidable barrier for the two trailing cars.

Sunny dove into the rolling barricade with the utmost confidence, trusting in his reflexes, tires,

and lucky streak to carry him to the other side. Pike dropped behind Sunny and took an alternative approach. The old man slowed and angled off the road into the grassy median. His car spit dust and gravel, but tore around the braking traffic with ease. Sunny cursed as he saw the older man disappear through the jam. More pressing matters quickly drew his attention back to the road.

Yanking the wheel left and right, the younger driver felt a bead of sweat drip down his cheek as he narrowly missed car after car. Sunny tried to look two or three vehicles ahead to predict their movements and respond accordingly. All that mattered to him was finding the quickest, collision free route through.

Eventually his physical reactions exceeded the speed of his thoughts, and Sunny let his body take over. Split second adjustments and brake pumping blurred together as he sped through the chaotic crowd. So fast was his speed that some cars hadn't stopped honking at Molly when he blew past their doors. Finally the rush parted and open road greeted him. Without missing a beat Sunny pressed the car past 160 miles an hour.

Molly Hatchet was a part time bandit, and part time bounty hunter. Her dual life lead to many harrowing encounters that had taught the driver much. Her experience solidified the gap between Sunny and Pike, and soon the group was close to ten miles from the village. Leading the race provided a few advantages, but also meant she was the first to encounter any unexpected pile ups on the road.

Such an encounter awaited her as the lime car crested a slight hill. An oversized semi had crashed into the overpass at Langdon Road. The concrete bridge had collapsed and the ensuing rubble had buried several cars. Like ants blocked by a rock, all oncoming traffic was slowly trying to find a way around. A few cars were stalled on the steep hills bordering the wrecked overpass. Others had exited their vehicles and climbed amongst the chunks of rock, looking for survivors or plunder.

Her mind barely had time to process the information before she acted on instinct. Some animal spark in her brain forced her towards the clearest route, which meant driving up the empty grassy slope alongside the highway.

Molly screamed into the radio as her car flew up and off the hill. The grade acted like a ramp, and for a moment she was suspended over Canyon Road. Pedestrians and drivers alike turned to point at the spectacle, thinking the desperate leap was intentional. Molly wished it had been, for then she might have some semblance of control. Instead her car angled down and smashed nose first into the rock face on the opposite side. Wheels spun futilely in the air as the car flipped over and settled into the dirt, fully upside down.

"What the hell just happened?" Pike hollered in the radio, thoroughly unsettled from the wretched scream.

"I think we just won the race," Sunny replied, unconcerned with the fate of his opposition.

"Don't be so smug, she might be hurt."

Back on the secure channel, Sunny accusingly said, "And she might be leading us into a trap."

"But-

"But nothing, we know nothing about her. It was just for fun, and now we gotta keep our head in the game."

Pike remained silent, surprised at himself for getting so tangled with emotions. He also had to admit that Sunny's cold, logical approach was the correct reaction to the situation. Regaining his stone facade, Pike clicked the radio on, "It's still nine miles to Santa Nella."

Sunny slowed and replied, "If you're up for it, old man, let's start fresh from the next mile marker. For now take it easy in case something is ahe-"

As he crested the same hill Sunny's gradual deceleration became a dangerous stop as he pressed both feet over the brake pedal. Tires squealed and his suspension groaned as the weight of the car carried forward. Premium brakes held the chassis back, and soon Sunny was at a dead stop. Thick black skid marks trailed his Side Draft, and the sting of burning rubber filled his nostrils.

Closer to the median, Pike simply dropped into the grass and cranked the pedal and hand brake at the same time. Jodi skidded and spun, but the seasoned driver kept her from flipping or hitting another vehicle. A wafting cloud of dust rolled over the ruined overpass, and Pike released tense hands from his steering wheel.

Sunny recovered first, and immediately threw his car into gear. The younger driver took Pike's offer seriously, and seriously wanted to win. He edged the Side Draft up the hill beside the overpass. Tires rattled and jostled as the vehicle wandered through the divets made by Molly's wild route. At a controlled speed the hill was simple to navigate, and soon Sunny was safely braking down the other side.

Following Sunny's lead, Pike aimed Jodi for the same hill, hoping to reach the mile marker soon after clearing the overpass. Even after hundreds of road battles and a constant proximity to death, Pike felt nervous. In a way the old man's trepidation was for Sunny and whether his natural talent could match Pike's years of experience. He knew defeat would crush the youth, especially with how he looked up to Pike. Even with that knowledge, the idea of yielding or easing up didn't cross Pike's mind.

Under the hum of news helicopters, the two drove away from the wreckage. Other drivers entered their vehicles to follow the roundabout method of bypassing the rubble. By the time Sassy arrived on the scene an impromptu dirt road had been cut into the side of the hill from the volume of traffic.

Sunny and Pike sped away from the accident like convicts rushing to a brothel. Traffic and speed were their main concerns, for the road was otherwise straight and smooth to the village. Both cruised comfortably at 230 miles an hour, with Pike edging slightly to the lead.

"Ever driven this fast, boy?"

"Hah!" Sunny shouted back over the radio, adrenaline and excitement edging his young voice. His knuckles were white and sweat dampened his brow. The duelist was impressed with his car, and flushed cheeks barely contained happiness at his own reflexes. For all of Pike's jabs, the older man did have a point sometimes; driving in a circular arena was a lot different than flying down a straight away.

So far the pair were locked fairly evenly, but tension and nervousness were starting to show in Sunny's face. Pike calmly maneuvered his heavy car as if he was driving to pick up groceries on a lazy Sunday. A man didn't live 72 years behind the wheel without having broken 200 miles an hour before. In addition the bounty hunter knew every strength and weakness of Jodi. Sunny was driving a new car at untested speeds, and the lack of familiarity and experience practically guaranteed a loss.

Indistinct cars blurred past them as the pair hurtled towards Santa Nella. Mere miles outside of the village, Pike grinned and put the hammer down. Jodi redlined and he shifted up and crawled past Sunny. The younger driver cried out in surprise, hoping they would maintain 230 or, ideally, less.

Pride forced the Side Draft's pedal down.

Sunny could feel his ride starting to teeter and fishtail, but he pushed past 240 and onwards to 250. The cars became powerful darts of color streaking the last mile to the finish line. Trees

cracked, dirt flew, and glass shuddered as the pair roared onwards.

A split second before the welcome sign, Pike glanced across to Sunny. Gritting his teeth hard enough to split metal, the young duelist was a mix of excitement, fear, desperation, and hope. Pike knew the mask well, and knew how much Sunny had emotionally invested into the race. Although Pike knew he'd never hear the end of it, he sighed and tentatively let off the gas pedal.

Every ounce of speed mattered, and the slight concession by Pike meant Sunny flew into the town first by mere feet.

"Yes! Yes I won!" As soon as Pike heard the cry of pure joy, he knew he'd made the right decision.

"This time at least!" he retorted.

Luckily for both the villagers and the drivers, Santa Nella was situated off the highway slightly. Slowing down from the incredible speeds didn't involve any slamming of brakes or careening out of control. As they returned to a reasonable pace, Sunny's hands shook and his breath came in ragged gasps. Such an intense race had taken a lot out of both of them. They merged off the highway and into the main village, the airwaves filled with Sunny's boasting.

Leaving from Los Angeles later in the day had repercussions, and the group felt them as the sun set on a mere 300 miles travelled. Sassy had rejoined the pair at a more reasonable speed, and the group were now parked by an abandoned high school.

"I would say drinks are on me, but," Sunny looked at the ruined building and gutted classrooms, "I get the feeling we want to keep a low profile."

"Unfortunately true," Sassy said, stretching as she rose from the Impact 244, "even though I think we could all use a drink."

Ever playing the dower role, Pike groaned, "Even just to dull Sunny's gloating." Sassy noticed the light in his old eyes, and figured there was more to the race than Sunny realized.

Santa Nella was very close to a major highway but the locals still maintained a quiet, sleepy quality. Several streets pierced the town, but none were heavily populated with the flashing neon of pubs. Somehow the entire place felt like a time capsule from a day of unarmed vehicles.

The group naturally felt safe, even with the cracked and shadowed high school nearby. A rear parking lot, likely for teachers long ago, would be their accommodation for the night. Invisible from the main street and with plenty of exits, the swathe of pavement was great for avoiding ambushes.

Each driver was comfortable sleeping in their vehicle. Pike devoted a folding section of the back bench just for that purpose. Sassy preferred to curl up with a warm blanket behind interior curtains. Sunny knew a night of shuffling and shifting lay ahead as he hadn't decided on a proper way to sleep in the new Side Draft yet.

The night had barely settled though, and sleep was the furthest thought from everyone's mind. Spirits were high from a successful and uneventful first day, and food was quickly unpacked from each vehicle.

"You know," Pike started, heaving a boxed cooking stove up the school steps, "We didn't cover much ground today."

Sunny just scoffed as he returned to the Side Draft. Reacting more constructively, Sassy said, "Give us some credit, we did start at noon. Tomorrow will be a bigger day."

Pulling his jacket and a bag of algae chips from the trunk hatch, Sunny wandered into the

nearest classroom and examined their pile of supplies. Pike was hassling with his cooking stove and Sassy unwrapped fresh bundles of algae.

"I'll be happy if this beef thing works out, because it has to be better than green gunk."

Even without the relaxing factor of local alcohol, the group had a merry night. Sassy had placed candles throughout the old classroom, casting the room with a warm glow. Dusty chairs and forgotten desks were shuffled and adjusted to make a rough circle. The group clustered around Pike's propane cooking stove like cavemen around a campfire. Soon the smell of cooked algae wafted throughout the hallways, and for a moment each driver forgot the tremendous journey ahead.

The night was lost under an avalanche of smirking banter, friendly jokes, and upbeat tales of the money that awaited them.

Doctor Moss wished for anything to stop the pain. His fingernail tore free and a splash of warm blood pooled in the gap.

A voice, calm and powerful with purpose, silenced his screams, "You will direct them through San Francisco." The voice paused, and Doctor Moss almost thought the agony was over. Then a second fingernail tore free as the voice asked, "Correct?"

The man had called himself Agent X, but to Doctor Moss he was the devil incarnate. Torture was rare in most fortress cities, but the barbaric practice was still popular by bandits. Those crude sessions were mostly for gang amusement and ended quickly when someone accidentally nipped an artery.

Unfortunately for the Doctor, Agent X was no mere bandit, and would draw out the suffering as long as required. He was a heartless, calculating corporate assassin from the finest company Green World could find.

Without a word, Agent X moved from the bleeding left hand to the fresh right hand. "You will direct them through San Francisco." Another fingernail.

Dead eyes of his assistants peered at him from the wrecked lab. Smashed beakers mingled with dried blood as his lolling gaze surveyed the carnage. The associates of Atrebla Beef had come down, hard. Doctor Moss didn't know how they had discovered the ruse so quickly, but the end result was the same.

Now he was the only one left. Agent X had spared him for the sole purpose of misdirecting the couriers into an ambush. Doctor Moss knew his life would end after the morning status call from Sassy. In a way he wished to be dead. Agent X couldn't torture him then.

The question repeated, "Correct?"

Every inch of Doctor Moss' broken body quivered. "Y-yes." Anything to stop the pain.

Sunny coughed and rose from his sleeping bag. Blinking against the rising sun, he smudged condensation from the window and looked outside. Fresh dew sparkled across the school field, coating the long grass and shrubbery of the overgrown area. A few pedestrians walked hand in hand by a torn chain link fence.

Wincing at a crick in his neck, the duelist shifted to check on his friends. Sassy's car rested against the building, nose outwards in preparation for a fast exit. Already cleared of moisture,

Jodi was being checked and analyzed by a stooped Pike.

"Apparently an early riser," Sunny wheezed, thirsty from the salty algae of the previous night. He smirked, "Unlike some people I know." Adjusting his pillow, the young driver shamelessly dove back into sleep.

"You let him win, didn't you?" Startled, Pike rose and spun in one fluid motion. Before he realized, the six-shooter had sprung into his hand.

"S-Sorry," Pike said, awkwardly holstering the weapon in response to Sassy's raised eyebrow. Her hair was tucked into a tight bun, a style she hadn't worn in front of the group before. The fresh morning light glowed across a face untarnished by mascara or stress. Thick sheaths of blanket hung from her shoulder, and bare feet were loosely planted in combat boots.

"A little jumpy today?"

Shaking his head and turning back to the car, Pike mumbled, "I just really don't have a good feeling about this entire job."

"So you keep saying." Strips of fog swirled and evaporated as they stood. "And as I was saying, you let him win, didn't you?"

"Yes...barely. He's got talent, we both know that." More silence passed between the two in a comfortable, early morning way. "I just hope he doesn't rush off and die before he can use it." Slumping her shoulders at the thought, Sassy whispered, "Yeah. I...I hope none of us die." Feeling like a lecturing father, he replied, "Let's push a big day today and see if we can't get this job over with before anyone realizes what we're carrying."

"Deal."

Sassy glanced both ways before plugging a cable into the slumped telephone line. An elegant system to give status updates to Doctor Moss had been devised before they left. Instead of calling the Los Angeles office directly, which was undoubtedly watched by Green World, they would instead dial a different number to an answering machine.

Doctor Moss would change the machine's greeting to include any information he needed to convey, and the group would simply leave a message with some details of their progress. The approach was built on trust, mostly vested in the drivers to not flee with the new cars.

Using new equipment and an old trick Pike knew, Sassy was directly tapping into one of the central phone lines. Reliable phone service was a rarity between the recovering cities, so trepidation edged the three as Sassy eased the receiver up to her ear. Luckily a bland dial tone awaited them.

"Is this going to take long?" Sunny complained as she rung the number.

"Not any longer than you slept this morning."

"Whatever Pike, some of us have many years left to snooze away."

With an outstretched hand Sassy frantically silenced them, "Shutup, the machine picked up."

"Hi, this is Peter, you just missed me. I'm heading out to San Francisco today. Come to Pier B-32 for lunchtime drinks."

Sassy rolled her eyes at the extra layer of security. Doctor Moss had insisted on hiding messages in common speech, and under a different name.

"He, hmm, well he wants to meet at some pier in San Francisco."

Furrowing his brow in confusion, Sunny spouted, "What the hell? What for?"

"He didn't," nervously she looked at Pike, "or couldn't, really say."

Pike furrowed his own brow, but for different reasons. "Sounds suspicious. Let me hear the message."

"Me too," Sunny chimed in.

Unwilling to spend more time sitting still, Pike had pressed them to continue on Interstate 5. They settled for nervous chatter over the secure radio channel.

"He sounded so...strained, don't you think?" Sunny asked, shaking his head. "I mean he was relaxed, even psyched when he dropped the cow vial off. But not on that call. I mean no way was the doc on the level there."

Pike agreed, "I thought this whole operation seemed questionable, but I'm doubly certain now." "Maybe the government caught up with him? They can fake voices, like electronically, can't they?" Sassy kept checking her rear view mirrors, expecting a row of tanks to thunder over the horizon at any moment.

"I think the voice was real, but I bet they beat it out of him," Sunny bit his lip in worry at the idea.

His voice level, Pike injected some semblance of order into the increasingly paranoid conversation, "Say that they did. Say that we're made, and the pier is a trap. Where does that leave us, boys and girls?"

"Screwed, that's where!"

"Sunny's right. We can't make 900 miles if we're tailed the whole way. I mean, I hoped we'd get out of Cali at least!"

"Calm down. Everyone," Pike dragged out his voice, "just calm down."

The radio crackled with tension.

"I know this is only our second day in, and I know we have kind of been taking it easy. But if this is a trap, well, then we're all in danger. Real danger, not a few roving bandits kind of danger. But real danger that Green World or the government could bring." Sunny and Sassy nodded enthusiastically in their seats while Pike continued, "But our ambusher, whoever they are, made one mistake. They told us where they plan to strike. And if you think about it," he gingerly touched the steering wheel's weapon triggers, "that makes us the ambushers."

San Francisco and the surrounding cityscape had suffered heavily from food riots. Upscale yuppies rioted for a return of clean, organic fruit and the lifestyle they had known. Downtown gangsters and desolate poor rioted for the sake of rioting. The combination of citywide chaos took a heavy toll on the old, unstable buildings.

Fires light the night, and the San Francisco metroplex burned and burned. The introduction of autodueling excited the violent masses, and the steep streets and turns filled with unsanctioned duels. Rioters turned to spectators eager to see fiery wrecks smashing down trolley lines and along the wharf.

The government pressed the peace and slowly secured downtown behind a massive, rolling wall. Individual slabs of thick steel and concrete were pushed south from the Golden Gate bridge. Lumbering machines belching black smoke edged The Wall forward mere inches per day, crushing anything that stood in the way. The ruins left behind were cleaned, rebuilt, and restored.

Although tedious and fraught with errors, the process eventually turned a small chunk of the San Francisco metroplex into a thriving community. Under watchful government eyes the militarized security zone spread south from the Golden Gate bridge to the destroyed city college and Ingleside and Parkmerced districts. Outside The Wall violence and terror continue

unabated, and Pike hoped to use that to their advantage.

The sun had risen and was warming the daily bustle of commuters. Most of the drivers hailed from inland California, likely the Modesto or Sacramento fortress towns. Sassy looked upon the endless parade of dull faced workers and longed for an end to the tension and fear of being pursued. "Maybe couriering is aging me faster than I'd like," she thought, gently touching withered lines around her eyes.

The group were still north on highway 5 when a bullet riddled sign marked Interstate 580 as twenty miles away.

"Coming up on the 580," Pike confirmed, still out front of their little convoy. His voice remained unshaken and confident. He knew the risks of the job, knew what they could face, and was worn thin just enough from a life of violence that dying on the highway seemed preferable.

Sunny nodded, forgot the other drivers couldn't see he, and opted for the radio instead, "Roger." The young driver had seen much of the world outside the dueling track, and wanted to live a long and amusingly dangerous life. But now real danger loomed over him; the type of danger that didn't come to an end when the racetrack buzzer rang. But Sunny's inner strength and confidence had grown from his time with his friends, and as a result his constant boasting became less empty than before.

Minutes later Pike slowed his speed in preparation for the Interstate 580 exit. "Okay, everyone remember the plan?"

The plan was simple. With luck the pier ambush would turn into a feint aimed at destroying or slowing their pursuers enough to get across the California border. Part of the strategy involved splitting the group, and giving the cattle embryo to Pike or Sunny.

Sassy would weave an inconspicuous route northwards along Interstate 580 and any side streets she felt were a safe alternative. They were banking on their ambushers not observing outside The Wall, and hoped her angled path would go unnoticed.

Eventually Sassy would enter San Francisco from the north, while Pike and Sunny entered from the more predictable south. The two men would head for Pier B-32 in the Marina district, and hope that Doctor Moss had a legitimate reason for meeting. Both knew that situation was unlikely, so they would scream north through downtown to reach the Golden Gate bridge.

Across the Golden Gate bridge was outside The Wall, and that meant Sassy had free reign to place as many traps and tricks as she wanted. Security would likely see their pursuers and destination and let Sunny and Pike pass; anything to keep trouble outside The Wall. This gave the pair a chance to lure pursuit into the perfect ambush spot at the Redwood Highway tunnel.

"Yes we all know the plan," Sassy crackled, her voice quiet and hollow across the distant radio, "Me and Sunny pulled a similar fake out on the highway to lure bandits across our mines."

"Wait, wasn't that where I had to save your life?" Pike replied.

Sassy rolled her eyes, "Sure, the rest of the fight was brutal, but at least the mine part worked," she strained a laugh.

Sunny didn't like being split from Sassy, and his concern added doubt to Pike's recollection of the San Francisco streets, "That's assuming this tunnel will still be open? I mean you were here a long time ago Pike..."

Still unwavering, Pike stated, "Don't worry, I never forget a tunnel."

"What does that even-"

"Look, if the tunnel isn't there we can still ambush these guys, we just won't have tons of fallen rock to do it for us," Sassy interrupted, not wanting Sunny's fear to feed her own. "You just lure

them north and hope for the best."

"Right Sassy, we'll lose radio contact once we cross The Wall," Pike said, repeating what they already knew. "But we'll aim to be at the tunnel."

Sunny rudely interrupted, "-Or whatever is there now-"

Ignoring the barb, the older man continued to double check, "-at two o'clock, okay?"

"Alright see you boys, and any friends, then."

"You know you look like a tourist with that map out," Pike scowled.

"I am a tourist!" Sunny said, exasperated. He motioned to the many glassy eyed travellers around the pair, "And besides, we want to blend in like Joe Schmoie, right?"

"I already told you the route out of here."

"Yes yes because you remember every street ever, I get it," Sunny replied, matching Pike's scowl. "Did you ever think that The Restoration may have modified some of those streets?"

Pike looked away, preferring to split his attention between thinking and enjoying his cold drink. The pair had stopped at a roadside cafe along a historic road called The Embarcadero, and were sipping drinks and trying to look inconspicuous. Nearby were their vehicles, although a dusty muscle car and finely tuned racer tended to stand out even if their owners did not. An hour remained until the planned meeting time at Pier B-32.

The refreshing sea air infused Pike with a sense of humor he normally preferred to keep hidden. "What is with these people and The? The Wall. The Embarcadero," Pike made mocking air quotes with his fingers.

Sunny smirked and pointing upwards, covering his mouth to prevent laughing.

Pike leaned back in the flimsy plastic deck chair and looked up to see the cafe sign. "The Foggy Day? The! Really? That's where we're drinking?"

"Maybe 'The' gives these people a sense of control."

"Oh stuff it, you're starting to sound like me," Pike growled. "But really, The Restoration? Hell, what even is The Restoration?" he demanded.

"Well, if you had one of these," Sunny smugly began, casually motioning to the tourist pamphlet on the table, "you'd know that is the government project to restore downtown. The basic-"

"That's pretty boring."

Sunny huffed, "Well Pike what thrilling topic would you rather discuss?"

"The route. I want to discuss," again came the air quotes, "the route. Over and over until you can drive it blind." The sea air seemed to have left Pike's sails of humor.

Sunny planted his elbows on the table and leaned in, "You can say Lombard Street and Chestnut Street and Doyle Drive until you're blue in the face. I still have no idea what any of those roads look like."

"Well I-"

"Yes, you're the one who said 'Let's not drive around and draw attention to ourselves'."

Scowling he sat back, "Come on Pike, everyone drives around this town."

"Not us, and not now Sunny, okay?" Finality edged his voice.

"Fine, you win. Let's go over Never Seen It Street and Some Silly Name Avenue again." Sunny motioned the waitress over and rolled his eyes at Pike, "After you buy me another drink."

Although Never Seen It Street didn't factor into their plans, Pike envisioned a mix of main roads and hilly side streets. They wanted to escape capture without totally losing the pursuers,

at least until the Redwood Highway tunnel.

After going across the road and the wrong way on Lombard Street they would cut north to Chestnut Street. From there Pike planned a straight west route to Richardson Avenue, which became Doyle Drive and lead north over the Golden Gate bridge.

Sunny had taken his role of tourist to heart, and read the free pamphlet handout front to back twice. The young driver was excited to be on the coast, feel the fresh air and see such a famous port. He only wished the visit was under different, less dangerous circumstances.

The Foggy Day cafe was situated near Pier 23, so they had a few blocks to drive to the meeting place. Doctor Moss hadn't specified a time more specific than "lunch", so they hoped to arrive a while after noon.

Sunny's eyes roved the streets between sips of artificially flavored water. The young driver was focused on ignoring Pike, and the bustling mix of commerce and tourism was the perfect distraction. A vibrant mix of tourists, cyclists, businessmen, sailors, and cabbies presented a new scene every second.

Throughout every street corner and store front the lingering heel of government control loomed. Security and comfort inside The Wall had a price. Although they tried to be invisible and unobtrusive, Sunny couldn't help but notice the numerous unmarked red cars driven by scowling men in red armor. Apparently unmarked black cars were out of fashion for the San Francisco Security Force.

The young driver fought to keep his eyes open, but soon his mind wandered. The hum of the colorful crowds mingled with cackling seagulls and Pike's route planning. Sunny felt attached to Sassy, even though she hadn't made time for mixing pleasure and business. Nonetheless he made a point of avoiding the numerous winks and smiles of blonde pedestrians, and instead focused on thinking about Sassy.

The tunnel was massive and wide enough to push four lanes of traffic either direction. Luckily Sassy's collection of weapons was even more massive.

As an added bonus to the new droppable dangers outfitting her Impact 244, Sassy had saved a pile of mines. The explosives were perfect for tearing the roof apart and dumping piles of stone on any pursuit.

The Redwood Highway, designated 101, wound through the tunnel. After the passage the road eventually split with the coastal Shoreline Highway 1, which was a scenic route from the days before auto-dueling.

Now such a cramped, winding highway was seen as dangerous and vulnerable to roadblocks and gangs. But part of the plan was to take the Shoreline Highway and hope any pursuit continued north on the 101. Abandoned fishing towns and disorganized gangs seemed preferable to a rolling battle with Green World or the government on a major highway.

"Oh of course I'll just hop up the sheer wall and rig the roof," she stubbed her finger and cursed, "I mean I've been sneaking off and practicing demolitions just for that purpose, stupid son of a--"

Traffic roared and echoed below her as Sassy continued her uncertain climb along the walls of the Redwood Highway tunnel. A crude rope and harness setup was latched to her waist, but the driver felt far from safe as she teetered thirty feet above the road.

The cool metal of her submachine gun rested along her thigh and comforted her enough to forget the constant stream of vagrants wandering below. Most of the cars that passed were busy firing at each other, and that drew most of the attention from her dangling form. A rare catcall or hoot reminded Sassy that she was surrounded by lawlessness, but she has spent her life in such situations.

Rusted metal arches supported the roof of the tunnel, and she used one of the less bullet ridden beams as climbing support. Between the roar of rockets and the heat of flamethrowers Sassy had a hard time putting one hand in front of another. Her heavy pack of explosive mines didn't help.

Hastily Sassy sprayed cleaning foam on her hands, scrubbed them together, and groaned at what little progress was made against the dirt. While fighting a stubborn patch of grit she surveyed what two hours of demolitions work looked like.

A single mine had been placed over each lane, and rigged to a basic wire detonator. Compact jars of napalm were affixed to the main support girder in the hopes of washing the rubble in flame.

The detonator wire was curled tightly along the wall and ended near her Impact 244, where Sassy stood. The vehicle was pulled to the side of the tunnel and pointed away from San Francisco.

She would wait until Sunny and Pike were clear of the blast line, and then detonate the roof mines and napalm. Years before the food riots a separate route around the tunnel existed, called Alexander Avenue, but the road was no longer passable. The collapsed tunnel could hold up pursuit for at least a day, which would mean the group could practically reach Seattle without further harassment. In theory.

Pike's voice awoke Sunny from his slumped position, "Hey chump, quit daydreaming."

Groggily Sunny said, "I wasn't daydreaming, I was sleeping."

"Well we're set to go, so saddle up," he ordered.

The drivers rose and left a thin stack of bills to pay for the drinks. Pike warily looked around before approaching his car, while Sunny casually strode up to his vehicle.

A pair of seagulls rested on Jodi's hood, basking in the reflected warmth. Their beaks were nestled into closed wings, and Pike was angry to see smudges on the car. "Look at these pests, making a mess of Jodi - um, my car."

"Look, Pike, I know you named your car, so I don't get why you're weird about it."

"Well, I-"

"And careful there. Seagulls are a protected species within The Wall," Sunny continued, pointing at the pamphlet he still carried, "as are starfish and sea lions." He put a finger to his chin, "Say what do you figure a sea lion is anyways?"

"I think-"

Sunny continued to enjoy talking over Pike, "Anyways a protected species means it's a crime to feed, harass, or harm them. Apparently everyone was eating the birds, and that was," Sunny loosened his grip on the pamphlet so he could unfold a page and read, "um, let's see. That was 'Creating an undesirable atmosphere and inappropriate seaside ambiance for customers, visitors, and residents'. Go figure, eh?"

"In a way-"

"Well, we should get going. Gently remove those dear, dear seagulls," Sunny said, smiling, "and try to hurry up, we've spent enough gabbing."

Exasperated from the numerous interruptions, lecturing tone, and pointless details, Pike roared, "That's what I've been saying!"

Sunny pretended to be offended before closing his door.

While buckling himself in Sunny checked his mirrors, and then slowly drew the cow embryo vial from his inner jacket pocket. The young driver stared at the vial in wonderment as he thought of the potential locked within. Although Sunny was overjoyed with his new car, new friends, and possible payday, he also truly believed that cattle could help the world.

Suddenly a ragged hand swept across his windshield, spreading water full of oily bubbles. The rag belonged to a grimy man in grimy clothes, expressionless and with a vacant, tired edge to his motions. The street person continued the unmasked sweeping of Sunny's windshield.

Quickly Sunny dropped the vial from sight, more a reflex to avoid Pike's lectures than any actual fear of the homeless cleaner seeing the embryo. Opening his window Sunny started, "Hey buddy, hey...yeah you, hey." Withdrawing a single bill, Sunny pushed the crumbled dollar into the man's hand and shooed him along.

"Many thanks," the man said with a bland nod. He eyed Pike's car, but saw no hint of generosity in the driver's eyes and scurried down the wharf instead.

"If you're done..." Pike strained over the radio before starting his car and merging onto The Embarcadero.

"Sir, Agent 56 reporting in."

"Go for 56," came the reply.

"They're at Pier 23, heading north towards your location," the homeless man whispered into a microphone attached to his collar. His shambling stride had straightened, and a malicious light now glinted in his eyes. "Package confirmed."

"Affirmative," was the curt response from the listener, Agent X. Silence followed, and the undercover Agent 56 had enough experience to stop speaking after his report. "The woman, was she there?" Agent X asked.

"Negative, sir. Targets were two males."

"Confirmed. Out."

Agent X dropped his wrist microphone and surveyed his crew. For this operation he had chosen a dark blue business suit and thick sunglasses, while his drivers were all wearing standard camo green helmets and padded suits. Several undercover units were roving San Francisco in plain clothes and would strike when necessary.

The mass of San Francisco Security Force vehicles could pose a problem, even with the payoffs Green World executives had tried to make. Some loose cannon always wanted to be a hero, and SFSF was no exception. At least the red brigade would call off the hunt at the Golden Gate bridge, Agent X knew.

His contract allowed for three personal associates to accompany Agent X. The rest of the kill squad, support teams, and intelligent officers were all Green World employees. He considered them expendable fodder, and knew any one of them would crumble in a duel with his quarry. But Green World favored sheer numbers over raw talent, and time was on their side.

The center of the rat infested warehouse was dominated by eight vehicles conforming to a variety of standard design patterns. At the request of his employer each was a similar green

color. Every weapon had been checked and rechecked, and the Green World crew were anxious to spring the trap.

Agent X didn't get anxious, and certainly wouldn't let emotions overrule common sense. Supremely confident, he planned to stay out of combat range and observe how the couriers handled the first wave. The coast was long, and Agent X was certain he could capture the vial. Before breaking, Doctor Moss had revealed the destination lab to be in Seattle. Although he was interested in catching the traitors, Agent X didn't want to start a city wide search for the lab in case the scouring tipped off the couriers.

Seamlessly shifting his attention back to the warehouse, Agent X drew his mic and boomed orders in an amplified voice, "Contacts are confirmed. Prepare to give chase. Once they're on the pier they'll see something is wrong, and flee immediately."

Looking over the empty expanse of Pier B-32, Sunny groaned, "They could at least try to make the ambush less suspicious."

"A lack of tourists does seem rather unusual. But let's not count our chickens before they're hatched."

"Our what?"

"Nevermind. We have a few good avenues of escape. I figure we ease up on the right, and swing around that first warehouse and head back towards Lombard Street once the ambush breaks."

"How many do you think there'll be?" Sunny asked, his voice tense with the early jitters of adrenaline.

"Not sure. Let's keep our eyes peeled," Pike replied. His hands on the steering wheel were steady and sure like iron bars. The pair drove like they were in a highway convoy, with Pike up front and Sunny trailing several feet behind.

Their rolling tires echoed through the wooden boardwalk as the pair entered the pier.

Protected seagulls encircled the end of the boardwalk, which was close to three hundred feet in length. Multiple warehouses mingled with heavy machinery across the desolate space. The rusted beams and tin roofs looked refreshingly new compared to the ruins outside The Wall. Fresh seaweed stung their nostrils, and Pike noticed a pair of heavy algae boats drifting in the sea.

The gray stone of the first warehouse blocked the sun as they drew closer. Blinking rapidly to adjust his eyes, Sunny could see the wide loading doors slowly creaking apart. "Look, the door is opening," he immediately exclaimed into the radio.

"I see it. Be ready for anything."

Agent X strutted from the interior shadows and lifted his hand. Adjusting his cuffs and cranking the mic the assassin ordered, "You have property belonging to Green World. Cease and we-"

Sunny and Pike didn't give the man a chance to finish. "Go!" Pike yelled while slamming the accelerator. Jodi's upgraded power plant sparked and whistled as torque fed into the axles. Wooden beams protested as the thick tires dug in and propelled the car in a tight arc away from the warehouse.

Adrenaline was Sunny's fuel, and it poured through his veins as he reacted to the scene. He mirrored Pike's maneuver by edging the Side Draft parallel to the entrance. Not as eager to leave without a fight, he grinned and triggered the cluster of light rockets on his right side.

The three missiles spewed smoke and flashed away from the car. Agent X stood fearlessly against the onslaught. Blasting his suit and hair with exhaust pressure as they spiraled by, the rockets dove into the warehouse. Sunny cheered as he saw the red glow of explosions and heard twisting metal.

Simultaneous to Pike's initial retreat, the Green World forces had started moving. Engines roared and the chase was on. Unfortunately the overeager lead driver sped directly into the three rockets. One detonated against the armored hood, blasting apart to expose the vulnerable power plant. As if sensing the weakness, the second and third rocket plowed into the engine, destroying the car before it had even left the warehouse.

Rushing away from the warehouse, Sunny silently wished for Sassy's dropped weapons and radar. He tried to count the pursuit vehicles, but constant weaving prevented any sense of accuracy. The pier had seemed so empty during their peaceful approach, but at sixty miles an hour every obstruction became a deadly hazard.

"Embarcadero coming up," Pike yelled.

"Got it." Lamenting his miscount, Sunny said, "I can't tell how many there are."

"Looks like seven. Woulda been eight...good job with the rockets."

Beaming at the compliment, Sunny skidded after Pike onto the smooth pavement of The Embarcadero. Traffic honked and hollered at the pair as they headed towards Lombard Street. Local laws prevented commuter vehicles from being armed, so the only retaliation available was angry noise.

The mass of Green World vehicles followed them in formation, each car firing various caliber machine guns when they had a clear shot. Sunny could see a few grenade launchers mixed among the pursuers, but so far the attack was limited to bullets.

Now that the brawl had started, Sunny felt his old arena confidence return. He flawlessly swapped attention between driving and firing. The dual recoilless rifles blasted backwards from the Side Draft's turret. Within seconds the advanced targeting computer upgrade had proven its worth. Each Green World vehicle was highlighted, and desirable angles of attack were projected onto the monitor. Sunny just had to wiggle the crosshair a bit to steadily hit the pursuers.

"Lombard's just ahead," Pike reported over the roar of his engine. Plastic shards ripped off his car, and Sunny had the sinking suspicion a different weapon was in play. Confirming his thought, the older driver said, "Looks like one of the bastards is packing a gauss gun."

"Fancy tech for the likes of us," Sunny said. The gauss gun was expensive and rare and worked by electromagnetically accelerating a mass of needle shaped projectiles towards the target.

"Well let's avoid it if we can." Pike exhaled before cranking his car left onto Lombard Street.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny followed, mumbling to himself, "Time for the one way." Part of their plan was to shake some pursuit by going against traffic for the first section of Lombard Street.

Cars flashed their lights and skipped onto the sidewalk to avoid Pike's imposing battering ram. Smug and soft from being secure inside The Wall, citizens were rudely forced to leap to safety. In a hard corner of his heart, Pike reveled in the chance to shake the populace from their complacency.

One oncoming van was oblivious to the chaos. The driver was busy fiddling with their radio, and had stopped paying attention to the road ahead. Pike barely had time to react, and chose to disable the approaching vehicle rather than risk a collision. His laser battery hummed to life as he triggered two of the forward weapons.

Invisible lances severed the front left tire from the axle, and the van careened into the parked

cars alongside the street. The driver smashed through the window from the impact and smashed against the sidewalk. Heavy and unbalanced, the van started to tip over onto the melted wheel well.

"Watch the van," he croaked to Sunny before drifting around the crashed vehicle. He nudged the back of the next parked car with his battering ram, slamming the vehicle out into the road to make an impromptu barricade. The bounty hunter was confident in Sunny's ability to dodge between the two wrecks, but wasn't going to hold his breath for all the Green World vehicles. Trailing at high speeds mere feet behind the dusty lead car, Sunny's reacted faster than he thought possible. Yanking the wheel right then left he cut between the smashed van and ruined parked car. After avoiding the parked car he overcompensated slightly and nearly swerved into a stop sign. At the last second he recovered the vehicle and continued to follow Pike.

Flipping a switch he brought the turret to bear on the parked car. "A little more warning would help, pal." Releasing his anger with pyrotechnics, Sunny jammed the trigger and sent a pair of oversized projectiles through the hood of the parked car.

An explosion tore through the vehicle, showering the road with debris. The lead Green World car had slowed slightly to navigate the mess, but the pair behind him didn't. A cheer escaped Sunny's mouth as the crowd of pursuit vehicles slammed into each other in confusion.

"Looks like we lost them for a bit," he said, returning focus to the road ahead. Or rather, the forest.

The pavement turned north, and the path west towards the Golden Gate bridge was blocked by Pioneer Park. Pike glanced out his left window to see the unpainted Coit Tower surrounded by scaffolding.

"Wait, wait, I thought this street went through?" Sunny cried, naturally braking as they approached the woods. Tall trees dotted the park, some fallen and others a patchwork of rotten bark. Pedestrians casually strolled through the narrow dirt paths, busy admiring the scenery. A steep slope towered behind a row of parked cars, which Pike was heading directly for.

"It does. Kind of." The four light lasers blasted through the doors of the nearest parked car, which Pike then accelerated into. Thick plated steel on the battering ram split the remains of the empty subcompact, and Jodi sped free of the wreckage.

Switching pedals, Sunny eased the accelerator and followed. Silently nervous about scratching his new paint job Sunny triggered a short burst from the forward machine gun to widen the gap. Flames licked the windows and broken glass cracked under his tires as he drove through the hole that used to be a car. Unfamiliar with off-road driving, Sunny trusted in his Side Draft to handle the slope.

"Looks like they're regrouping," Pike mentioned, quickly checking his mirrors. The Green World cars had untangled themselves and slowly forced the van off the road. Three split north towards Chestnut Street, which was parallel to the unexpected Pioneer Park path. The remaining four barreled through the woods after Sunny and Pike. "Keep firing, if you can."

"I don't think I'll hit much with all this greenery," he admitted, "and I'm not made of ammo." Although deep, the magazines of the recoilless rifles were not bottomless, and he knew broader stretches were rapidly approaching.

Besides the slope and rare panicked pedestrian, Pioneer Park was surprisingly easy to surmount. Dodging tree stumps was no different than dodging concrete blocks in the arena. Any fallen trees that stood in the way were either blasted or battered aside.

Using the intervening trees as cover, one particularly bold Green World vehicle caught up with Sunny. The masked driver was quick to sideswipe the lighter yellow car, which nearly spun Sunny into a tree. Apparently unconcerned with conserving ammunition, the remaining four vehicles took the collision as a cue to renew their firing.

Bullets pattered across the Side Draft, and Sunny weaved between every scrap of cover he could find to try to slow the lead tide. A lump formed in his throat as he felt the deep thump of a grenade launcher. There was a high pitched whistle as the explosive canister arced through the air, but Sunny couldn't tell which vehicle had fired it.

"Got a problem back h-" Static flooded his radio as the grenade detonated above his car. The air burst showered his speeding car with shrapnel. Long, jagged chunks of metal clung to the weak top armor, and warning lights flooded his display.

A stray shard from the blast cracked Pike's mirror. Cursing, he quickly surveyed the terrain for options to bring his car around. Cresting the top of the Pioneer Park hill, Pike saw a way to help Sunny.

Expansive and freshly paved, a parking lot awaited the pair. The majority of cars were clustered near the walking paths, since the lazy drivers preferred to save their energy by not traversing the scorching pavement. This left a large swathe of empty lot to joust in.

"Hold on and keep going," Pike ordered. Slowing just enough to bring Sunny and the Green World cars parallel to him, Pike wrenched the steering wheel and emergency brake. Tires angled and locked, and for a brief moment Pike was freely skidding across the parking lot. Part of his maneuver had swung Jodi's front ninety degrees to the right, and lined up the rack of lasers with their enemies. Still skidding over the smooth pavement, Pike held the trigger down and blasted the five vehicles with searing lasers.

One of the cars carrying a grenade launcher crumbled under the barrage. Plastic armor melted and flowed down the sides like a toxic river. The sheer volume of laser shots destroyed the car in a shower of sparks.

"Yes! Got 'im." Pike released the emergency brake and brought Jodi back to her original bearing. The parking lot ended soon in the downhill slope out of Pioneer Park.

"Nice move." The buzz of warnings subsided in the background of Sunny's transmission. One Green World car still bumped against the Side Draft, two had dropped back slightly, and the remaining driver foolishly tried to mimic Pike's daring skid.

Pike smelled burning rubber and saw a fresh cloud of white smoke erupt from the spinning opponent. The driver wasn't as experienced as Pike, and barely maintained control of the car. While skidding sideways the vehicle eventually angled enough to get a clear shot. Machine guns tore across the parking lot, mostly striking the parked tourist vehicles. A few bullets chipped into Pike's side armor, but the bounty hunter was unconcerned. Unwavering in his forward path, Pike was sure to provide a tempting distraction to the skidding Green World car. He just needed a few more seconds.

Perhaps the gunner of the firing car saw what Pike saw, or maybe a radio call ordered him to straighten out. Regardless the skidding vehicle slammed sideways into the curb at the end of the parking lot. Casually waving, Pike rolled across the barrier and into the grass beyond.

The speed, angle, and curb combined forces to flip the skidding Green World car high into the air. Slamming into the dirt that bordered the parking lot, the car started to slowly roll down the hill lengthwise.

"Quite a show, Pike. Let's box these last two bastards in?"

"Absolutely." Pike had thought of a similar strategy, and was already slowing to drop behind the two remaining vehicles that chased Sunny. His array of forward lasers had already proven

deadly against the pursuers.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Sunny pointed out the obvious, "There's the end of the park." At the bottom of the downhill slope was Lombard Street, except traffic flowed both ways. His troubles were far from over as the nearest Green World vehicle kept scraping alongside him. Considering his options, Sunny smacked his forehead and remembered the triple light rockets remaining on that side. He had fired the right facing set at the lead warehouse vehicle, but besides a few dents from the ramming his left rockets were ready to launch.

They would be on Lombard Street in a matter of seconds. Sunny saw an approaching tree, thick and swollen with age. He drifted onto a line left of the tree, pushing the Green World vehicle with him. Wanting to ensure a kill, he didn't hesitate in triggering the entire chain of missiles. As soon as they cleared his vehicle he swerved to the right, narrowly missing the tree. The dense hardwood blocked most of the explosive shockwave as the rockets found their target.

One detonated against the front right tire of the Green World vehicle. The second blasted through the passenger side door and exploded inside the car. The final rocket smashed into the trunk, momentarily lifting the flaming wreck off the ground.

Gritting his teeth Sunny sped through the remaining woods and onto Lombard Street. Pike was rotating laser fire at the remaining vehicle, thankful that he had opted for an additional battery dedicated to powering the weapons. Crafty dodging and a persistent streak of luck had saved the Green World employee so far.

"Watch for those three Green World scumbags that split off before the park. I noticed a lack of gauss gun shots, so it's probably still out there."

"Got it. Want to take back the lead now that we're on the street?"

"Probably a good idea."

Mere minutes had elapsed since they first ran from the pier, and both drivers were still flush with adrenaline. Some distant memory of duels reminded traffic in both lanes to steer clear of the chase. The pair easily kept the remaining Green World car at bay, and Lombard Street provided a chance to catch their breath.

No traffic lights interrupted their flow for several blocks. Pike felt confident running the stop signs, and Sunny had clocked enough hours of misspent youth to know how to safely navigate a blind crossing. The street still angled downwards from the park before leveling near Columbus Avenue.

"Red light ahead," Pike noted, rapidly peering up and down the avenue to try to gauge the approaching traffic.

Flying down the hill, Sunny had barely noticed the unobtrusive traffic light near the sidewalk. Trusting in Pike's leadership and age, he said, "I'll follow your lead."

Checking his speedometer Pike continued to scan and predict vehicle routes. "Hit it at seventy and we should cruise through."

Preferring to expose the smallest possible target to unaware commuters, Sunny accelerated a fraction and carefully edged closer to Pike. The avenue was only a single lane each way, as well as a far lane of old trolley track rebuilt for sentimental reasons. Lombard Street intersected at an angle, and Sunny could see no other roads that Green World could sneak from. Seven storey apartment buildings mingled with food marts and quaint jewelery shops, all of which prevented a full view of the road ahead.

Sunny raised an eyebrow and reached for the radio as the sole Green World vehicle slowed and dropped behind the pair. Half thinking the coward was afraid to run the light, the young driver didn't stop to consider the enemy was preparing to avoid a collision.

Before Sunny could speak, Pike flew across Columbus Avenue at seventy miles an hour. He would have safely made the crossing too, except for the dangers in a troublesome alley the buildings had obscured. The single lane Newell Street ended in a fenced storage shed, but there was still room for the three Green World vehicles to hide.

As soon as the trailing pursuer had slowed the waiting group had jammed their accelerators, carefully coordinating the timing over a secure radio channel. The lead vehicle t-boned Pike from the front right side, accidentally catching the edge of his battering ram in the process. Both cars spun out in a cloud of smoke and debris. Still trailing close to scene of the crash, Sunny didn't have time to react and swerve out of the way.

Jodi stuttered and spun from the impact, clipping Sunny and pushing him towards the nearest lamp post. Then the second and third Green World cars opened fire, showering the intersection with a combination of gauss and machine gun fire.

Gritting his teeth and clenching the wheel, Pike felt his entire body strain as the car rapidly swung out of control. Alarms beeped at him, lights flashed, and smoke started to fill the cabin. Disoriented and in pain, he barely had time to duck as a shower of bullets broke his rear window.

"Go go go! Get out," he yelled into the mic, flooring the car and hoping to straighten back onto Lombard Street before killing himself on the surrounding buildings.

Sunny was equally dazed from the secondary impact, and winced as sparks exploded downwards from his turret. All four Green World cars had successfully untangled themselves and were firing everything they had into the pair.

Hearing Pike's advice, Sunny followed suit and revved his Side Draft. Internally damaged and dribbling cooling fluid from a dozen holes, the car was slow to respond. "Come on!" he roared, trying to angle his weapon turret at the same time. The turning mechanism was jammed and locked the weapons forward. Sunny realized he wasn't even sure the rifles had even survived the barrage. Quickly he browsed the assortment of flashing lights on his dashboard to confirm his suspicions. Only a single light from the turret status panel was green, so Sunny hoped to have at least one recoilless rifle operational.

Pike's own damage check left a sour taste in his mouth. The far right laser had crumbled and was unusable. He toggled a switch to deactivate it from the weapon link, and continued to scan the dashboard while driving. The impact didn't pop his front right tire, and Pike breathed a sigh of relief at his mobility. A lucky angle combined with the thin sheets of wheel guard armor had saved the tire, and likely his life.

Pike raced ahead, wafting thick clouds of black smoke. Finally the Side Draft gained enough speed for Sunny to angle away from the metal post and head back onto Lombard Street. Sensing their chance, the Green World vehicles eagerly continued pursuit with guns blazing.

Agent X watched the battle from further north on Columbus Avenue, tucked safely inside his vehicle. Sharply angled to deflect radar, the black sedan cost more than most small towns. A soft breeze from the atmospheric controller wafted over the frown forming on his face. "Maybe I have underestimated you," he thought, dissatisfied that his latest prey proved so feeble. The pair had decimated his crew to half strength, but seemed to become reckless after their initially strong showing.

The advanced radio system had hijacked a line to the San Francisco Security Force dispatch. A dull purple light glowed as chatter echoed over the channel, "All SFSF units near Lombard Hill,

dispatch requests support to end a gang related duel."

Straightening his frown into a scowl that passed for happiness, he thought, "Perhaps this will be interesting after all."

Sweating and aching from the crash, Sunny clicked on the radio, "How's it holding together?" "She'll be fine," Pike said, apparently forgetting his earlier awkwardness at treating his car like a person. "You?"

"I think one of my rifles is toast, and I'm leaking fluid like a stuck pig."

Pike checked his mirrors, both to keep an eye on the Green World cars and to confirm Sunny's condition. "Yep, the left rifle looks like a melted tube of tin foil."

"It's locked forward too, so I can't even harass these bastards."

Although he hated to admit being outmatched, Pike began to realize the chase was less about luring out the ambush and more about survival. "Remember our little Santa Nella race?"

"Of course." Partially forgetting his situation, Sunny weakly boasted, "I mean how could I forget beating you-"

"Let's floor it again," Pike interrupted, knowing seconds counted. Weaving and dodging only worked for so long, and the Green World pursuers were sending everything they had after the pair. Infrequent grenades smashed parked cars or potholed the street ahead, and the constant string of machine gun fire continued unabated through the smoke.

"I...I don't know if my car can handle it."

"Well, can it?" Pike demanded, knowing full well every limit of Jodi. "We've got a bit left, don't you," he mumbled, patting the steering wheel as he had so many times in the past.

Sunny knew he didn't have the luxury of analyzing his dashboard lights to find a response.

Glancing across the array of information, he instead lifted his gaze to the road. He slowly shut out the roaring cacophony around him and focused on the beating pulse of the vehicle. The power plant thrummed energy through the chassis, and Sunny began to feel every nuanced sway of the car. Sunny held this repose for a moment to find his answer. Determination burned in his eyes as he brought all attention back to the road. As if the Side Draft had spoken to him, Sunny answered with certainty, "Yes."

Lombard Street had survived a fair number of hot pursuits, and later, weaponized duels. But speed, pure speed, was something the streets of San Francisco never tired of. Sunny and Pike unleashed everything their cars had, and were breaking 100 miles an hour when Lombard Street intersected Leavenworth. There the hill took an unexpected turn for the worse, literally.

"What the hell!" Sunny screamed, naturally slamming on his brakes at the imposing maze before them. Instantly images from his tourist pamphlet of the famously reconstructed Lombard Hill flooded his mind. The road switchbacked so sharply that trucks were banned and most subcompacts had trouble traversing the curves. Eight elbow shaped turns awaited them, and Sunny felt fear grow in his stomach. Worse still the road was one way, and traffic only flowed against them down the hill.

Pike was reacted before Sunny had even shouted in surprise. Blaring his horn the old man cut hard to the right and launched Jodi up the straight staircase that paralleled Lombard Hill.

Railings sparked and scraped to his left, and rows of palm trees splintered against the battering ram. Fences parted like paper to his right, and still he plowed up the walkway.

Horror cut across his face and guilt flooded his heart as the battering ram smashed through a slow pedestrian. Blood spattered his windshield, and a strangled cry cut through the air. Pike

didn't slow, and launched off the improvised staircase ramp at ninety miles an hour.

Barely reacting in time, Sunny followed the crazed shortcut. The carnage of Pike's passing thudded under his tires, but Sunny maintained focus on driving. His lightweight Side Draft flew even further over the top of the staircase.

Fifteen red SFSF vans and cruisers awaited them at the Hyde Street intersection. Some of the surprised officers fired hand weapons at the underarmor of the launched cars, while others started their own vehicles in preparation for pursuit.

Pike's heavier car landed first. The suspension shuddered and gave under the weight, and he skidded out of control over a fire hydrant. Pressurized extinguisher foam erupted from the hydrant. Eyes wide in surprise at the last four seconds, Sunny flew over Hyde Street and landed smoothly on the downhill opposite Lombard Hill. Barely maintaining control, Sunny settled for heading down the bumpy road.

Spilled foam splashed Pike's undercarriage, and cries of "Stop, citizen" boomed from numerous SFSF units. Swerving wildly the old man was able to salvage a right turn onto Hyde Street.

Trying to regain control of the situation, he hopped on the mic, "I...I..."

For once Sunny was the voice of reason. "You got us out of there, that's what counts." Although Pike offered no response, Sunny could tell the man would be troubled at the spilling of innocent blood for the rest of his days.

"You made it onto Hyde?"

"Yes, but I don't know for how long," Pike stated, eyes narrowed as he saw dozens of flashing lights chasing him. Slitted eyes widened as an explosion erupted from Lombard Hill. "Looks like the Green Worlders tried going the wrong way up the hill."

"Good riddance, maybe that was all of them," Sunny said, trying to visualize the roadmap he and Pike had mentally studied. Dropping the luxury of small talk, Sunny ordered, "Cut left on Chestnut Street, I'll go right on Larkin and we'll meet up."

"Done," Pike said as the sound of squealing tires filled the radio.

An empty set of stairs replaced Chestnut Street for a block, but the drivers and pursuers crashed up them. After leveling back onto the road, Pike led them west towards the Golden Gate bridge. The drive was an adrenaline fueled blur for Sunny.

Some sections of Chestnut Street were jammed with traffic, while other blocks were desolate of cars. Screaming onto the sidewalk covered the former, and dodging and weaving at high speeds saved them during the latter.

Eventually two of the three Green World vehicles were destroyed, including the car armed with the gauss gun. Four of the fifteen SFSF pursuers were also wrecked, some from traffic collisions and others from weapon fire. The officers seemed reluctant to fully engage, but Sunny couldn't tell if Green World had paid them to hold off, or if injuring pedestrians was a concern. Regardless he was relieved to have a breather from the constant attacks, especially when the horde of SFSF could stop them by sheer numbers.

Sunny was broken from his trance of swerving, checking mirrors, and flipping dials by a massive building rapidly approaching on the right. "What the heck is that?" he eagerly asked Pike over the radio.

"Some kind of center or hall," Pike sounded uncertain, "maybe government related."

The building was the rebuilt Moscone Center, which had once served as a host to technology conferences with delegates from around the world. After the riots it had become a fortress dedicated to debauchery, run by a villainous slumlord. Advancing government forces and the looming Wall had eventually scattered the inhabitants like cockroaches. After an extensive

cleanup operation, the Moscone was once more becoming a prime location for events. Sunny and Pike knew nothing of the history. All they saw were opportunities, especially in the massive baseball fields surrounding the building. Massive earthworking machines were planted throughout the fields, busy rehabilitating the soil. Although slow and unarmed, the towering construction vehicles could provide cover.

"Let's see who's playing?" Sunny joked, edging into the lane closest to the Moscone Center. Mirroring the drift, Pike replied, "I was thinking the same thing. The street across the field looks like it merges onto Marina Boulevard."

"And that means what exactly?" Shots deflected off Sunny's bumper, and a row of warning lights brightened. "I'm starting to heat up," he said nervously, trying to glimpse the leaking fluid through his back windows.

"Marina Boulevard is right by the ocean, maybe the breeze will slow down the damage a bit." "Yeah...maybe," Sunny said, unconvinced and pushing aside panic from the thought of his Side Draft stalling.

"Look at it this way," Pike started, his voice chattering as Jodi hopped the curb and dug across the baseball fields, "at least we're down to a dozen pursuers."

Electric engines hummed with anticipation as Agent 22 and Agent 8 scanned Marina Boulevard. They were sitting in a pair of midnight black cars on the Doyle Drive merge ramp. Although less powerful than Agent X's vehicle, the same basic design philosophy of radar deflection and stealth were evident to even a casual onlooker.

Eventually the scenic shoreline drive of Marina Boulevard ascended to the Golden Gate bridge. Doyle Drive was the final stretch of road before the numerous toll booths that were embedded in The Wall. The mercenaries were confident in their position, as the ramp provided cover, surprise, and a commanding view down the road.

"Target spotted," Agent 22 croaked, eyes narrowed as he saw the smoking forms of Pike and Sunny rushing across the Moscone fields. Without saying anything, both Agents were pleased to see the Green World fodder had weakened the pair.

Fastening fingerless leather gloves over his hands, Agent 8 stated, "I see them. Weapon check." The pair were silent as switches and triggers were inspected. "Lasers primed. EMP charged." Glowing bulbs of energy signatures flickered green as Agent 22 said, "Check, munitions hot." "Roger. Begin pursuit in 27 seconds...26...25..."

"Hah, got one!" Sunny hollered triumphantly as an SFSF vehicle exploded against an earthworking machine. "We're doing pretty well for no rear guns."

The turf was rich and black with minerals, and so fresh that all the cars were bogged down slightly. Pike and Sunny tried to maintain eighty miles an hour as they sped between the stunned construction crews. Showers of dirt followed in their wake, and red SFSF vehicles trailed behind in a loose, broken formation.

"Could-" static interrupted Pike's voice, "Dammit, I just lost my rear left tire." Sunny could hear the telltale whine of a strained axle. Swerving as a massive drill was lowered into the grass in front of him, Sunny tried to see Pike's position.

"Can you make it?" Cutting around the last machine, Sunny saw a two lane road ahead, "Looks

like our exit."

"Just in time too. I'm going to drop back a bit, see if I can't get some cover amidst the SFSF units," Pike said. Without waiting for a response he slammed Jodi's brakes on, the flat tire violently ripping the car to the left.

Still speeding, the lone Green World car flew by amidst a swarm of SFSF units. Pike gunned the engine, straining his arms as the steering wheel bucked and pulled away from his guiding hand. He knew the rubber remnants of the popped tire would wear away soon, but he hoped to safely be fleeing north on highway 1 by then.

Grunting he straightened the car enough to fire a series of laser shots at the back of the nearest SFSF van. The unfortunate victim was a lightly armed traffic control vehicle who had responded to the call for backup. Thin sheets of armor slowed the first stabs of light, but Pike's array of lasers eventually burned through the chassis.

He let Jodi turn left by loosening his grip on the wheel slightly, just enough to swing the lasers towards the next target. "It's like shooting fish in a barrel back here," he beamed, "I don't think the SFSF boys know what to do."

Remembering the numerous minor and annoying laws they had encountered so far, Sunny guessed, "They probably aren't allowed to slow down in a pursuit."

Despite their damaged vehicles, the two shared a laugh as the crowd of cars roared onto Marina Boulevard.

"There it is," Pike mumbled, breathing a sigh of relief as the towers of the Golden Gate bridge peaked above The Wall. His arms, old and tired from age, were nearly at their breaking point from fighting the flat tire. Without clicking the radio on, he sighed, "Almost there."

In the interest of public safety the SFSF had cleared the final stretch of Doyle Drive, including the rows and rows of toll booths near the southern entrance to the Golden Gate bridge. Dozens of heavy duty SFSF vehicles awaited them in a loose roadblock by the toll booths, just inside The Wall. Mere seconds across the water was the tunnel Sassy had rigged.

Still dominating from behind the SFSF vehicles, Pike had managed to destroy all but six. Like a wolf stalking a deer, he had picked off the weakest targets first. Parking enforcers, security taxis, and maintenance vehicles had fallen to his lasers. The remaining six were dedicated officer vehicles, and so far had resisted his attacks.

Finally the last Green World car had been destroyed. Pike had slashed the rear axle and slammed the out of control wreck through the Doyle Drive railings when they first merged onto the highway.

Sunny was alone in front of six SFSF vehicles when he saw the barrier of red cars awaiting him up the road. The ongoing battle with the SFSF response team since Lombard Street had just been a cover to pile more vehicles at The Wall border.

Seeing the impossible array of blast cannons, anti-tank guns, mines, and piles and piles of officers, he opened a channel to Pike, "Looks like they responded a little faster than we anticipated."

Tired and knowing Jodi didn't have much left, Pike grumbled, "To put it lightly."

"What do you think we should do? I...I don't see a way around."

The Wall seemed more and more imposing as they approached. A thin glimmer of sunlight reflected off the water beyond, and Sunny could see the freshly painted steel of the Golden Gate bridge between gaps in the SFSF line.

Sunny's hands shook as he realized he might die. As dangerous as the arena was, he felt safety there through control and mastery. Now he felt like a rat in a cage, for the longer they scurried

around inside The Wall the more SFSF units would await them.

"I guess they won't accept surrender," he gulped.

Fire blossomed from the far right SFSF car as Pike finally penetrated the armor, "Considering that's the tenth man in red we've killed, I don't think so." His voice was dry and quiet, as if his lungs grew tired of vocalizing his thoughts.

Pike was less morose about their impending destruction. Though he hated to give up, he was becoming exhausted enough to not care either way. The bounty hunter had lived a long time for such a brutal world.

The pools of innocent blood he had shed was starting to quench his fiery will to live. An unsuspecting tourist splattered across his battering ram at Lombard Street had just amplified his guilt and forced forgotten memories to the surface.

"Stop them from being killed," Agent X ordered, his normally calm voice edged with fury. The SFSF payoffs had apparently been wasted on the eager red vehicles blocking the way. Agent X hated incompetence, and never understood the false sense of nobility that inspired some police forces. "Now, because of their arrogance, they will die."

After seeing Pike and Sunny's performance throughout San Francisco, Agent X had no doubt about their impending capture. But he did need them alive, or more importantly the vial undamaged. The SFSF units arrayed against them had no such goal, and would open fire in seconds.

Speeding forward from his surveillance position, he opened a second channel to Agent 8 and continued to spout orders, "Use the EMP if you have to, just make sure they get clear of The Wall."

"Heh, I'd say we got these two trouble makers, eh Sam?"

"If not I wouldn't have much right calling myself a SFSF man," the officer named Sam replied. The pair steadily tracked the approaching fugitives with a blast cannon. They hoped to be the first shot as soon as the order to fire was issued.

"From the looks of things their cars are pretty much falling apart anyways," Henry, the second chatty officer, scoffed and smirked.

"Yeah, yeah." Sam paused and checked the range finder. "They're getting awfully close."

Leaning out of the van he asked the nearest officer who outranked him, "When should we fire?"

The junior lieutenant, perceiving doubt behind the question, felt insulted. He snapped back, "When I say! Besides, conflicting reports are coming in, it sounds like High Command wants them alive, but Rogers wants us to ignore them."

Both Sam and Henry roared, "Ignore them?"

"That Roger is as slimy as overcooked algae, let me tell you. He probably-"

Fiddling with dials on the radar, a young woman interrupted them in a worried voice. "Targets incoming. Um, looks like just one...no wait, four now." Narrowing her eyes and slapping the side of the radar box, she grumbled, "Wait, back to one. What the hell is going on here?"

Agent 22 answered the confused SFSF units by screaming towards their ranks at two hundred miles an hour. A massive laser discharged twin shots at the nearest vans, shattering the chassis and detonating the remains in a thundering explosion. The black car continued through the wreckage and onwards to the Golden Gate bridge.

"What was that?" Sunny said, hands gripping the wheel in anticipation as the two SFSF units detonated.

"I don't know, I saw something black streak by." Lingering concerns were spreading through Pike's mind like tentacles, but he tried to focus on their escape. "Looks like we have an open door though."

Sunny nodded and accelerated, hoping to sneak through the oncoming toll booths before the remaining SFSF units could recover.

His car barely audible over the confusion at the booths, Agent X and Agent 8 followed the destructive route set by Agent 22. Angling from the right, they cut in front of Sunny and Pike and flew through the gap. Immediately before exiting the gate, Agent 8 smiled and triggered the EMP.

EMP was a secret military weapon that was nearly impossible to buy on the open market. The hired agents had acquired a single device in a daring raid many years ago. When activated the electromagnetic pulse blast disabled or destroyed electronics caught in the sweeping, bluish arc.

The array of SFSF guns tracking Sunny and Pike stalled and remained still. Sparks flew from radar screens, and The Wall was strangely silent without the buzz of idling engines. Shocked cries mingled with angry roars as weapon systems failed to respond.

Without intending to, both Sunny and Pike had ended up trailing dangerously close behind the agents. The blast washed over their cars, momentarily killing the power plants and numerous notification systems. Angrily Sunny clicked the radio on and off, but no friendly static of an open line greeted him.

Choosing the only option he saw available, Sunny nervously edged through the burning gap opened by Agent 22. Pike was equally baffled and impressed, as neither driver had encountered such a powerful weapon before. He tried to signal Sunny with a flapping arm stuck out his window, but the younger driver was intent on escaping The Wall.

Sunny had hoped their escape would have been easier, but he was still happy to at least roll past the San Francisco border and onto the Golden Gate bridge. The sun felt warmer than it had in a long time, and even the squawking gulls annoyed him less than usual. Unfortunately the young driver came crashing back down to reality as he saw the speedometer inexorably creep towards zero.

The sleek cars that had attacked were nowhere to be seen, and for that Sunny breathed a long sigh of relief. Clicking his weapon triggers did nothing, and he could feel how sluggish turning was without power steering. Pike rolled behind him in a similar predicament.

Leaning out the window, the old man hollered ahead, "Angle your car into a defensible position just before it stops," he motioned with his hands as soon as Sunny gave him a

frustrated look in regards to a "defensible position" on a wide open bridge. "It looks like the SFSF guys aren't following us, but we need to be ready in case those black cars come back." "Okay," Sunny yelled back, edging his car into the far right lane. They had seen no other traffic, not even a disinterested commuter. In the interest of sparing innocents Pike hoped the SFSF had blocked access into the city as well as out. "Do you think our cars are fried?" Sunny shuddered at the thought of his brand new car already being reduced to a big, useless pile. "I think the effect is just temporary." Quickly peeking back inside the car, Pike yelled another order, "Looks like my flat isn't doing me any favors. I'm slowing down too fast, so just pull off and brake there."

Sunny did as he was told, then sat at the wheel, uncertain. Normally he would never leave his car after being attacked, but he didn't see a lot of options. The bridge felt more and more exposed as he waited under the beating sun.

A thick gun handle bumped into his door, and Sunny looked up with a start. Pike was there, six shooter in hand and his old hat propped down over his eyes. "You might need that," he said, motioning to the large caliber pistol Sunny had picked out for their entry into Atrebla Beef.

"Yeah...right," Sunny said, sliding the weapon from a gap between the seats. Shaking his head to clear his doubts, the younger driver edged open his door and rose level with Pike. "What do you figure we do?"

"Those fancy guys are probably going to come back to finish us off. Since my car is immobile, to say the least, I figure I'll start on swapping that flat tire." Pike boldly started walking back to Jodi, "Cover me though, okay?"

"Right..." Sunny said, his mind still foggy at what had happened. For a moment he stood leaning against the car, pistol hanging limply beside him. Again he shook his head and tried to focus. Looking back to The Wall he saw the SFSF units tinkering with their vehicles, but none had chased after them on foot. So far their previous hope of reduced pursuit once they reached the bridge was holding true. Plus he was certain the SFSF didn't like the idea of a straight out man to man firefight anymore than Sunny did.

Squinting he scanned northwards across the asphalt surface of the bridge, trying to catch a reflection or glimmer of their attackers. Seeing nothing, he pushed the door open further and squatted behind it. He dubiously checked the pistol, still preferring to be separated from combat by a series of switches inside a vehicle.

The agents returned just as the last two bolts remained to be tightened on the spare tire. Pike was busy grunting and mumbling to a tire iron, but Sunny instantly perked up as the black shapes approached.

"I see 'em, I think," he called to Pike. Trying to sooth his shattered nerves, Sunny stabilized the tip of the pistol against the door and aimed down the bridge. His feet were exposed under the open door, but he knew enough side armor remained to protect him from at least one shot.

"Wait, it's just one car."

Pike hastily tightened the last bolt and dug in behind his own door, six shooter at the ready. "I see him."

The lone vehicle stopped a dozen yards from their position, but made no attempt to blast them. Gusts of heated air vented from the hood of the black car, and nothing could be seen through the midnight glass. Pike whistled under his breath, surprised at the amount of money their pursuers had thrown around to catch them.

Agent X's car was slightly longer than Pike's, and all the radar scrambling fans and angles were

fully extended. The entire vehicle resembled a menacing lizard head when parked head on with the pair. No weapons were visible, but that didn't ease either of them.

Peeking from behind the door, Sunny turned his head slightly to check on Pike. Uncertain why the vehicle hadn't killed them yet, Sunny called out tentatively, "Um...hello?"

Activating a loud speaker, Agent X ordered the two in the same flat tone he had used at the warehouse. "We meet again." His emotions had returned to a level state, and Agent X was again cool headed and focused only on completing the job. "You still have property belonging to Green World." Agent X did not boast or threaten, he simply asked the men as if he was ordering boiled algae from a market stand, "And now it looks like you have no option but to throw down your weapons and return the item."

Sunny ducked behind the door and turned to Pike, mouthing "What now?"

Constant pursuit had reminded Pike of fleeing his old life, and that angered him. He recognized a piece of his time as a police officer in the lifeless monotone and business oriented demeanor. In his heart Pike knew whatever they said would matter little in the outcome.

"Lackey of Green World," he opened, knowing their only hope was to keep the driver occupied long enough for their vehicles to recover. "We have no such property, and-"

Agent X answered by snapping the forward weapon ports open to reveal the shining metal of lasers.

"Look, we're just simple couriers with dozens of packages. We don't even know what exact item you mean," Sunny cried, finding himself ten times as fearful when not behind the wheel of a car.

"You know the item. A small vial. Where is it?" Agent X was in no rush, at least not yet. He knew the properties of EMP even better than the two he faced, and certainly didn't need to rashly hurry quite yet.

Pike's brain furiously worked, and finally produced a slim chance at eluding death. "Oh, the vial, of course." Switching his gaze to Sunny, he squinted slightly and hoped the duelist would understand. "Why didn't you say so?"

A gull drifted overhead, basking in the towering thermals whipping off the Golden Gate bridge.

"Right, well, I have it in the glove compartment of my car."

Sunny knew Pike well enough to understand his tone and get an inkling of the older man's plan. Ruefully he played along, "Pike, what are you doing!"

"Shut up kid," Pike said, imitating his usual gruffness perfectly. Staring back at the black car he asked, "Look, if we give you the vial will you let us go?"

"Yes. My task is only to retrieve the vial. I care little for you." Agent X boomed over the loudspeaker.

For a moment the sheer bluntness of the response had Sunny almost believing they could go free. He sighed as sunlight glinted off the laser barrels, and the moment passed.

"Hmm, if you don't, I'll put a slug right through your head," Pike boasted, acting the part of the angry, unbreakable hero. Even if he intended to fire, he knew their weapons would do little against the bullet proof glass and armored flanks of the car.

Having heard a similar threat a hundred times before, Agent X calmly ordered, "Get the vial."

Keeping his gun visible, Pike leaned into the car. Sunny nervously swung his head back and forth between the attacker and his friend. Sliding across the passenger seat Pike popped open the forward compartment and dug into the pile of miscellaneous junk stored there. Eventually he found the ancient copy of the Aerostar '35 Owner's Manual, brown and worn inside an old envelope.

Sliding the book out and leaving it on the floor, he dropped an old tube of his wife's lipstick into the empty envelope. He silently prayed to Our Lady of Perpetual Mercy that the attacker wouldn't want him to open the envelope and ruin the ruse.

Cautiously raising the envelope he edged towards the passenger door. Dropping his eyes Pike glanced at the dashboard, looking for signs of life from Jodi. The engine light glowed like a fading ember, but otherwise the vehicle was dark.

"Okay, okay, here it is," he said, faking a resigned tone. Rising from the right side of the vehicle, he raised the envelope in the air.

Agent X smiled at the raw trust so many captives put in the mercy of their attackers. "Walk past the yellow car and put the vial on the ground."

"And what if I do this!" Pike said, sprinting as fast as his old legs would carry him. Only a few feet away was the edge of the bridge, which he angled directly towards. Gripping the envelope as if it had something more important than old memorabilia, Pike smiled triumphantly and held the package over the rolling ocean below.

"Then I would kill you out of spite," Agent X replied, working to stay in control.

Still playing along with Pike, Sunny yelled angrily, "I think you're going to anyways!"

In response Agent X closed the weapon ports as a sign of truce. To Pike it was a sign of weakness.

"Come out of your vehicle, and I'll meet half way with the envelope."

Agent X scowled and whitened his knuckles jamming the loudspeaker button, "No chance."

Pike loosened his grip on the envelope to let it flutter in the wind.

Slipping a needle dart launcher over his wrist, Agent X opened his door slightly.

Immediately Sunny blocked out any distraction and focused on scrutinizing the door. The slightly cracked door had opened a gap in the black armor, and Sunny could barely see a series of dark hinges. Taking careful aim he trained the pistol on the central hinge and waited.

"That's better, now maybe we can deal fairly," Pike said, relaxing his shoulders while still keeping the envelope over the water.

"Or maybe my agents just trawl the ocean for the package," Agent X cried victoriously, moving to rapidly double cross the pair.

With one hand he opened the weapon ports and fired a slice of laser at Pike's outstretched limb. At the same time he tried to close the door.

Sunny didn't like being outside of his car, and didn't like the dull kickback of the pistol, but his discomfort didn't slow reflexes trained in the arena. As soon as the door began to close, Sunny fired two shots at the hinge.

The powerful bullet tore through the exposed metal and jammed the door open. He saw the glowing muzzle flash from the forward lasers at Pike, and dove towards the black vehicle before Agent X had a chance to shift his aim.

A sparkling beam of light reached Pike's arm before the crude lead bullet blasted apart the hinge. The laser made quick work of his hand and with a startled cry the old man retracted the battered limb. Severed and cauterized, the clenched hand and decoy envelope dropped from the bridge.

The wind played with the package, pushing it left and right before depositing it into the ocean. Water seeped through the thick paper and pulled it out of sight.

Cursing and holding his seared wrist stump, Pike threw himself behind Jodi's passenger door.

Meanwhile Sunny reached Agent X's stuck door and wrenched it open. The young driver fired a single shot into the cab before Agent X kicked him in the gut, staggering Sunny backwards.

Emerging from the vehicle in a single rapid motion, Agent X fired a series of darts at Pike's

position. The slivers slammed into Jodi's door and Pike wisely kept his head hidden.

"Come on then," Sunny challenged, aiming the pistol at Agent X's center mass. Before he could even tug the trigger the hired killer was raining blows all across his upper body. One swift left kick knocked the weapon from Sunny's hand, and the following right hook spun him in place. Clearing his head with a grunt, the younger driver straightened and tried to bring his arms to shield his face. He hadn't been in a fist fight since rough housing in the autodueling pits, and wasn't nearly as well trained as Agent X.

Pike peaked over the door, hoping to snap a shot off at Agent X. Circling in a mass of flailing limbs, the two combatants swung and swung until Pike had trouble seeing a clear shot.

Throwing a swift uppercut Sunny caught Agent X off guard. While the lighter man was unbalanced Sunny threw himself forward, catching the killer around the waist and shoving him towards the black car.

Agent X recovered quickly and delivered a rapid series of elbows to Sunny's exposed back, dropping the man. Rolling out of the way of a descending foot stomp, Sunny sprang to the side and regained his footing.

Wheezing through a bruised rib, Sunny eyed the dangerous assailant. Agent X merely straightened his tie and unruffled his hair before nonchalantly advancing back into the fray. A shot peeled between the two from Pike's smoking gun. Sighting down the six shooter's barrel he prepared the killing bullet. Thinking quickly Agent X kicked Sunny's right knee, and threw all his weight behind a solid follow through punch. Both men went down in a slump, Sunny from pain and Agent X from balance.

The attack worked in entangling the pair enough to stall Pike's shot. Raising his pistol angrily he scanned the bridge for a better angle. His eyes lit up when they passed over Jodi's dashboard, which was glowing with familiar symbols. The EMP had worn off, Pike dared to hope.

"You fight even worse than you drive," Sunny taunted, knowing the calm agent wouldn't bother rebuking his blunt statement.

Agent X faked a kick, and while Sunny's attention was drawn to his foot, sprang forward with a fusillade of fists. Welts and bruises formed across Sunny's face and torso, and he felt blood dribbling from his lip.

"Looks like your time is running out," Agent X said, laughing as his two allies drove from the north. Agent 22 and Agent 8 were screaming towards the combat, and Sunny knew his bag of tricks and bottle of solutions were empty.

Fueled by pure rage, Sunny whipped his arms in the general direction of Agent X. A glancing fist caught the man's shoulder, but he danced free of the sweeps. Gulping for air, Sunny slowly angled himself towards the mobile agent and kept swinging.

Before he realized what had happened, Agent X was smashed backwards. Pike had started Jodi and rammed the killer with all the force he could muster. Sunny heard cracking bones, most likely Agent X's arm, and the shout of agony as his limp body was flung to the concrete.

Propping open the passenger side door Pike tipped his hat, "Get in."

Leaping into the seat in relief, Sunny turned and looked at his Side Draft, "But my car?"

"No time,"

"Bullshit!" Sunny said, already struggling to free himself from the bucket seat.

"Sunny! Wait! I checked it when I was grabbing the actual vial. It's still dead, okay?"

Before the younger driver could argue, Pike slammed the accelerator and skidded northwards, trying to aim at Agent X's fallen body as he did.

Barely conscious, Agent X managed to roll underneath his vehicle to avoid becoming a bloody

pulp. The battering ram tore the door off, and Pike rudely sideswiped the black vehicle for good measure.

The recovering power plant was tested to its limits as Pike continued across the bridge. He reached eighty miles an hour before the two agents intercepted them. Guns blazing, the pair of black vehicles sped past and slammed on the brakes, angling gracefully to continue pursuit.

"So much for our lasers,"

"They're fried anyways." Glancing over his shoulder, Pike continued, "Now let's get to that tunnel and hope Sassy hasn't fallen asleep."

The two agents followed at optimum combat distance and fired their lasers almost constantly. The last flakes of armor peeled from Jodi's chassis, and only sheer will kept her from blowing apart at the seams. Pike grunted and wove the vehicle as best he could, still accelerating towards the visible tunnel.

Sassy perked up when she recognized the approaching engine. Sitting up in her seat, she grabbed the detonation wires and started her car. "Took you guys long enough," she mumbled impatiently before gluing her eyes to the rear view mirror.

"There it is!"

"I see it, I see it," Pike said, his voice faint. He thanked Our Lady that the road was straight, for his crippled hand prevented any rapid cranking of the wheel. The burned stump throbbed with agony, as did a dozen points all across his body.

Sunny wasn't in much better shape from the beating Agent X had administered. Valiantly he stayed conscious and focused on the road, wishing he had a bigger role to play than passenger. Agent X had rejoined pursuit, but hadn't reached firing range yet. His own movements seemed just as uncertain as Pike's, and Sunny had no doubt the killer was hurting. The other two agents relentlessly pounded the vehicle, and hazard lights Sunny had never even seen flashed across the dashboard. Pike pointed at switches for Sunny to toggle or levers to pull, some of which seemed to reduce the whining alarms.

Finally they saw the comforting outline of Sassy's Impact 244 waiting alongside the road. Exhaust drifted lazily from the back, and Sunny could feel her anticipation filling the tunnel. With a cheer they passed into the tunnel. Shadows alternated with halogen bulbs as they pushed onwards at nearly 120 miles an hour. Seconds before reaching Sassy's position, she accelerated from the tunnel and twisted the detonation cap.

Several hundred feet back, the two agents obliviously kept firing. Agent X gritted his teeth as his doorless vehicle reached combat range. "You won't escape this one," he said, holding down the laser trigger.

Sassy's trigger signal reached the web of traps. Deep, rumbling explosions echoed through the tunnel, deafening a crowd of pedestrians watching the pursuit. The row of land mines linked by the fuse cracked the roof. Napalm canisters shattered and spread burning death everywhere.

And before any of the agents could react, thousands of tons of rock extinguished all life behind the three brave couriers.

"Yeah!" Sunny shouted, "We made it."

"Thank the Lady," Pike said, his foot slouching off the pedal. Jodi slowed and his remaining hand dropped from the wheel in exhaustion. Sunny angled the car towards the side of the road before hailing Sassy over the radio.

"Great job, I can't believe that worked."

Her voice beamed, "Likewise, although I thought you'd bring more of the bastards with you."

"Trust me, there weren't many left from the city. What do you say Pike, we musta killed at least a dozen of those Green World punks."

"At...at least," Pike whispered, his voice hoarse. The old man lolled and dropped onto Sunny's shoulder, blood trickling from the edge of his mouth.

Sunny's eyes widened, and he shouted in surprise, "Pike? Pike!"

"I'm glad to see Jodi held together, even if...if, I couldn't."

His eyes still wide, Sunny propped Pike up and leaned back to examine the man. A dark red patch soaked his entire left side.

"What...how?"

Sassy appeared at the window, having reversed and stopped near the dusty green car. "Well my victorious couriers, shall we continue onto-" She yelped as her gaze found Pike's wound.

"Pike!"

"It's okay...guys...we got them back for it." Wheezing he leaned back in the driver's seat and closed his eyes. Shallow breathing escaped his lips, and Sunny could see the charred remains of his left side through the torn shirt.

"Looks like a laser. They musta shot straight through the back." Gritting his teeth to stop from welling up, Sunny reached for the passenger door. "Let's go Sassy, we've got to get him to-"

"No..." Pike coughed thick strings of blood, "It...it hit my lung. My luck is all run out." He closed his eyes again and slumped back.

Sassy remained silent, a hand covering her mouth and muffling sobs.

Blinking away tears, Sunny touched the old man's shoulder. "Come on Pike, not like this. We're almost to the Redwoods."

Fluttering his eyes open, Pike appeared entirely lucid for a moment. He reached to the ignition and removed the worn set of keys. The idling engine sputtered and died, and overbearing silence pressed down on the three.

His voice thick with purpose, Pike pushed the keys into Sunny's hands. "Take...take her."

Solemnly Sunny nodded.

Returning to his restful position, the old man croaked a gurgling laugh, "You'll be a better driver than I ever was." A silent prayer to Our Lady of Perpetual Mercy flickered through his mind, mingling with images of his wife and their time together. Pike mentally grasped at them as seeping darkness polluted the images as his brain shut down. Receptors and nodes brimming with memories of a tumultuous life sputtered and stopped, and a final breath escaped his lips.

Pushing aside the grief at their lost friend, Sunny and Sassy helped rest the body in Jodi's backseat. Keeping a tight upper lip, Sunny unholstered the six shooter and laid it across Pike's torso like a knight of olden times.

Sunny whispered, "He was a good man, and a good friend," while Sassy nodded and bit her lip.

"I think we just killed the scum that did this, so the best we can do is make sure Pike's sacrifice

wasn't in vain." He rose and rested a soothing hand on Jodi's hood. "We'll get to Seattle, we'll get to the lab, and we'll change this algae filled world."

"Onwards then, to the Redwoods," Sassy said, looking both ways in the tunnel. Slumbering piles of rock, some flaming and others powdered with dust, blocked any pursuit for the moment. Sunlight glimmered from the opposite exit, and Sassy could hear the breeze blowing. Embracing her in a deep hug, Sunny said all he wanted with the warmth of contact. Breaking apart, Sassy stumbled back to her car, still feeling a mix of horror and trepidation. She didn't know what had happened in San Francisco, but the planned simplicity of a reversed ambush had turned into a bloodbath. Although fear, anger, and misery clouded her thoughts and delayed her every action, Sassy still held a glimmer of faith that they would deliver the vial. Sunny stood over Jodi as if visiting an old friend. He avoided looking at Pike's body in the back seat, and instead tried to order his jumbled thoughts. A man he considered a dear friend and competent mentor had been murdered, and Sunny was powerless to stop it. He glanced at Sassy's taxi and quivered at the thought of losing her too.

Sunny thought a moment longer about Pike, silently and with his head hung low. Then he hardened his heart and compartmentalizing the grief for a later, safer time. Gritting his teeth he patted Jodi's roof and ducked into the driver's seat.

The road awaited.